

The Importance of Play

Play is the most important way that your child learns about their environment. Thinking skills develop as children progress through the stages of play. Play can allow children to learn how to interact with others, develop problem-solving skills, creativity and imagination. Children also learn words and ideas about the world through play.

STAGES OF PLAY

Stage 1 – Random and Exploratory Play (approximately age 6-8 months)

Children at this stage explore objects by tasting, looking, listening, moving and feeling with different parts of their body.

Activities:

Give your child opportunities to explore objects through different senses:

- **Hearing** – Talk about the sounds that objects make. While playing with a set of farm animals, introduce sound effects such as “cow says moo”
- **Seeing** – Encourage your child to really look at an object. Consider playing with cause and effect toys with flashing lights.
- **Touching** – Give the child the opportunity to feel different textures and temperatures. Feel the cool playdoh between your fingers or coarse sand on your toes.
- **Moving** – Give your child an opportunity to move, push and pull objects. Encourage the child to copy your movements such as stomping like an elephant.
- **Tasting and Smelling** – Give your child lots of opportunities to taste and smell a variety of items.

Stage 2 – Early Functional Play (approximately age 8-12 months)

Children at this stage begin to use objects the way they are meant to be used. For example, your child may use a brush to brush hair, but may also brush the floor or other objects inappropriately. Children at this stage also begin to push cars, open and close boxes, drink from a cup, roll a ball, stack blocks and put pieces into a very simple puzzle.

Activities:

- Give your child opportunities to observe you using objects appropriately. Give them the object and encourage them to imitate you. Any time your child

imitates the appropriate action for the toy or object, give them lots of attention and praise.

Stage 3 – Later Functional Play (approximately age 12-15 months)

Children at this stage use most toys and objects appropriately. Children may also begin to respond to requests such as “show me what goes on your head” by picking up a hat.

Activities:

- Play guessing games to encourage your child to learn about different objects and their functions (e.g. “what do we ride in?” – car; “what do we drink with?” – cup). Have objects readily available or ask these types of questions while your child is playing with these items.
- Mystery Box – fill an empty shoebox with some small objects and have your child guess what the object is by feeling it with their hands, without looking.
- While playing with a ball or toy car, show your child how to roll or push the ball back and forth to each other.

Stage 4 – Creative – Symbolic Play (approximately age 18-24 months)

Children at this stage begin to use one object (“a symbol”) to represent another object in play. For example, children may use a box to represent a train.

Activities:

- Provide your child with dolls, blocks, boxes, dishes, cars, trucks, puppets, dress-up clothes and paper and crayons. Pretend that a block arrangement is a castle. Pretend to talk on the phone using a banana.
- When feeding a puppet, blocks of LEGO can represent food.

Stage 5 Imaginative Play (approximately age 12-24 months)

Children may also act out familiar household routines while playing “house” and carry out dramatic play with puppets. Children at this stage may begin playing with imaginary friends or animals or pretend to be someone else.

Activities:

- Read stories to your child. Encourage them to act out a familiar story including props such as a cape or hat.
- Give your child dolls, puppets, dress-up clothes, doctor kits, and other materials for imaginative play. For example, while re-enacting the “Three Little

- Pigs”; pretend to be the big bad wolf blowing down a house while your child hides like a pig.
- Using a towel or blanket on the floor, pretend to have a picnic or tea party with Teddy Bear and/or Dolls.

A child’s play is in fact work. It is a universal part of growing up and is vital to social development. Find time to create opportunities for your child to interact with their peers. (e.g. local parks, playgrounds, daycare, community centres etc.)