

Children who have experienced trauma, abuse
and neglect in their early lives

Play: why it's so important and how to make it helpful

What you might see

- A child who just doesn't seem to know how to play at all
- A child playing with toys that seem to be far too young for them
- A child who doesn't know how to share with other children
- A child who cannot play with others on their own, having to dominate every game or resorting to physical or verbal aggression when they get frustrated
- A child who appears to be getting it right on some levels but always ends up playing in mud, creating a gooeey mess with their food, playing with the suds rather than washing up.



How it can feel for carers

- That you're worried and frustrated about this child who never seems to have fun or play but just sits watching others
- That you don't know how to help this child learn to play - it should come naturally!
- That it's embarrassing having a 14 year old play with baby toys
- That you can't leave the child alone to play for a second- and that's driving you barmy!
- That friends are avoiding you because your child can't play nicely with theirs
- That you're uncertain whether you should allow or encourage "childish" play or whether your 11 year old should still be sucking his thumb or carrying her teddy bear



Why do these children have difficulties with play?

- Play develops in stages from early babyhood and if some of the stages are missed, a child can find it hard to play as one might expect of that age of child
- Everyday life at an early age may have involved surviving, rather than playing, for both child and parent. The child was not encouraged to play and crucially, may not have had a parent or carer who played with them.
- Many children who have experienced a difficult start to life have not been taught, or encouraged to use, the skills of sharing their toys and their play with other children.
- Their emotional difficulties and different brain development, resulting from their poor start, makes this even harder for them as they are likely to misunderstand or not notice how other children feel when they are playing with them.
- The child feels stressed and anxious about everything in life and can't feel safe enough to relax and begin to learn to have fun or to trust anyone enough to let them play with them.
- Many children who have experienced trauma and neglect have great need to always be in control and feel the need to dominate playmates.

A number of these reasons may apply to the child for whom you are caring or there could be other reasons more specific to them not mentioned here.

The stages of play

Stage 1: The baby plays using all its senses to explore the world around them and experiment with how they can affect it. Crucial experiences: messy play, sand, water, bubbles, play dough etc

Stage 2: The toddler uses toys and play equipment to represent feelings and situations, trying to understand them through play, often repeated play. Crucial experiences: toys, paints, models etc

Stage 3: The child uses pretend play to act out new roles and ways of doing things. Crucial experiences: "let's pretend" toys, dressing up, pretend play etc



How to help your child with play

- Invite your child to join you in playing as often as possible. Ideally, you could have a special short time each day with maybe a longer playing session at least each week. (See below for ideas of how to make the most of this)
- For children playing at a younger age, be re-assured that this is a good sign that your child knows what s/he needs. You may wish to help them manage this around peers of their age who may be unforgiving in their criticism of this younger play. You could also add in some special times to "baby" them -cuddling, rocking, feeding - again to provide special nurturing that they missed out on earlier
- Make available toys for a much younger child, even if your child has not asked for them. Leave them around casually. Don't forget that some of your play activities together should ideally be "messy play" - most children who have had a poor start to life have missed out on this crucial stage
- You may need to carefully teach play and friendship skills by setting up "play dates" for your child with suitably co-operative children and model how to play and share. After time you will be able to move to supervising closely and then eventually, leaving them to it for gradually increasing periods of time
- Remember and re-visit all the games you used to enjoy in your childhood. Simpler, less technological games and "old fashioned" fun and play offers far more in the ways of interaction and social skills
- There is some evidence that TV and computers may be harmful to the brains of these children and should be limited as far as possible. If you chose to use them, make sure you are engaging with your child and using them together as much as possible

Some suggestions of what can you do to make special play times really helpful to your child

The special playtime can be made into a beneficial, almost therapeutic time by just a little extra care and attention. Doing it consistently will certainly add to your relationship and strengthen the attachment between you. Agree to set aside a specific time that is for the child to lead and then try to do these things:

- **Set the stage - give the idea of the freedom of the special play time** "you can play with the toys in lots of the ways you'd like to"
- **Let the child lead the play** "What should I say?" "Show me what you want me to do"
- **Track the child's play with your attention and your words, "commentating" on what they are doing** "you're filling that all the way to the top" " you've decided you want to paint next"
- **Join in the child's play as a follower. Be careful not to anticipate and start leading** "you want me to be the robber and I'm supposed to wear the mask" "now I go to jail until you let me out"
- **Try to comment on the child's feelings** "that kind of surprised you" "you really wish that we could play longer"
- **Set firm and consistent limits that you're happy with but acknowledge their feelings when they'd like it to be different and provide an alternative:** "I know you'd like to play with the play dough on the floor but it's not for putting on the floor ...you can play with it on the tray"
- **Show you recognise and encourage the child's efforts** "You worked really hard on that and you did it!" "Sounds like you know lots about..."

Try to avoid: criticising, asking leading questions, allowing other's to interrupt your special time together, turning it into teaching, preaching, just watching but not getting involved. You also want to avoid praising - play doesn't need judging, it should just be fun, though hopefully your child will use it to "play through" some of their issues.

