

Tip Sheets

Overcoming Play Challenges Through Play Partners

The Importance of Play

Play is a fundamental right of childhood. It is the “ultimate integrator of human experience.” (Fromberg, 1990). Young children learn best through play, and we know that play:

- Enhances language development, social competence, creativity, imagination and thinking skills.
- Is a natural and innate skill for most children.

Children need to experience interactions through play and add the skills they learn to their social



repertoire. When a child is challenged by play it may cause the child to withdraw, become isolated, and

miss out on learning that is available through play. As adults who care for and teach young children we can provide the support needed for them to achieve mastery in the area of play.

Solitary and Parallel Play

Children challenged by interactive play will often choose to play alone, engaging in solitary or parallel play which can:

- Isolate them from their peers.
- Block opportunities to develop turn taking and conflict resolution skills.
- Interfere with facial cue deciphering and interpretation of social skills.
- Affect communication

Play Partnering

Many children avoid interactive play because it is difficult to navigate. They may become anxious and withdraw after only a few attempts. To simply tell a child to “go play with your friends” is not the answer in this case.

For children who need a boost in their play skill development, play partnering is one way to practice this critical skill to enhance social skill development. It is a way to create success in play for young children. Play partnering is a support strategy that:

- Assists children in making the transition from solitary and parallel play to associative play that includes sharing materials and talking to peers.
- Eventually leads a child to cooperative play where they will begin to organize their play with others with specific goals in mind.
- Involves planned play interactions orchestrated by an adult but carried out by the child and his/her peer.

When planning play partnering, it is important to create a pairing that includes one child that is an “expert player,” i.e. a child that has well-developed play skills and shows patience and fairness to others in play.

Play Partnering Activities

- Catch
- Follow the Leader
- Pulling each other in a wagon

- Body outlines on paper or with chalk on the sidewalk
- Puzzles: Dump the puzzle and divide the pieces into two piles, one for each child so they must take turns working together.
- Play-dough: Use one of each play dough tool so children must ask for a turn.
- Pretend Play: Use props that require interaction such as dress up clothes with many buttons or a zipper in the back, special props that only come out when play partnering occurs such as phones, doctor/patient play props
- Easel Painting: Use one brush per color and suggest a theme. Children can plan and talk together about what they are going to paint.
- Story Tapes/CDs: Use listening headsets and only one book.
- Making a Tent: Use a blanket/sheet and table, and add props needed for a campout.

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