

Developing social play skills

This factsheet will explore the stages of social interaction and supporting your child in developing their social play skills. It is important to learn social skills such as sharing, cooperation or turn-taking, because it encourages cognitive enrichment and emotional growth. Also, it fosters creativity and imagination and develops joint attention¹. Whilst social skills are important, it is important to ensure your child has access to their preferred activities or time alone if wanted.

What are the stages of social interaction in play?

Children develop and grow through six different social skills stages with their play², beginning at birth.

- 1 Unoccupied play**

A baby makes lots of movements with their arms, legs, hands, feet, etc. When they do this, they are discovering and learning all about how their body moves, and this is the very beginning of play.
- 2 Solitary play**

Beginning in infancy, and common in toddlers, this is the stage when children start to play on their own. When a child is engaged in solitary play, they might not notice other children playing nearby, or take much of an interest in playing with them quite yet. Although children progress on to spectator/onlooker play, at all ages children will continue to have some time for this independent play.
- 3 Spectator/onlooker play**

In this stage, during the toddler years (around 2 years), a child begins to watch others playing but does not join in. Whilst common for toddlers, spectator play can occur at any age – especially if a child is shy or uncertain of how to join the game or activity.
- 4 Parallel play**

During this stage, a child will begin to play alongside or near others but not with them. They might use the same or similar toys to those around them.
- 5 Associative play**

At this stage, around the age of three to four, a child will start to interact with others during play – for example by giving, taking, and sharing play materials. It is generally the first stage where social interaction is required from engaging in a mutual activity, however they might not yet be working towards a common goal. For example, in construction activities there might be no division of labour, organisation of the activity or discussion about what they are attempting to achieve.
- 6 Cooperative social play**

At around the age of four, a child begins to play together with others and has an interest in both the activity and the other children involved in playing. Play involves much more interaction. They begin to share ideas, play games with rules, and work together on something (building a sandcastle for example). Cooperative play can become quite complex and requires extensive communication skills and social skills such as turn taking, problem solving and cooperation.

¹ Lantz, 2001

² Parten, 1932

What stage of social interaction is my child at?

After observing your child playing/being around peers without adult support, assess which stage they are at on most occasions.

When working to expand their social play skills, start on their current level and work through the phases.

How do I help my child move to the next stage?

- **Make learning fun!** The goal is to create positive experiences, so it is more likely that your child wants to engage again in these activities in the future. Reinforce the behaviours that you want to see, model to your child what they are expected to do and guide them, when necessary, with the most effective prompt.

Example: Your child is doing some water play in parallel with a peer, and they are playing nicely, so you can reinforce by saying 'you are playing so nicely' [social praise] or 'you can have more water!' [preferred activity]. Show yourself asking for preferred items to peers. And, if the situation arises, guide your child to respond to their peer by encouraging them to interact.

Example 2: Your child is painting in parallel to a peer and you notice that they want a colour paint that the other child has, so you can encourage them to ask their peer for what they want. Receiving the bottle of paint would be the reinforcer in this example. Give the bottle back to the peer so you can create more opportunities to practise requesting to peers, and with time fade your involvement.



- **Ensure to always reward** any spontaneous interaction that you observe.
 - **Create multiple opportunities:** Like everything else, the more practise the better.
 - **Break it down:**
 - When setting up activities, set realistic goals. **For example**, if your child finds it difficult to play in parallel, start by guiding them to do so for 1 minute, or if taking turns is difficult, practise this with adults first, and then gradually build these skills up.
 - **Parallel play hierarchy:**
 - Peers play alongside, each with a different set of toys.
 - Peers play alongside, each with the same set of toys.
 - Peers play alongside, each with the same set of toys and sharing 1 of those items.
 - **Associative play hierarchy:**
 - Take turns with adults.
 - Take turns with peers.
 - Make request to peers with adult's prompts.
 - Make requests to peers independently.
 - Respond to requests from peers with adult's prompts.
 - Respond to requests from peers independently.
 - **Cooperative play hierarchy:**
 - Accepts direction from other children with adult support.
 - Accepts direction from other children independently.
 - Leads other children to play cooperatively with adult support.
 - Leads other children to play cooperatively independently.
- Build up the duration of the activity and the number of exchanges between peers.

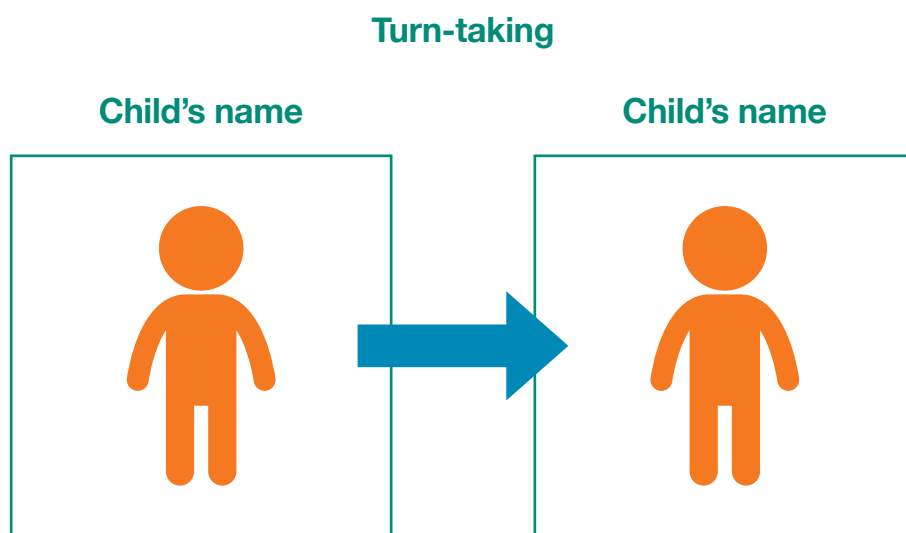
Other techniques that can be helpful

1. Creating visual supports (appendix A), such as “now and next” boards for taking turns, sand timers to countdown the time left in the activity or counting down with your hands the seconds left to get their turn. See the **Visual supports** factsheet.
2. Using visual stories. For example, “how to be a good friend” or “how to make friends”. See the **Visual story** factsheet.
3. With the use of social scripts (appendix B).
4. Video modelling of desired social interactions between peers.
5. Finding a peer buddy system, i.e., peers that have similar skills or that will be seen as role models.
6. Finding social skills groups. Check your Local Offer in your borough or team up with other families from school, nursery, or other services.

References

- Lantz, J. (2001). Play Time: An Examination Of Play Intervention Strategies for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders. *The Reporter*, 6(3), 1-7.
- Larkey, S. (2021). Promoting Social Understanding – Social Scripts. Podcast available from <https://suelarkey.com.au/promoting-social-understanding-social-scripts/>.
- Parten, M.B. (1932). Social participation among pre-school children. *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 27(3), 243-269.

Appendix A. Visual support: “now and next board for turn taking”



Appendix B. Social script guide by³.

My name is XXX and I am unsure of how to ask people to play with me in the playground

	Sometimes I want to play with people at play time. I am unsure about how to do this, I can ask for help.
	I can speak to my teacher before play time and tell her that I want to play with someone.
	The teacher can find someone who will play with me.
	Sometimes the teacher might not be able to find someone in that moment. I can stay with my teacher or another adult and I can play with them
	If my teacher does find another person I can play with, I will say "Hi, my name is" I can ask their name too
	Once I know their name, I can ask them "What game would you like to play?" or teach them a game I know
	I can take turns

Title
Introduces the topic/scenario

Perspective sentence
Makes the script personal for the child and more specific to them.

Coaching sentence
Keeps it positive and tells the child what to do

Alternative scenario
Include likely scenarios to avoid anxiety

Descriptive sentence
Teaches the social skills necessary in the scenario

Conclusion > affirmation
Positively reinforces and restates the original purpose with additional information

It is okay to ask the teacher to help me find someone to play with at playtime

³ Social script guide by Larkey 2021