

# Know Your Child's "Play Stage"

The way your child plays with toys and the way he communicates during play depend on his stage of communication. You can know what to expect at each stage by answering the following two questions:

1. How does your child play with toys?
2. How does your child communicate during play with toys?

## How Does Your Child Play with Toys?

### No play with toys

Especially at the Own Agenda stage, your child may not play with toys at all. He may be more interested in exploring toys by chewing them or rubbing them against his face.



*Rebecca is only interested in the way toys taste and feel in her mouth.*

### Unconventional play

Your child may not play with toys in the way you'd expect. For example, he may line up his trains instead of moving them along a track or bang his blocks instead of building a tower. Unconventional play can usually be explained by your child's sensory preferences – he may like the pattern that his trains form or the sounds of the banging blocks. This kind of play may occur at all stages, but most often at the Own Agenda and Requester stages.

*Instead of moving his trucks along the floor, Carl likes to line them up and look at them.*



### Functional play

Your child can play with toys the “right” way. Placing a peg in a pegboard, shovelling sand into a pail or fitting a puzzle piece into the puzzle board are all examples of appropriate, or “functional” play.

Functional play can begin at the Requester stage when your child performs one action on a toy, such as pushing a lever or taking objects out of a container. Towards the end of the Early Communicator stage, your child may learn how to perform many more actions on a variety of toys, but he may still prefer certain kinds of toys, like puzzles or shape sorters.



*Jake can do his puzzles in record-breaking time.*

### Constructive play

In constructive play, your child uses materials to create something. For example, he builds a tower with blocks or uses paint to make a picture. Constructive play is different from functional play because it involves planning ahead and working towards a goal. A child at the Early Communicator or Partner stage who's very interested in building things may work on making something out of blocks or Lego.

### Symbolic or pretend play

In symbolic play, your child pretends to do or be something imaginary. He might drink from an empty teacup or get down on all fours to act like a puppy. This kind of play is linked to language, because both words and pretend actions symbolize or stand for real things. Some children develop pretend play on their own; many others can be taught how to pretend. Pretend play helps your child develop his imagination, understand how others feel, learn to solve problems and practise communicating.

At the Requester stage, your child may perform one pretend action on himself, using real objects or realistic-looking toys. This is called self-pretend play. Your child may pretend to drink from an empty cup or hold a toy telephone to his ear.



*Your child may start to pretend on himself.*

At the **Early Communicator** stage, your child may perform one pretend action on toys or other people, copying something that he has seen you do. He may pretend to cook with a pot on a toy stove or give his teddy bear a drink from his cup. To play this way, your child needs to use objects that look like the real things.

At the **Partner** stage, your child may act out a short sequence of pretend actions, copying his everyday experiences or scenes he has seen on television. For example, he may feed his bear with a spoon, give it a drink and then put it to bed. Or, like Darren in the picture below, he may cook a pretend soup and then set the table for a pretend dinner. In pretend play, a Partner can use objects that look similar to but not exactly like the things they represent: for example, a big red ball can stand for an apple, or a piece of string can represent spaghetti.

In the final stage of symbolic play, your child makes up stories from his imagination and acts them out, sometimes pretending to be someone else. This type of play is challenging because it relies on talking and the ability to plan and carry out many pretend actions.



*At preschool, Darren likes to play in the drama centre. He pretends to stir soup on top of the stove, just as he has seen his mother and father do at home.*

