

Helping Your Child Play with Another Child

Edited/modified with some local cultural / adaptations from the Child With Special Needs: Greenspan / Wieder, by Kathy Walmsley, Sensory Connections

As soon as your child can open and close circles of communication most of the time with a parent or caregiver, it is important to facilitate interaction between him/her and other children, starting with one other child. He will then be more ready to enter a group. At home you can begin to arrange play dates. At kindy, even though there may be many other children present, your child will still need to interact initially with just one other so this groundwork is important.

Use floor-time principles to follow the children's lead, looking for opportunities to encourage interaction, between the two.

Observe your child and the peer to see what they are drawn to, Comment on what they are doing, joining in whenever you can. As soon as you see an opportunity, try to bring one child into the game of the other. For example, if your child is playing with toys cars, hand the other child one of the cars. If this doesn't get an interaction going, try to draw your child into the activity of the other child. Eventually they'll find a way to play together, even if only for two or three circles of communication. From these you can gradually build more.

1. Use your voice to help each child pay attention to what the other child is doing.

Say things like, "Look! Did you see that? Wow!" " I wonder what Danny is doing? " "Hey, John has a great idea, look at that!". " The more drama you put into your voice, the easier it will be for both children to attend. And don't limit yourself to positive emotions; include negative emotions, too, such as anger, frustration, and jealousy.

2. Get both children involved in problem solving.

Plead, play dumb, exaggerate, whisper with animation, or do whatever is necessary to make your voice compelling enough to draw both children into the problem-solving activity. "Oh no! The car is missing a wheel! What should we do?" "Help! Help! The door to the house is stuck! The soldier is locked in! How can we help him?"

3. Help both children become aware of each other's feelings.

Put a lot of drama into your voice and gestures, don't be afraid to shed pretend tears or make angry or jealous faces, and always use the name of the child you're describing. "Oh, poor Seth! He looks so sad!" Or, making an angry face and gesture, "Wow, Jason looks really mad right now!" Your child may be surprised at first, since he's not used to noticing other children's feelings. But if you do this regularly, he will become more comfortable and turned in to his friends' emotions.

4. Help the children engage with each other.

The children may tend to do parallel play at first - playing side by side but not interacting. Try to draw them into interactive play by calling each one's attention to what the other is doing "It looks like Mary needs to jump right now, that looks like a lot of fun!" It may take many play dates, but if you do this repeatedly, interaction will begin to occur.

5. Try to hold each child's attention for as long as possible in order to delay her moving away.

If you sense one of the children is getting ready to leave, create some suspense or excitement to try to lure her to stay. Try using extra emotion in your voice and gestures, adding a twist to the drama, or brining out something you know the retreating child especially likes. If those efforts fail, try asking, "Why are you leaving - what's the hurry?" Or, "Is Maria yelling too much? Does it hurt your ears?" Or, "Was that a scary idea?" ...

6. Help both children understand the other's behavior by translating that behavior into simple words.

Both children may become confused at times by the other's behavior. You can help them

by explaining what the other child is doing. "Sarah screams when she hears someone cry; it hurts her ears." "Uh-oh! Mary is stuck. She doesn't know what to do next." "Oh, it looks like Josh really needs to squash his body right now".

7. *Help the children interact by using shared interests –*

When one child starts doing something you know the other child likes to do, call the other's attention to it. Hold out a second car, fire truck, or doll and encourage him to join in. Or take all the toys yourself and distribute them equally to the children. This may lead to a shared activity such as playing school, racing cars,

8. *Help the children stick with their play by helping them bypass tangential ideas.*

Once the children have a play theme going (for example, taking a family of dolls to the park), take on a role yourself in order to help them keep it going. If another theme surfaces (a crocodile comes by who has escaped from the zoo), either ignore it and return to the original theme ("When are we going to get to the park?") or incorporate the new theme into the original ("Let's take the crocodile with us to the park!").

9. *Help each child notice the feelings and actions of the other by reiterating what each one said or did.*

Children often miss the actions or reactions of other children because those actions may be quiet or subtle. To help them notice, point out what each child has done or said. You might even ask the child to repeat what he just said or did ("Evan, did you really say that?").

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10. *Help the children share symbolic ideas.*

Encourage playing around themes that you know both children can handle symbolically (perhaps you've already played pirate or doctor with each of them). If you remind them of these experiences, then they can elaborate on them together. Chances are that they will want to be on the same side and mobilize against you, especially if they are into good guy-bad guy themes. That's fine; it will strengthen their alliance with each other.

11. *Pick up on highly emotional themes (such as separation, fears, body damage, and aggression), and help the children play these issues out symbolically.*

These highly emotional themes are shared by all children because they are part of a developmental progression. As children grapple with them, they define their sense of self and reality. Symbolic play that addresses these issues will be of great interest to the children. They may react actively or anxiously (by becoming over reactive or passive and avoidant).

12. *Identify each child's coping strategies and solutions, and offer symbolic solutions to difficult situations.*

Perhaps you notice that every time pirates approach looking for gold, one child falls asleep. You might say, "Jesse goes to sleep every time the pirates come. Jesse, if you go to sleep now you won't be scared. But maybe you'd also like to use a magic sword?" By offering Jesse a symbolic solution to his fear, you might help him find another way of grappling with it.

13. *Help the children resolve conflicts together.*

If one child disrupts the play, ask both children to help resolve the problem. For instance, one child might get upset after touching the messy shaving cream or one child might be losing a game and decide to run away. If this happens, explain that it is important for each child to understand how the other one feels, then help them come to a solution to the problem, "Oh dear, Jenny doesn't like it when her hands get dirty? I wonder what we can do to help?"

14. *Create opportunities for the children to work together.*

For example, if you are the bad doggy that is trying to mess up their house, they might need to build barriers together to keep you out. Or they might have to tickle you to see if they can make you laugh.

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Adult Facilitation Strategies for Day Care, Kindy, Group Events:

1. Helping your child with getting in. When your child approaches a group, encourage him to ask if he can join in by modeling. If verbal language is delayed interpret your child's actions for the other kids and cue them into responding to your child – “Hey, look who just came over,” “I wonder if John wants to help with that puzzle”. Encourage the kids to discuss options of what they can do together. “Do you want to build a road to the airport or the zoo?”
2. Build interactive skills. Follow your child's lead as appropriate during free time and then pull the other children over and involve them, “Hey look at what Carl is doing?” Encourage the kids to take turn following what each other is doing... using lots of expression in your voice and gestures to help your child bridge to the other child.
3. Become a playmate mediator, if you support your child now in learning to play with others, her relationships will develop more quickly. When you get down on the floor to play with him, other children will be drawn to what you are doing. “John is off to the circus – any one want to come with him?” Kids will be drawn to you, refer them back to your child, e.g. they will often ask you questions, you can suggest that they ask your child instead. If your child doesn't answer, ask the child to repeat, if they still don't answer repeat for the child and if that doesn't work then answer for your child yourself to keep them in on the play. Often children's responses will be slow due to auditory processing or motor planning issues, don't consider this a rejection, but don't let him get away without responding in some form. Insist on a response in words or gestures to close the circle.
4. Support motor activities. If your child has motor planning challenges stick with simpler motor activities available such as water and sand play. Find out what activities are happening in the group and rehearse beforehand,

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5. Encourage partnerships with others – start with having your child play/work with children who are showing interest in them and work on joint projects, e.g. joint painting, playdoh activity where they are both making chips for puppets to eat, puzzles where they divide up the pieces and take turns until finished.
6. Always encourage interaction - it is more important to reward efforts at interaction than completing tasks by him/herself. For example, really

interaction than completing tasks by themselves. For example, really tighten the lids on the dot markers/paints so that the child can not open by themselves, when they ask you for help, pretend you can't do it, and ask? "Who else could help" to direct them to the peer.

7. Create opportunities that motivate children to work together, e.g. hiding games where they both hide together from the monster (you), playing pirates using swords to attack the crocodile/Captain Hook, game in which the children have to band together to defeat you to see who can build the highest block tower.

Additional Information (from Kathy Walmsley OT, Sensory Connections)

Tips for Successful Playdates -:

- Keep them short to start with - 45 to 60 minutes
- Include a snack time and oral motor activities – you might have some structured tasks available which meet the interests of the children, e.g. making popcorn, together.
- Do your research and find out what the interests of the visiting child are. Ensure that the peer has a fabulous time and wants to return for more! Use sensory motor games – simple is often best – e.g. jumping or swinging together, swimming pool and trampoline fun! – think of fun activities that both children enjoy and have them available to choose from.
- Pack away most of the small toys – keep a visually distraction free environment if playing at home, and ensure that special toys that the child has difficulty sharing are packed away.
- Avoid TV, hand held computer games, or noise making electronic toys!!!, for mid primary aged and above children (where not having electronic recreational items is seen as a social disaster!!) invest in interactive movement software such as Playstation Eye toy, Dance Mat, which can be played interactively, and are movement based.
- Keep up regular play dates with the same children over a period of time if possible to build a history of shared experiences. Develop your family relationships with other parents of kids in your child's peer group, arrange to go on outings together as a family, e.g. zoo, beach, train , bus , ferry ride, aquarium, swimming pool, enclosed playground, bike rides.
- Make friends with other parents who have a positive accepting attitude to kids with special needs, and that share the same values that you do. Discuss with the parents your need to facilitate the play, offer to look after their child while they do their shopping or other tasks.
- Take digital/instant photos to use as a prop to discuss the experiences and to give to the peer as a reminder of the play date!

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