

## First friends

By Dr Robert Needlman and Dr Laura Jana

Children under three often play alongside each other – in parallel. As children get older, they start playing together more. You can help your young children develop the skills they need to play together and have fun.

### When do children begin to play with each other?

It used to be thought that young children didn't really play with other children. Before they're about three years old, they engage in what is called parallel play – that is, playing alongside each other, but not interacting directly.

That is true most of the time, but at other times, even very young children interact with each other while playing. Children who have been in group child care from an early age have more experience with peers, and tend to interact more. Siblings, who know each other very well, play with each other even at a very young age. However, when playing with other children they don't know as well, they still play in parallel.



### Early cooperative play

By age three or four, children spend more of their playtime interacting with each other. Some of the interaction is positive: imitating, planning, and executing a plan together, or sharing materials. At other times, the interaction is less benign. One child may snatch a toy away or barge in, disrupting the play.

Although it might seem that these actions are intended to annoy, it's more likely that they represent a child's unskilful attempts to join in the fun. It takes a long time for some children to figure out how to assert themselves without being aggressive.

On the whole, children learn best when adults assume that their intentions were good. This is true even if the children did not carry them off well. It's more helpful to show a child how to go about taking turns, than to scold the child for grabbing toys.

### Tips for encouraging early cooperative play

Here are some tips that can help make early play more cooperative:

- It's helpful if you can arrange to have two or more similar toys at playtime. That way, when one child is banging pegs into holes, a second child can bang away too, without having to wait.
- Keep the playtime short at first (30-45 minutes). If your child is having a hard time one day,

you can simply leave early. There is little to be gained by sticking it out. It's more important that your child have a good time while he's there. This is better than trying to make the experience last. When he's ready, he'll be able to stay longer.

- If you can, step in to redirect a child who is having a hard time playing positively. Try to do this before her behaviour evokes an angry reaction from another child. In this case, prevention is better than treatment!
- Give your child enough time to feel comfortable in the group. You might be a very outgoing person, but if your child is not, let him set the pace. He might want to stay near you for days or even weeks. Your natural tendency might be to push him to just get in there and play. But it's more helpful to respect your child's timing and comfort level. When the unfamiliar becomes familiar, even the most slow-to-warm-up child can feel comfortable in a group.

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Rated ★★★★★ (5 ratings)

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