



Topic:

How young children's social play is affected by different types of toys and playthings

Research tells us:

Parents and early childhood practitioners can encourage young children's social interaction during group play by providing toys and playthings that have any of the following features:

- ▶ Toys that involve turn taking or physical play,
- ▶ Toys that represent functional household objects in children's daily lives,
- ▶ Toys that can be used as props in pretend play, or
- ▶ Toys that can be used easily by two or more children.



Toy tea things bring two 2-year-olds together.

Is it time for a TOY tune-up?

Research shows that toys with certain characteristics encourage young children at play to interact socially

What do a child-sized tea set, a bubble-filled water table, and a basketful of colorful building blocks have in common? Besides being delightful playthings, these toys seem to work like magnets, drawing children together for imaginative, engrossing interaction and fun. They are also just a few examples of the many toys and play materials that share one or more of four characteristics research identifies as promoting social interaction among young children.

Melinda Raab, Ph.D., of the Research and Training Center on Early Childhood Development, analyzed studies of young children at play dating back as far as the 1930s to find out what features of different types of toys and play materials set the stage for children to be more likely to play together with peers or more likely to play alone. She examined 16 studies that included a total of 529 children between 2 and 7 years of age, 20 percent of whom were children with disabilities or delays. Fifteen of the 16 studies were conducted during naturally occurring or simulated free-play sessions. Most involved minimal or no adult direction about children's selection and use of playthings.

While any given toy can be used in a social or nonsocial way by a child, findings from available research made clear that some types of toys are more likely to be associated with children's social play, and other types of toys are more likely to be associated with nonsocial play. Some examples of social play toys are blocks, housekeeping and other dramatic play materials like dishes and dress-up clothes, toy cars and trucks, and wagons. Toys associated with nonsocial play were items like books, clay and play dough, puzzles, crayons and markers, and peg boards.

Dr. Raab compared all of the research findings to determine what characteristics of different types of toys and play materials promote children's social and nonsocial—or isolate—play. She found: ▶

Acting on the evidence:

Promote a rich variety of high-quality social play opportunities for your young children by giving them frequent opportunities to play freely with peers in settings where the following kinds of toys are among those readily available: dolls, puppets, dishes and other housekeeping items, dress-up clothes, building blocks, toy vehicles, riding toys and wagons, and (for older children) table games.

- **Social toys** are ones that (1) can be used easily by two or more children or that require more than one child to use them; (2) involve physical activity or turn taking; (3) may be used in a way that mirrors the everyday use of household objects; or (4) may be used as props for pretend play about real or imaginary situations.
- **Isolate toys** are ones that (1) a single child can use easily or (2) involve manipulative or creative activity.

Other findings from this research are (1) that social toys are among the most popular toys in terms of how often children select them and how long they play with them; and (2) children display higher levels of cognitive or symbolic play when using housekeeping and other dramatic play materials.

These research findings make clear that children’s everyday classroom experiences with toys and play materials provide many opportunities for increasing interactions among children. Practitioners who want to provide environments that encourage young children’s social play should consider the characteristics of the toys and play materials available in those environments.

When Dani Martinez began working as a substitute covering a childcare teacher’s six-week maternity leave, she noticed something interesting about her group’s morning free-play time. The busy three-year-olds tended to play by themselves, with little interaction, even though Dani knew there were some nice friendships among the children and that they generally enjoyed communicating and cooperating during activities like meals and “circle time.”

As she observed this tendency toward nonsocial play, Dani noted that toys and materials readily accessible in the classroom free-play area were mostly things like Play-Doh, crayons and markers, books, wooden puzzles, and other toys that could be used easily by only one child. Acting on evidence from research about how different types of toys affect children’s play, Dani moved quietly about during nap time, supplementing the toys that prompted “isolate play” with several others, previously stored out of reach, that she knew might promote social interaction. Later, soon after she cleared away their post-nap snack, Dani smiled as she watched the children happily playing in pairs and threes as they gathered around a large set of building blocks, a well-furnished doll house, and the bright contents of a costumes box.



Young children are more likely to interact during group play when toys that encourage socializing are available. Some choices are, clockwise from upper left, music makers, pretend food and dishes, riding toys like tricycles.

Take another look!

Read or download the complete research synthesis in the *Bridges* section of www.researchtopractice.info:

Raab, M. (2003). Relationship between types of toys and young children’s social behavior. *Bridges*, 1(8).

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