



# Playful Ways 2-4 Years

by Anandé Ferreira

This age group sees a widening of imaginary worlds and an ability to engage with and relate to others. They explore more movement patterns, may enjoy some light-hearted rough and tumble play, and yes, they enjoy making a mess as they continue to discover and learn about their bodies.

We see a shift from toddlers playing mostly with their close caregivers to enjoying the presence of others. This play stage starts teaching them how to engage in a group, share, make decisions, negotiate with others and start developing problem-solving skills as well as their own play interests.

They expand on their simple printed play actions, sequence routines and combine different objects as part of their pretend play. They often use real life experiences as their play themes. Play prompts that represent parts of their routine and domestic play continue to be important during this play stage. From three years onward, skilled players develop their ability to use one toy to represent another as their abstract and symbolic thinking develops.

Age mixing during this play stage provide benefits for both the younger and older playmates.

Play spaces that are too cluttered can lead them to them feeling overwhelmed. Rotating toys and items and placing some in clear containers and boxes on lower levels, along with one or two of their current favourites, may help some toddlers who become overwhelmed.

Scaffold the amount of support you give during play engagements and try to limit the adult agenda during child-initiated play. Try a "wait and see, then respond, wait and see, then respond" approach. This will allow them time to create and build on their own play ideas.

Solitary play is beneficial on many levels; therefore, we want to ensure that they feel safe and comfortable with the idea of playing by themselves from time to time and not feeling that they always need a caregiver right next to them. You can trial what I like to call a dance of "here and near". This is where we engage with children during initially whole then parts of activities, being close enough that they might hear or see you in the room, but not necessarily hovering over or near them.

The rhythm of your "here and near" dance may be different with each child, some may need a slower rhythm, you checking in and encouraging a bit more, while others may respond well and become so involved with the flow of their play that they can happily play away by themselves for a short period of time. It's all about tuning in to your child on the day and supporting the flow of their independent free play.

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A few key points:

- 1 INCLUDE FREE PLAY AS PART OF THE DAILY ROUTINE**
- 2 CREATE A SAFE, CALM AND PREFERABLY SCREEN-FREE PLAY SPACE**
- 3 DON'T OVERWHELM WITH TOO MANY TOYS AND/OR OBJECTS AT ONCE**
- 4 GET ON THEIR PLAY LEVEL**
- 5 ALLOW THEM TIME AND SPACE TO DEVELOP THEIR PLAY IDEAS AND INTERESTS**
- 6 FOLLOW THEIR PLAY CUES AND SCRIPT**
- 7 ASK THE RIGHT QUESTIONS TO GET A SENSE OF THEIR INNER PLAY WORLD**
- 8 USE BODY LANGUAGE AND FACIAL EXPRESSIONS**
- 9 FOSTER A “HERE AND NEAR” DANCE TO MAKE THEM FEEL SAFE AND SUPPORTED DURING SOLITARY PLAY IN ORDER TO DEVELOP INDEPENDENCE IN FREE PLAY**