

Parten's Stages Of Play

Unoccupied Play

(birth- 3 months)

Unoccupied Play lacks social interaction, objectives, and language. Children engaged in Unoccupied Play observe their world and move their bodies. Picture an infant happily watching dust particles dance in a sunbeam and kicking her legs.

Solitary Play

(3 months – 2 ½ years)

In Solitary Play, a child plays alone with little interest in other children or adults. The child is focused on and content with the activity at hand. Solitary Play is more focused and sustained than Unoccupied Play. Picture a child happily driving a toy car across the floor.

Onlooker Play

(2 ½ years – 3 ½ years)

A child watching others play without taking part is engaged in Onlooker Play. The child may show interest in the play, engage socially, and even converse with the players. Picture a three-year-old watching a group of school-age children busy with a dramatic play scenario.

Parallel Play

(3 ½ years – 4 years)

Parallel Play is when children play independently in the same area and with the same materials. They may observe and mimic each other, but they have their own goals and communication is limited. Picture children, seated at opposite sides of a table, busy with their own play dough creations.

Associative Play

(4 years – 4 ½ years)

In Associative Play, children are socially engaged with their peers and share materials, but the activity is not communal. They are playing together—at doing their own thing. Picture the play dough kids mentioned above working on their own projects while sharing materials, ideas, and conversation.

Cooperative Play

(4 ½ years and up)

Cooperative Play is the most social and organized form of play. Participants share a goal and work together to bring it about. They also share resources, make compromises for the common good, and take turns. Picture a group of children, transformed into superheroes, busy saving the world.



Based on the works of sociologist Mildred Parten Newhall (1902-1970) *While scholars agree Parten's theory has contributed to our understanding of play and provides a rough roadmap of how play develops over time, there is disagreement about whether children go through these stages in a strictly liner fashion and some think the age ranges are inaccurate.*

