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Play and friendship for children with disability

Key points

- Play and friendship can help children with disability develop social, communication and physical skills, feel good, and have fun.
- You can help your child practise play skills like listening, sharing, cooperating and taking turns.
- You can help playdates go well by choosing appropriate toys, setting up play areas, and guiding children through tricky situations.

Why friendship and play are good for children with disability

Play (https://raisingchildren.net.au/guides/first-1000-days/play/why-play-is-important) is central to learning and development for all children. Play and friendship help children with disability learn skills and abilities, including social-emotional, communication and physical skills.

And playing with others can help children with disability feel good about themselves – and have fun.

How children with disability learn and develop through play with others

Social-emotional skills

Play and friendships help your child learn about sharing (https://raisingchildren.net.au/toddlers/behaviour/friends-siblings/sharing), cooperating, working out what other people are feeling and making friends with other children. Friends are fun and can be caring too. Your child will get to know that they can rely on other children for support. This can be good for your child's self-esteem.

If your child finds it hard to understand and manage emotions and this affects their ability to play with others, a psychologist (https://raisingchildren.net.au/guides/a-z-health-reference/psychologist) can help.

Communication skills

Children with disability have many different ways of communicating. They might use speech, signing, gestures or communication devices. By being with other children, children with disability can learn new ways of talking, listening and communicating. For example, your child can hear and see how other children 'use their words' to say what they want and need when they're together. And your child can practise using words too. And other children can learn how your child communicates, which can help your child communicate with them.

When your child feels more confident about communicating, your child is likely to get along better with other people. And if your child sometimes has challenging behaviour, better communication skills might help.

If your child's disability makes it hard for them to communicate, a speech pathologist (https://raisingchildren.net.au/guides/a-z-health-reference/speech-pathologist) might be able to help.

Physical skills

Friendships can encourage your child to join in with fun social physical activities like running, jumping, throwing a ball, climbing or building things. Getting involved in physical play can improve your child's muscle tone and gross motor skills, as well as confidence.

If your child has a physical disability that makes it hard to be active, a physiotherapist (https://raisingchildren.net.au/guides/a-z-health-reference/physiotherapist) or occupational therapist (https://raisingchildren.net.au/guides/a-z-health-reference/occupational-therapist) can help your child find ways to get involved in games and sports with peers.

Practising play with children with disability

You can help your child practise skills for playing well with others through your everyday play and communication together. This includes skills like sharing, taking turns, listening and being sensitive to other children's feelings.

You can do this by being a behaviour role model. By listening, sharing, compromising, seeing things from other people's points of view and showing empathy, you show your child positive ways to interact with others. For example, you can say things like, 'Yes, let's do it that way' or 'I don't understand what you mean'.

Playing board games or interactive games is a great way to help your child learn to cooperate, share and take turns. For example, if waiting for a turn is something your child needs to practise, you can remind your child to wait by using a wait card or by just holding up your hand. As your child gets better at waiting for turns, you can cut down on the prompts by using a raised finger instead of a raised hand.

And you can read books with your child on play situations, or make Social Stories™ (https://raisingchildren.net.au/autism/therapies-guide/social-stories) or drawings of what might happen in the playground or at child care or preschool. It can also help to talk with your child about how to deal with these situations.

Whenever you see your child sharing, taking turns or playing well in any way, you can give your child praise and encouragement (https://raisingchildren.net.au/teens/behaviour/encouraging-good-behaviour/praise). When you tell your child exactly what you liked, your child is more likely to behave that way again. For example, 'It was nice that you gave the ball to Evan when it was his turn'.

Playing with others: making it easier for children with disability

All children have to learn how to play and get along with others. There are a few things you can do to make playing with others easier for children with disability.

Choosing toys and activities

If you're having a playdate for your child, you can help things along by choosing toys and playthings that all the children will enjoy. It's also a good idea to have some activities that you know your child can do confidently. Children are much more likely to join in when they feel confident.

For younger children, choose activities that give them the choice of playing alone, alongside others or together. Some ideas include:

- materials for painting and drawing
- books, blocks and construction materials like Duplo or Lego
- musical instruments
- props for imaginative or dramatic play
- outside play.

Setting up a play area

If you're inviting children to your house to play, setting up a play area for them can help things go well. A spacious area that's not too crowded works well, as do different spaces and activities so that children can either play together or alone.

Helping out if needed

Sometimes you might need to step in and help your child handle tricky situations. If you can give your child some words that help with understanding feelings, it might help. For example, 'Sally has taken your toy. It looks like you're feeling angry. It's OK to feel angry. Let's see how we can help'.

You can also teach your child some basic questions and sentences to help with play. For example, 'I would like to play with that too', 'Can we try doing this together?' or 'I don't like it when you do that'.

Mixing and matching

It's great for your child to be with both older and younger children as well as children the same age, and children with and without disability. This can give your child the chance to have a variety of play experiences.

If play doesn't go to plan

Things probably won't always go according to plan. We don't make friends with everyone we meet, or get along with everyone we know. It's normal to worry if your child is ignored or left out, or behaves badly.

If you can make playing with other children as fun and enjoyable as possible, your child will probably want to do it again.

Note that playing with other children takes physical and emotional energy, so your child might need to spend time alone after a big play session. As your child gets better at playing with other children over time, they'll naturally gain confidence.

If you're worried that your child might be being bullied, read our tips on how to spot if your child is being bullied (https://raisingchildren.net.au/school-age/behaviour/bullying/bullying-signs) and what you can do about it.

Understanding play

The way your child plays and makes friends will change through early childhood. Children learn different things from play at different ages and stages, including creativity, flexibility and problem-solving. And the more chances your child has to play, the more your child can learn about how to play.

Solitary play is when children play by themselves and don't pay attention to what others are doing. This stage typically goes up to 15-17 months. It can last longer for children with disability.

Parallel play is when children play alongside each other and might use the same or similar toys as those around them. This stage typically starts at 18-24 months, but it can be later for children with disability.

Associative play is when children make and share things, give each other things, or join in with what other children are doing. This typically starts around three years, but it might be later for children with disability.

Cooperative play is when children join together to do activities and work together to finish something. It might also be making up rules or playing games with rules. This typically starts happening at 3-4 years, but it might be later for children with disability.

Children with disability might move through these stage more slowly than typically developing children. This can be because their development is delayed, or because they haven't had the same play opportunities as typically developing children. For example, a child with a significant motor disability might find it physically difficult to play alongside other children, give things to other children and join in with activities.

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