

Play Partnering Children with SEND

Early Years Team

What is play partnering?

Play partnering is when an adult scaffolds a child's learning and development through child-led play. Children use play to understand the world, test new ideas or replay things they have experienced. Play partnering a child can help you to understand the child's view of the world and help the child to make sense of their world and understand what is expected of them. A play partner responds to, and follows, a child's lead, meaning that the child can stay in control of the play but enjoy the company of adults.

Why is it important to use play partnering?

Through play partnering, positive relationships are developed, and children's well-being is supported. It is the perfect opportunity to model language skills, new and interesting vocabulary and ways of communicating, including the rules of communication.

Children appreciate a playful adult, one that shows enthusiasm, who is ready to follow their responses. Being a play partner enables children to feel secure and develop independence; play partnering with children can encourage them to have a sense of self efficacy - making decisions for themselves.

How can I be an effective play partner?

If the play is freely chosen and lead by the child, you may think, what role do I have in this? Being a play partner sounds easy, but it takes knowledge, skill and patience. The key is to be interested in the child and what the child is actively trying to achieve in their play - children know the purpose of their play, we just need to find it out. To truly engage as a play partner, the adult needs to focus on the child; put that child at the centre of what is being said and happening right there in that moment, not focusing on outcomes. Learning and next steps will occur quite naturally and as you are part of the play.

Being an effective play partner requires sensitive interactions where you will be deciding if questions are appropriate in the situation, it can be better to actually be the one answering the children's questions rather than asking them. When adults interact sensitively with children during their play, they can support children's language skills. Getting the balance of adult talk/questions and child talk right is crucial. It is key to not ask too many questions or interrupt the child's thoughts; we need to ensure we are giving the children the time and the space to develop their

thoughts, play and chat. Listening to children, so the adult can build on what the child has to say, is far more effective than asking questions such as, 'What colour is the car?'

Sometimes, children need a quiet pause/silence to think, to process what is being said or what is happening. The adult filling that space stops this thinking process and the child must go right back to the beginning. Tuning into the child enables an emotionally supportive relationship to flourish.

Being a play partner enables us to encourage higher level thinking in the children. Through their play, we start to develop and extend children's thinking and learning. A play partner can draw a child's attention to certain features of what they are doing, without changing/redirecting the child's play. It is possible for us to create opportunities that prompt interesting conversations, and this can help children to think, explain and reason. The skill is to engage children and encourage the development of their thinking and learning without spoiling their enjoyment of their play.

Example of play partnering

Beginning

Make sure you have allowed for time to give the child the full attention, i.e. arrange for fellow room staff to attend to the needs of other children. Set up some toys/play activities which you know are key interests of the child. Let the child choose what to play with independently. The child has chosen to play in the sand. Sit close to the child, on the opposite side of the sand tray, so they can see the face. Let your body language and face show that you are interested in their play, e.g. look at what they are doing, smile, make reassuring sounds to show your interest etc. Initially you may need to simply mirror the child's play e.g. the child pushes a car through the sand, you push the own car through the sand, without making any comments.

During the activity

Follow the child's lead, if they accept you playing close to them and pause to show you something, acknowledge and name what they are playing with e.g. "car". They may notice you watching/mirroring them and may do something, such as bang the car down, and look to you for a reaction. Smile, react with a friendly sound i.e. bang! If the child enjoyed this interaction, they may repeat it many times.

You could then attempt to build upon the play by you modelling the action, i.e. banging a car, and look towards the child and wait for their reaction, e.g. a smile, sound, before repeating. Listen and repeat what the child says to provide an adult model e.g. child says 'tar', you say "car". Repeat what the child says and add a word e.g. child says "car", you say "red car" or "car driving" again following their lead and play.

Continue to watch what the child is doing, how they are playing, and help to build on this without taking over the play/changing the play. For example, if the child is covering the car with sand, you could model using different tools to cover you the car with sand e.g. a spade, a spoon. If the child is engaged more in the pouring and covering, than the car, you can introduce different objects for them to cover, pour

into, fill and empty. Make relevant comments, such as, “Hmm it’s full now” or “The car is stuck” but remember not to continually speak; to leave spaces of silence for the child to think and initiate interactions if they wish.

Key things to remember for success

- Be physically and emotionally present while playing – give them the full attention – you are not play partnering if you are writing an observation or talking to another adult.
- If the child allows you, try to sit where you are close, and they can clearly see the face, ideally opposite. You may need to start by simply sitting a little distance away and moving closer over play partnering sessions.
- Follow the child’s lead – let them choose the toy/activity, copy their ideas, actions and sounds.
- Be aware of the child’s and the own body language and gestures and let these lead your interactions.
- Don’t try to change the play, praise and reinforce the child’s ideas and gently extend play opportunities without taking over.
- Limit the amount of ‘adult talk’. Give the child extra silence - wait for them to communicate with words/sounds/gestures/eye contact.
- Avoid asking lots of questions, e.g. what colour is the car? How many cars are there? These types of questions may limit play and prevent the child’s thoughts from developing. Make relevant comments instead.
- Repeat what the child says and add a word e.g. child says “car”, you say “red car” or “car driving”.

