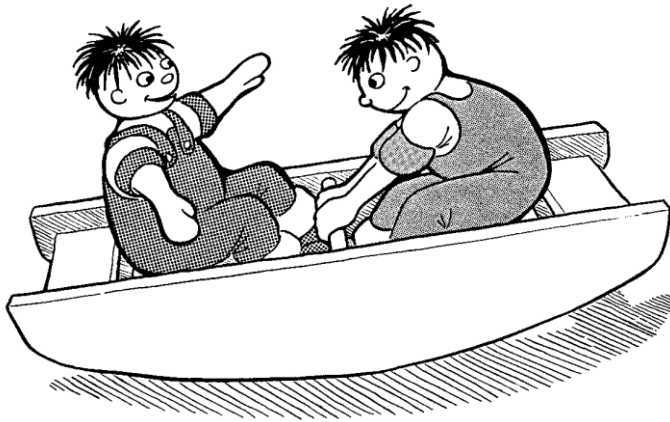


# Encouraging Social Interaction Through Play



Your child care program is a prime place for young children to develop and practice emerging social skills in a nurturing environment. For some, your program may even be their first experience being around other children and their first opportunity to interact with peers.

Some people think of social interaction only in terms of talking and its accompanying expressions and gestures. A more global picture of interaction takes into consideration what occurs visually, verbally, and/or physically any time a child comes into contact with another child. It may be as simple as a touch or a glance or as complicated as cooperating or taking turns.

For young children, social interaction skills are acquired through frequent contact with peers and caring adults. The give and take during the activities and caregiving routines of your child care program allow for the experiences which are necessary to learn appropriate skills at varying developmental levels and for the practice which ensures that these skills can be used in a variety of situations.

Providers who care for both children with and without disabilities keep in mind the possibility that children may not spontaneously interact with one another. Responding to the limitations and needs of each child, they make an active effort to mix the two groups of children throughout routines and activities. They pair children with disabilities (and/or younger children) with children who are more skilled at interaction. They provide verbal and physical encouragement to help overcome the tendencies of some children to avoid social interaction with other children who are seen as different. And, they create opportunities for social interaction by carefully selecting and using particular play materials.

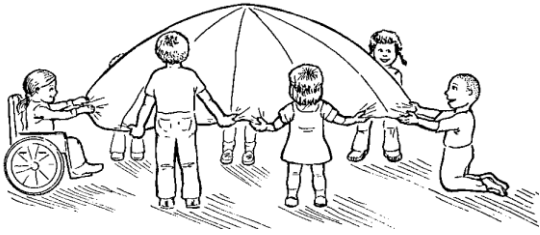
Using play materials to promote social interaction offers children with disabilities natural opportunities to learn to interact. Carefully selecting play materials to promote social interaction is both viable and nonintrusive - the materials themselves prompt play and interaction - leaving the care provider freer to attend to the needs of individual children and caregiving routines. You are probably already aware that some play materials seem to encourage children to interact with each other, or to cooperate while using the toy or acting out a play scene which includes the toy. The characteristics that are common among toys and equipment that promote social interaction can be described as the "ABCs of play materials for social interaction":

- A**ccessible - require little or no adult assistance
- B**e adaptable - children at different ability levels can play together
- C**ooperative - require the help of another child
- D**esigned for two (or more) - allow space for several children to play
- E**xtra sensory - maximize visual, verbal, and physical contact

Efforts to increase social interaction also include - in addition to play materials - attention to curriculum, activities, care routines, individual skill acquisition in communication, and specific behavior interventions.

As you use these ideas, you will see children developing in both small and large ways in their ability to interact. By providing appropriate play materials and encouraging social interaction in your child care program, you assist children in their learning to play together, to cooperate, and to find joy in their interactions with others.

## Try It Out



Ask kids what they think about parachute play, and they'll say, "It's great!" There is something great about the colors flying and the swish of fabric being pulled through the air. Another great thing about parachute play is that each child in your program can participate in what makes parachute play great. Children large and small can take turns laying under the parachute and experiencing the wave of color and wind as their friends billow the chute above them. Puffy terry-cloth ponytail holders can be sewn to the edge of the chute, (sheet, blanket, or large scarf) as hand-holds and placed around a child's wrist, to allow infants and children who may have difficulty grasping to join in the up and down motion of the play.

Large triangles of different textured fabrics - burlap, corduroy, velour, flannel - sewn to make a circle add touching and feeling experiences for all children and may be particularly exciting for a child with a vision impairment. Adding a ball(s) in the middle of the parachute challenges children to coordinate their movements to keep the ball from rolling off the edge.

Of course, letting children use their own imaginations may result in additional ideas such as, "Let's make a tent over the climber," "How many of us can get under here?," "Can we each sit down on a different color," or "peek-a-boo" as the chute wafts up and down. Parachute play is cooperative, fun, and imaginative; it pulls children together in a breezy swirl of color, touch, and movement.

## A Child Care Provider's Question

**QUESTION:** *One of the children in my program, Andy, has a severe developmental delay. He has very limited movement, doesn't use words, and seldom plays with toys, much less other children. Is social interaction something I should work on for this child, too?*

**ANSWER:** Definitely! Children interact with adults, toys, and their peers even when they have significant developmental delays or disabilities. The way interaction occurs may be different from what is thought of as typical, but social interaction is important for every child. Here are ways you might promote social interaction for Andy:

- ★ Be sure that he has an opportunity to play in each of the activities you provide or areas you arrange. Andy's play may not be the same as another child with better motor abilities, but it is important for him and for the other children to spend time together - in the same play areas playing with similar materials. In the block area, for example, Andy may not build towers or houses, but he might enjoy knocking down towers or looking at blocks arranged in interesting patterns.

- ★ During art activities, arrange the art supplies on Andy's wheelchair tray. When children need more paint or another pair of scissors, they can go over to his tray, tell Andy what they need, and pick it out for themselves. This al-

lows Andy to be involved and gives children many opportunities to talk to and interact with him. (Don't forget that Andy needs a turn to create his own art work, too.)

- ★ During circle time, you may need to be creative in looking for ways that Andy can interact with his peers. He may need an adapted chair or other positioning device so that he can sit at the same level with the other children. You or one of the other children may want to help Andy make the motions to familiar songs and nursery rhymes.

The important thing is to separate social interaction from a child's ability level - it really is possible to interact with people and materials at any developmental level. Your job is to look for and create opportunities that make it easier for children with disabilities to interact with their peers and truly feel a part of the group.

