

When a Child Doesn't Play

by Glenna Zeak

Play is the vehicle through which children explore, learn, build relationships, and acquire skills. Play fosters the expression of curiosity, laughter, enthusiasm, resourcefulness, and creativity. Play encourages independent learners. It requires the ability to imagine, plan, engage, reflect, pretend, construct, make choices, manipulate, examine, question, collaborate, cooperate, make decisions, create, and solve problems. Play engages children physically, intellectually, socially, and emotionally. Play engages the senses. It is how children come to understand the world, utilize surplus energy, cope with fears and anxiety, and manage emotional states. The very nature of play helps develop positive dispositions toward learning. Play is the way children learn. However, not all children know how to play, and not all children develop these skills in play experiences.

Some children wander about the classroom, pausing to observe and then moving on to another group of children, then another, never stopping to engage in play. Others dabble in play, that is, they move objects around but are not fully engaged. Still others feel rejected, anxious or aloof, never feeling like a valued member of the group, looking for solace rather than play. These children need the support of their teachers. Children are, of course, complex human beings and understanding their needs can be a lengthy process. This article is not intended to take the place of a careful and thorough investigation of their needs.



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When a Child Doesn't Play

What happens when children can't take advantage of play opportunities teachers provide? How can experienced teachers intervene to draw children into play, sustain their interest, and promote productive play interactions? It's through play that children build a repertoire of skills. We will examine the common problems exhibited by children who do not play, the effect of these difficulties on learning and development, and a process for supporting these children.

The Wanderer

Bethany is waiting her turn to plan for exploratory play. She listens as Leah tells of her plans to build a castle in the block and construction area with Dylan. Dylan explains how they will use the big heavy blocks for the walls and 'stick in' some little white plastic blocks for windows. Bethany turns to Leah and asks if she can bring her dolls to the castle when it's done and Leah nods. The teacher asks Bethany, "How will you get to the castle, and what will you do until the castle is built?" Bethany pauses reflectively, then replies: "I don't know. I want to help make the castle." The teacher suggests Bethany make a special sign so that everyone knows Leah and Dylan are making a castle. She hands her a book from the classroom library entitled *The Sign Painter*. Bethany looks through the book and selects the sign she plans to create in the art area, "Under Construction," as Leah and Dylan go off to build the castle. Bethany completes her sign and carries it over to Leah and Dylan, who are busy constructing a gate to surround their castle. These children have foundational skills for four- to five-year-old play. They are able to plan, reflect, make decisions, and carry out those decisions as they engage in play experiences.

Let's take a look at another child.

Macy, sits quietly nearby as other children announce their play choices. Then, as Bethany, Leah, and Dylan begin their play experience, Macy begins to wander about the room, pausing as if to study the play of peers, and after only a few moments, moving on to another center, and another group of children, never stopping long enough to enter or be invited into the play experience. Macy is a 'wanderer.'

Macy may wander for several reasons. She may:

- be overwhelmed by all of the activities to choose from.
- not have the skills to choose or plan her play experience.
- not know how to enter an activity already underway.
- not have the attention span to select and stay on task.

Children who wander may not have some of the basic play skills needed to engage in meaningful play, including: making play choices; sustaining interest in an activity; creating and experimenting; communicating wants and needs, joining a group, getting along with others, and enjoying play. These children may:

- have limited experience with materials or other children.
- be easily distracted, and may not have been given adequate time for play.
- find the tasks, materials, and activities boring, not challenging enough, or too complex.

Children may also exhibit wandering behaviors if they are not feeling well, have sensory delays or other special needs. Additionally, children who are experiencing stress or trauma at home may find the classroom unsettling or scary.

Supporting the Wanderer

The first step is to identify the cause of the wandering behavior and to take measures to modify the context in which the wandering behavior has occurred. For example, if the environment contributes to wandering, assess the choices in the classroom to determine if there is a sufficient number to interest the children. Determine if the materials and activities are appropriate for your children, and ensure

accommodations have been planned to address children with special needs.

If the wandering child has limited experiences with materials or children in the classroom and has difficulty making choices, adults can help her to choose one activity over another. Paying close attention to the areas where the child pauses with more interest than others enables the teacher to offer the child two options and encourage the child to make a choice. The adult may enter the play experience with the child: engaging in parallel or associate play; sharing materials and offering suggestions for use of the materials; and posing questions to extend play and sustain the child's focus and interest.

The wandering child may also have little experience playing with other children. Supported parallel play near other children may help this child to become more comfortable with his classmates. The wandering child may not see play as fun because of her inhibitions or fears. Changing that perception is essential to the success of the wandering child.

Dabblers

Like Bethany, Leah, and Dylan, Jacob announced his basic play plan: he was going to the water table to play in the water. Although he goes to the center as planned, he does not appear fully engaged in the play experience. As he fills the small dump truck with water, scooping it up with a cup and then dumping again, his actions seem repetitious. His eyes are neither on the toys nor the actions, and he appears to be watching the other children. Jacob is a 'dabbler.'

Supporting the Dabbler

Dabblers often exhibit attention deficit behaviors, unable to focus on a task for long periods of time. Jacob was eager to play at the water table, but his interest quickly subsided when he became distracted by the activities of other children. All children dabble occasionally. It is when a child consistently dabbles that intervention is needed. Dabblers are generally unengaged. The role of the teacher is to bring the child into meaningful engagement with materials and with the child's peers. The teacher may engage in parallel play or associative play with the child in order to model play behaviors; she may add materials to the play experience or pose questions and comments to stimulate and extend the child's play.

The Rejected Child

Joey is another five-year-old in this class. When he comes to school, his body and clothing is dirty, hair is matted and uncombed, and he has an unwelcome odor. Joey has tried to enter into play experiences with other groups of children, and when he is snubbed, he responds aggressively, knocking down constructions, throwing toys to the floor, or hitting and hurting other children. Everywhere he attempts to play, Joey is the 'rejected child.'

Children who exhibit aggressive behaviors are often rejected by other children, who are fearful of being hurt or simply dislike the company of this child. Although his unkempt appearance may have contributed to his rejection initially, it is most likely his aggressive behavior that perpetuates the cycle. Joey lacks the skills necessary for entering play.

The rejected child generally lacks three basic play skills: awareness of others; turn-taking skills, and problem-solving skills:

Awareness of others involves an ability to attend to what others are saying, doing, or feeling and to understand the perspectives and rights of others.

To be able to share means to agree to a common play goal, take turns, help others, and to allow others to use one's materials.

To be able to problem solve includes expressing one's wants and needs appropriately; listening to the wants and needs of others; cooperating and accepting mutually arrived at solutions.

Supporting the Rejected Child

To address the rejected child's lack of skills, adults should ensure there are sufficient materials that vary in complexity and meet the diverse interests of children. Ample time should be provided for children to become fully engaged in play experiences. Guide the rejected child through the turn-taking process by helping him to choose alternate activities until it becomes his turn, and then praise him for waiting for his turn. Provide him with the language to express his wants and needs appropriately, and offer encouragement every time you see him sharing and caring.

The Anxious Child

During exploratory play time, Jessica always chooses the same area of the classroom: the library. She walks into the center, picks a book, sinks into a beanbag chair, and looks through a book, that is, until another child comes into her play space. Then she drops the book, looks around the room for a place where no one else is playing, and crawls into the corner, cuddling herself, watching other children play. It appears that she views this child as an intrusion upon her alone time. When an adult walks into her space, her anxiety emerges once again. Jessica is an 'anxious child.'

A child may be anxious for many reasons, and they may appear anxious for a few days at a time, and seem very comfortable at other times. Anxiety often surfaces when children have experienced stress in the home environment, perhaps after hearing or seeing parents argue and fight. Anxiety may also arise when children have insufficient rest or when they are hungry, two conditions that cause physical and emotional stress. The anxious child may be overwhelmed by the preschool experience, with many children, numerous choices of play experiences, and no familiar adult to turn to. They may have had a negative experience with another child, or they may simply have a temperament that is not conducive to a bustling preschool environment. Children express anxiety in many ways. We may see physical signs such as when their bodies tense up, little eye contact, thumb-sucking, wanting a blanket or security item, trying too hard to please, or behaving in a disruptive manner.

Supporting the Anxious Child

To help the anxious child, adults must help her become more comfortable and able to join in play.

- Begin by validating the child by showing that you notice and value her and have an interest in how she is feeling. We do this by listening to the anxious child and responding appropriately to her wants and needs.
- Strive to build a trusting relationship with this child in which she can rest assured that you will meet her needs and keep her safe.
- Create a classroom environment that is a safe, predictable place where a child knows what he can expect and experience success.

- Nurture playfulness by providing captivating, appealing, and open-ended activities where children can explore at their own pace.
- Encourage the anxious child to engage in soothing (sensory) activities, such as sand and water play, and painting.

In time, most children will respond to the supportive efforts of the teacher and become more comfortable.

The Aloof Child

Daemon is an aloof child. He shows little or no interest either in his classmates or in play experiences. He stands a distance away from other children, observes for long periods of time, but shows no interest in joining activities. Dylan notices Daemon and invites him to help him as he continues work on the castle, but Daemon ignores the gesture.

A vital part of a child's growth is becoming a social being, someone who can make friends and enjoy others. Social skills and friendships have a powerful effect on children's self-esteem and their attitudes about learning and participating in school. The aloof child pulls back and avoids contact with classmates.

There are physical clues for recognizing the aloof child:

- They make little or no eye contact, have blank facial expressions, and appear tense or wary.
- The aloof child rarely initiates conversation, speaks softly, and responds with brief answers.
- He shows little or no interest in other children, is reluctant to join a group, and does not call attention to himself.

Children may be aloof if they lack experience with groups of children or with the materials and activities in the classroom environment. Or they may not have established trusting relationships with adults or children, may not feel comfortable taking risks, or have not recovered from a stressful life situation.

Supporting the Aloof Child

Children who are aloof, like all children, need to feel successful. To foster those feelings of success, adults should focus on having appropriate expectations for children and setting incremental goals. Children need to be challenged, but not

pushed beyond their level of comfort, understanding, and skills. Scaffolding to enrich the child's learning experience challenges him, yet ensures his success:

- Appreciate each child's individuality; while children are similar in many ways, they differ in temperament, personality, family context, and prior experiences. These differences can enrich the learning environment if appreciated and accepted as valuable.
- Accept the child's choices and encourage him to expand upon the choice; affirm his ability to make decisions and provide additional options in a positive way.
- Communicate your confidence in the child's abilities; offer words of encouragement or simply make eye contact and smile to the child across the room.
- Provide experiences that ensure a child's success; plan with the interests and abilities of each child in mind.
- Observe and affirm small successes. Catch each child in the moment when small successes are evident. Specifically and clearly tell him what you have observed, and you will begin to see his confidence emerge.

Supporting the Play of all Children

The role of the teacher-adult is to give children autonomy over their play, and to observe, assess, and plan to enrich the play environment for them. Supporting children who exhibit difficulties engaging in play is a natural extension of this role of helping children to take the next steps in gaining new skills.

The role of the teacher is to facilitate learning through play experiences where children can examine, explore, and inquire; where curiosity emerges and resourcefulness becomes second nature. It is to build relationships with children where they can feel safe, appreciated, and respected, and where they can trust that you will help them to accomplish what they set out to do. It is to create environments where children can engage in play experience that open doors to their understanding of the world, and to feel confident in trying out new experiences and taking appropriate risks.

Resource

Teaching Strategies (Producer). (2009). *Hand in Hand: The Child Who Doesn't Play* [Video training series with binder]. Washington, DC: Author.