

Young children form a variety of different kinds of peer relationships in child care. They have peers as friends, peers as playmates, and peers as unnoticed classmates. Each of these relationships provides an opportunity for children to practice and develop their social skills and their relationship skills.

Playmates and Peers

Your baby's social life with his peers will begin just as soon as you see to it that he has opportunities to see other babies. You can put two babies in a playpen or on a blanket on the grass at three months old, and if they are both in happy moods, they'll make a picture both families will always treasure. Cooperative play with other children, the kind most adults consider "real" play, doesn't start until children are about three, but they all need the companionship of other children long before that. Of course siblings often make wonderful playmates, but it is important for your baby to be around others who are close to him in age and size.



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Finding suitable playmates may or may not be easy, depending on your neighborhood, your own circle of friends, and your personal inclinations and abilities in making new friends. If there's a public park near you, you may find this "fresh air playroom" the ideal place both for your child and yourself to take a break from the home routine. Many lifetime friendships for both parents and children have begun in parks. The parents socialize and childcare tips as their babies doze in carriages; then later they share supervision duties as their children play on park equipment and learn to get along with others.

Some who have watched their own children or others' closely as their social lives developed have noted that

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play progresses in quite predictable stages. The first stage is not play at all; babies under a year old are watchers. They examine their toys and everything they get their hands on very closely, and they stare at other people. You'll probably notice that your baby is especially interested in other babies and small children and is well aware that they are different from adults.

Toddlers begin what's called parallel play. They play side by side or back to back, paying little or no attention to each other. They like being together and they may occasionally enjoy watching each other play, but most of all each is interested in what he is doing. When your child is about eighteen months old, you're likely to see some aggressiveness. Toddlers don't really know how to play yet. They don't understand sharing, and they haven't learned that it's not right to hit and shove and bite other people. Use common sense when handling a battle between two toddlers; remember that you are the adult. Of course you can't stand by and see a child get really hurt, but be careful you don't teach your toddler that it's all right to hit others because Mommy will see to it that the others don't hit back. And be aware that if you spank your toddler for being overly aggressive, you'll be teaching that the way to stop hitting is to hit.

Associated play, in which children really play together, follows soon. This is unstructured play; there are no rules, but two children will talk to each other and use some of the same toys. Both attention spans and tempers are short, and egos are all-important, so you can't expect the fun to last more than about a half hour in most cases. You'll hear the word "mine" often. If the eyes of to children happen to light on the same toy at the same time, they'll both reach for it whether or not they really want it. In fact, toddlers at this age really do want everything they see, unselectively. Reason won't solve the problem of contention; these children are not yet old enough to grasp the idea of sharing. You may be able to make use of a time to set the end of one child's turn and the beginning of the other's, but sometimes you may simply have to put a toy away.

Remember that the quarrels that annoy you because they seem senseless help children develop social skills. If you interfere in any but the most serious, you will be depriving the children of a chance to learn how to get along with others. At this point, children almost always do best with just one other child, and will get along better and be able to play longer with one than with

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another. It is important now that your child sees as many others as possible so as to be able to select the ones with whom she most enjoys playing.

By about the age of three, your child will have become proficient enough at social relationships to begin cooperative play, which involves rules and sharing and turns and fairness-in playing house, the "mother" must act like a mother; it's not fair for one child to knock down a tower of blocks two have put up together; your child will know that she can't use the swing while it's the playmate's turn. If you have older children, it's at about this point that you begin to see the sibling companionship you've been waiting for. While previously the older kids have probably enjoyed playing with the younger one as a sort of living toy, now little brother or little sister has learned enough to make proper responses in play situations and has become much more interesting. Imaginative role playing-"school," "house," "office"-is fun for both the younger and the older kids.

Parents often worry if they see what they think are signs of shyness in their child. Some shyness is simply the result of a developmental phase; the child will soon outgrow it and become outgoing and friendly. You can help your shy toddler or preschooler by encouraging non-threatening play with just one or two low-key children, not a crowd of boisterous ones. Be aware that some children are less gregarious than others, just as some adults are. Don't push too hard.