

A4: Social development across the life stages

The stages of play in infancy and early childhood

In the early stages of life, the quality of our interactions with caregivers and the environment can have an immense impact on our social and cognitive development. In many cultures, play and work are not as isolated from adult activities as they are in Western cultures. Children play, but their play is an imitation of what adults are doing. On the other hand, our culture sees play as something separate from real life. An interesting piece of research involved six-year-old children asked to draw pictures of adults and children doing things (Hoyles and Evans, 1989). The children's pictures of adults showed them washing the car, hoovering, etc., while the pictures of children showed them playing on swings, going to school or kicking a ball around.

It is no coincidence that we talk about children 'learning through play', and many early years curricula around the world have developed along those lines, such as the EYFS (Early Years Foundation Stage), and the Reggio Emilia, Froebel and Steiner Schools. Montessori even went as far as to state that 'play is the child's work', although her didactic materials deliberately do not encourage social play as this only interferes with the 'work'. Only one of each specially developed resource is available within the classroom, and few are designed for group interaction.

Why play is important:

- Provides sensory stimulation that supports the development of neural pathways and synapses in brain and memory development
- Provides the foundation blocks for fine and gross motor skills development
- Provides an avenue for imagination and creativity
- Allows you to engage with something repeatedly, fine-honing skills and ensuring the foundations are laid before progressing to more complex tasks
- Allows you to be curious, to think 'what if?'
- Allows you to be inventive, developing problem-solving skills
- Allows you to develop social skills, including sharing, collaboration, cooperation and understanding the needs and feelings of others
- Requires an ability to communicate, prompting the development of language or other communication skill sets
- Provides a basis for social interaction and the development of friendship and friendship groups
- Provides a platform on which we can build skills in self-regulation, courtesy and moral understanding
- Allows children to develop an understanding of rules and how to share
- Allows children to investigate difficult themes. such as death

Play is a social construct, dependent upon the culture children play in. Play is important as it is through play that children develop the skills and learning habits that they will need throughout their lives. Research shows that introducing play to areas that are 'play-deprived' improves children's cognitive, motor and social skills (Taneja et al., 2002). Play therapy is often used for children who have experienced adversity and abuse.

There are many different theories and studies that have been made about play. Mildred Parten (1902–1970) developed her theory that children engage in six different types of play while observing American preschool children aged two to five, during the late 1920s. She defined free play as anything that 'was unrelated to survival, production or profit'.

These stages emerge from infancy through to early childhood, and are not necessarily related to an age or stage of development.

Mildred Parten's six stages of play

Stage of play	Characteristic
Unoccupied	Children are not playing with anything or watching anyone.
Onlooker	Children watch each other play, and may interact socially, but do not engage in the play activity itself.
Solitary	Children play by themselves with no input from others.
Parallel	Children play alongside each other, sometimes copying each other.
Associative	Children are playing together but their play is uncoordinated and they have different play agendas.
Cooperative	Children interact and play together without adult support.

Once children have achieved the stage of cooperative play, they are beginning to identify with a particular social group, for example, a football team. Cooperative play requires a high level of social maturity and collaborative skills, and the ability to understand the importance of rules and adhere to them.

Developing these ideas about types of play, Tina Bruce, a social learning theorist who is influenced by the work of Fredrich Froebel (1782–1852), has developed a system of 12 features of play. Each feature can occur at any age. Bruce uses the term 'free-flow play' to explain how children use the experiences they get from social interactions and developing skills to 'wallow in their play'. The concept of free-flow play has been absorbed into present educational terminology to refer to children's ability to move freely between areas inside and outside the classroom.

Many fear that children's play is becoming a rare commodity. Symbolic learning (letters and numbers) is entering the previously play-dominated realm of the preschool and reception class. Children no longer play outdoors, with parents overly worried for their safety. The rise and rise of computer games means many children, adolescents and adults spend hours glued to a screen, interacting with unknown others over an Internet connection in an artificial world. The term 'helicopter-parenting' has gained notoriety as parents, in a bid to help their children avoid the stress of day-to-day living, end up overprotecting and dominating them, filling their free time with sports, dance or other activities and not allowing them to take risks such as climbing trees or cycling to a friend's house a few minutes away.

Tina Bruce's Twelve Features of Play

1. Children use first-hand experiences from life.
2. Children make up rules as they play in order to keep control.
3. Children symbolically represent as they play, making and adapting play props.
4. Children choose to play – they cannot be made to play.
5. Children rehearse their future in their role play.
6. Children sometimes play alone.
7. Children pretend when they play.
8. Children play with adults and other children cooperatively in pairs or groups.
9. Children have a personal play agenda, which may or may not be shared.
10. Children are deeply involved and difficult to distract from their deep learning as they wallow in their play and learning.
11. Children try out their most recently acquired skills and competences, as if celebrating what they know.
12. Children coordinate ideas and feelings and make sense of relationships with their families, friends and cultures.

Educationally, we have even tried to quantify the types of play that one would see in an early years setting. Ofsted took the view in 2015 that:

‘as children grow older, and as their development allows, it is expected that the balance between adult-led and child-initiated experiences will gradually shift towards more activities led by adults, to help children prepare for more formal learning, ready for Year 1.’

(OFSTED, Teaching and play in the early years – a balancing act? July 2015, No. 150085)

The following play terminology is often used in relation to preschool and Reception settings.

- Free-flow play: sustained play where children are free to explore, select and use resources and play areas, both indoors and outdoors play, as they like without interruption
- Structured play: play that has been organised and planned for by more knowledgeable others, i.e. both adult-initiated play and adult-directed play, usually with a pre-agreed learning intention or goal
- Adult-initiated play: play which may or may not be preplanned, but which is based on observation of children’s interests and provision of appropriate resources or provocations that children can use, first with some help from an adult and then independently
- Adult-directed play: play which may or may not be preplanned, but which is based on observation of children’s interests and provision of appropriate resources or provocations that require greater supervision and involvement from an adult than adult-initiated play
- Child-initiated play: sustained play that has been initiated and continued by the child with no adult involvement

The importance of social interactions

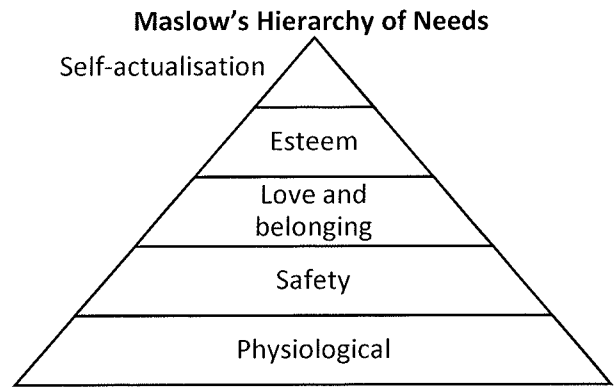
We are highly social beings, defining ourselves by complex interactions at family, community, national and international levels. Platforms such as Facebook or Instagram have grown enormously because of our need to socialise, and to be part of a group. Aristotle is quoted as saying over 2,000 years ago, that ‘man is a social animal, an individual who is unsocial naturally and not accidentally and is either beneath our notice or more than human... either a beast or a god.’ Quite why we are so sociable, compared to other animal families, is unknown, but anthropologists believe it has to do with survival. A family unit is stronger than a single parent, a group of families is stronger than a single family, all the way up through village and city to nation and federation. Strength lies in numbers, especially if everyone is in agreement.

Additionally, our brains appear to be hardwired to interact socially. Bowlby, in his research on what creates a positive attachment between babies and caregivers, realised that just caring for a baby’s basic needs (food, warmth, cleanliness, sleep) was not enough. Babies need to be held, nurtured and comforted as well. As shown earlier, Mary Ainsworth’s research in the quality of mother–child relationships uncovered different types of insecure attachment (anxious resistant and anxious avoidant), which affected the child’s social interactions with the mother and the stranger (Strange Situation experiment) and would impact on relationships later on in life.

Babies born to depressed mothers are shown to have lower levels of social and emotional development (Kumar and Brockington, 1997). Research also shows that babies are hardwired to look at faces, will stare at anything that resembles a face, and can process faces to an adult level by the age of four months. Other objects are processed at a much lower level in the brain at this age (Faraz et al., 2012). Researchers believe this is because babies are learning about social and emotional cues from facial expressions, and start to imitate and experiment with them, learning from the reactions and interactions they get from parents and caregivers.

So what exactly are the social benefits and importance of friendships and friendship groups?

Maslow (1908–1970), in his theory on what motivates humans, argued that once basic needs such as food and safety are fulfilled, the next basic need is to feel loved and have a sense of belonging. He recognised the strength of this need, particularly throughout childhood, and how it can dominate the other levels, such as safety or physiological needs. For example, children and adults will still cling to those closest to them for love and affection even if they suffer abuse from them.



A lack of love and sense of belonging can negatively affect family relationships and friendships later in life. People who do not have a sense of belonging or of being loved will feel, to a greater or lesser extent, lonely, anxious, isolated and ostracised. As we age, loss of loved ones, changes in where we live or lack of mobility and illness can also reduce that feeling of belonging and being loved.

A feeling of belonging is what drives us to take part in social activities and join professional organisations or gangs. It is part of the way in which we organise our sense of self-concept and is particularly strong in late childhood and early adulthood, when peer pressure may cause us to join groups that are not beneficial to our social and emotional development. Maslow recognised that the hierarchies are interrelated and not clearly separate from each other, and that they are relevant at all stages of our lives.

Positive effects of social interaction

Belonging to a social group is one of a human being's basic psychological needs and helps us to stay healthy in many different ways. There are many different group set-ups that we can belong to – family, hobby, sport, political, professional – but the one thing they have in common is that other members of the group share the same ideas or characteristics as we do.

Social interaction helps us to:

- stay mentally healthy, motivating us to connect, take part, do better or help others
- communicate ideas, needs, cultural beliefs and social values
- provide a support system, e.g. drug rehabilitation, postnatal, bereavement
- promote a cause or express personal beliefs, whether as a protest or in a professional capacity
- feel positive and happy (research shows that socially engaged adults age better and are more optimistic)
- achieve goals such as weight loss or running a marathon

Negative effects of social interaction

Not all social interaction is positive. Intimidation, violence, abuse, bullying and peer pressure can affect us throughout our lives, and everywhere we go. The effects can be:

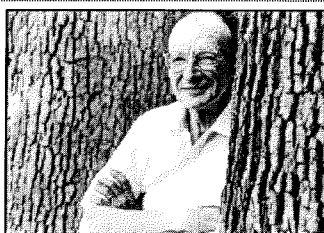
- lowered levels of self-esteem, especially if a person is ostracised from a group because they will not take part (peer pressure)
- fear – fear of being hurt, fear of being found out, fear of letting other people down, fear of not being good enough
- anger and aggression – often a defensive reaction linked to fear
- bullying, intimidation and violence – carried out by you on those you can dominate and have power over (children, partners, pets)
- depression – loss of love and a feeling of belonging, low feelings of self-worth and self-esteem that make it difficult to move on or away from the negative behaviour
- powerlessness – inability to change the situation, such as move job, or leave an abusive partnership
- physical reactions – migraines, stomach cramps
- stress – although stress can have a positive effect, raising concentration levels, and motivating us to get a job done, it can also have negative effects, such as weight gain, affect sleep patterns and cause acute anxiety
- obligation – feeling obliged to join the group so as to be part of something and not be ostracised

We often think of bullying or peer pressure as something that happens at school, or between adolescent peer groups, but they can also happen in the workplace, at church, or in a family relationship; however, they are patterns of behaviour that often start in childhood or adolescence. At these stages of life our image of self-concept is still fragile and immature, and needs positive interactions to build it up. The behaviour of children who are bullied will often change, and this is not just due to hormonal and physiological changes. Some signs are:

- becoming secretive and withdrawn, and unable to share what is happening with those who are closest to them
- becoming irritable, argumentative and aggressive
- becoming less confident, with lower levels of self-esteem
- losing trust, particularly if, having confided in someone, that person 'tells' a teacher or parent
- pretending to be ill so as to avoid seeing the bully
- lying about things
- becoming afraid that it is their fault, and having feelings of self-doubt and guilt

People who engage in negative social behaviour and become the bully, may have experienced dysfunctional social and emotional interactions while growing up, or are suffering from stress or tiredness, or are being bullied and abused by others.

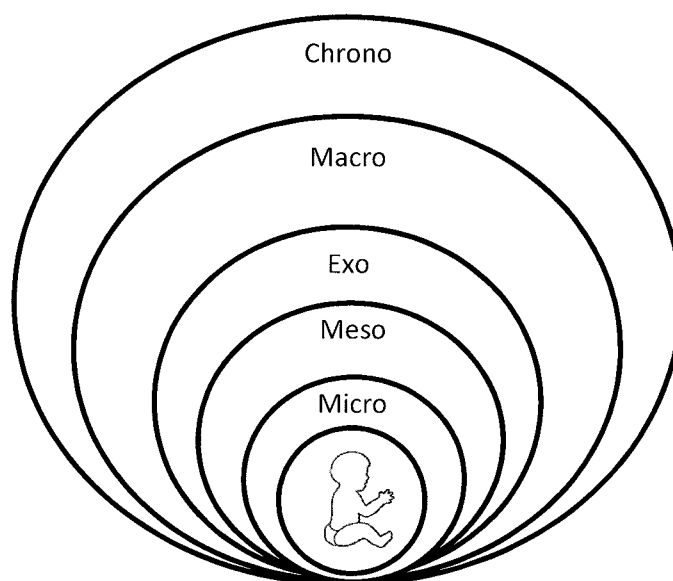
The development of relationships with others



The developmental psychologist **Urie Bronfenbrenner** (1917–2005) was born in Russia, but moved with his parents to the USA when he was six years old. He was a co-founder of Head Start, a programme designed to support disadvantaged preschool children in the USA. His Ecological Systems theory was the first to consider that child development occurs as a result of multiple influences, such as education and sociocultural norms.

There is a vast complexity to human relationships. Relationships develop through interactions with family, teachers, friends, work colleagues, etc. In 1979, Urie Bronfenbrenner published his Ecological Systems theory, in which he sought to explain how the different social systems we encounter affect how relationships develop. These systems both influence, and are influenced by, the child.

Diagram of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems theory



Each circle represents a different layer that will influence how relationships develop.


- Micro:** This layer is closest to the child. Within it are the environments with which the child comes into direct contact, e.g. family and home. The child can influence this layer through their character and personality traits, and the family and home structure can influence the child, e.g. through social and cultural beliefs.
- Meso:** This next layer contains environments and structures which are still very close, but have less of a direct effect. They include any kind of nursery or school environment, health personnel such as the family doctor, neighbours and friends. At this level, the child is an active participant in the structures they come into contact with, such as school. The child is also influenced by the relationship their family has with others in this layer. A positive relationship between school and home is obviously more helpful to the child's development than a negative one.
- Exo:** Within this layer are environments that do not affect the child directly, but whose influence may be felt. This could be a parent's workplace, and how their working schedules, job loss, overtime, etc. affect the family. It could also refer to decisions taken by local councils, school boards, religious institutions, etc. that indirectly affect their lives. TV and other media also fall into this category. An example would be a council decision to build 200 new homes on the local playing fields.
- Macro:** This layer refers to environments and structures over which the child and family have no control. It could refer to the customs of the country or particular ethnic group, the status of the family within society, central government decisions about schools and healthcare, etc. It refers also to the identity crises and conflicts that some children in minority culture families face as they grow up in the dominant culture of the new country.
- Chrono:** Chrono refers to time, and this layer is about the history behind the structures and environment that make up the society the child is born into. What effect do war, trade, technical advances, etc. have on the lifestyles of the child and their family and the way the society they live in functions?

How do relationships develop?

A relationship is a two-way process between two people, during which one or both will learn and possibly change. Relationships between people, or between people and groups, develop over time and are influenced by age, maturity, temperament, traits and self-concept. Some relationships will involve people whom we know very well, such as close family or friends, others will be acquaintances and yet others will be people we meet only once in our lives. Relationships can change across social boundaries, for example, if your boss is also your neighbour you may have a different relationship with them out of work compared to in work.

Relationships are based on trust, respect, understanding and some kind of similarity or perceived similarity, between people. A person who dislikes running will never enjoy playing on a football team, for example.

We often compartmentalise relationships under different headings, such as best friend, manager, family, and each relationship will be treated differently with regard to the importance we attach to it. Some relationships will be built on solid foundations and have a certain degree of consistency and reliability, while others will be less stable.



Some types of relationship:

- Family
- Friends
- School and training
- Work
- Groups (choir, sports team)
- Neighbours
- Peripheral (shop assistants, acquaintances)

On a social level, we build up new relationships through stages:

1. Pre-relationship: learning the other person or group exists
2. First steps: meeting for the first time, making quick judgements, learning the basics about a person or group. At this stage you may decide they are not your type and the relationship will go no further.
3. Second steps: follow-up meeting(s) with them, getting a better understanding of what type of person or group they are, and deciding whether the relationship will be close, or more an acquaintanceship. Not all relationships go beyond this stage.
4. Getting closer, sharing thoughts, dreams and secrets
5. Strengthening the relationship, devoting time and energy to it, perhaps marrying or living together

The idea that all relationships are based on the concept of give and take led to the development in the early 1960s of Social Exchange theory. Social Exchange theory is actually not a true theory but a framework for several theories. It states that people only engage in relationships because they want to get something out of them for themselves. According to the theory, everything that is done in a relationship is driven by ideas of:

- Is it to my advantage?
- Do I deserve it?
- Can I get something better elsewhere?



Social Exchange theory

$$\text{Worth} = \text{Rewards} - \text{Cost}$$


Rewards are the positive things in a relationship, such as nurture, acceptance, love and support. Costs are the negative things, such as time, money and emotional effort.

Worth is the final amount once the value of rewards and costs is taken into account. If Worth is positive then the relationship will prosper, but if it is negative the relationship will finish.

If our actions are seen positively and receive approval, we are more likely to repeat them; then the expectation will be that we deserve to receive approval for other actions. If our expectations are not met, we might consider finding another relationship. Cultural norms play a strong part in Social Exchange theory as approval can occur in many different ways, from a simple smile to a special gift.

Detractors of Social Exchange theory argue that it does not take into account the irrationality of human beings, particularly with regard to personal relationships. Also, it views a relationship as something that occurs between individuals, and does not consider so-called 'group mentality', where a person will subjugate their feelings for the good of the group even though the Worth outcome is negative.

Within successful relationships, partners are tuned in to the needs and interests of each other. In order to understand the feelings of others we need to be able to mentally represent and understand the state of mind of others. Infants and children up to the age of around four years old are incapable of inferring accurately what others are thinking. They interpret everything from their own viewpoint and belief.



Theory of Mind refers to the ability to mentally represent and understand from behaviour or body language what others are thinking or feeling.


The 'False Belief' test for Theory of Mind

A box is filled with something that would not usually be there, e.g. a Smarties tube is filled with pencils. Three questions are then asked:

1. What do you think is in the box? (before opening it)
2. What did you think was in the box before you opened it?
3. What do you think your friend will think is in the box?

A **three-year-old** will answer 'Smarties' and be surprised that it is pencils, but will then answer 'pencils' to questions 2 and 3. A **four-year-old** will answer 'Smarties' to all three questions.

Have a look at this video on YouTube:

 [zzed.uk/7993](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zzed.uk/7993)

Developing a 'Theory of Mind' is the foundation on which social development and understanding are based. In the same way as communication and language appear to be innate and biologically driven, so too is Theory of Mind. Neither is specifically taught to us as children, although a rich and stimulating environment, where people talk about other people's needs, wants and feelings, is key. Reading stories to children that involve tricking others, surprises or characters pretending to be someone else ('The Gingerbread Man' or 'Little Red Riding Hood') also helps to cement that development.

The ability to understand others appears to be a particularly human trait (research has not yet proven that primates such as chimpanzees and apes also have a Theory of Mind, although some claim that they do). It allows us to build, maintain and manage complex relationships. It also provides us with the ability to understand moral codes and rules of behaviour that ensure stability and social cohesion. Theory of Mind allows us to develop empathy and put ourselves in someone else's situation, or sympathy, acknowledging the difficulties and challenges another person might be facing. People born with Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD) appear to lack a Theory of Mind, and need assistance in developing social skills.

The development of independence through the life stages

Referring back to Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, we can see there are many influencers that affect our growth and development throughout the life stages. Also, that there is a reciprocity between the interactions we have with other people, groups and institutions, in other words, they influence us and we influence them. How our lives develop will be dependent on some things that are out of our control, for example, where we live, or the type of education we receive, and others that are within our control, for example, the people we count as friends, or the hobbies we like to do.

The development of independence:

Infancy:	communicating needs and wants, undressing, learning to crawl, walk and run
Early childhood:	going to playgroup and school, having school friends, walking or cycling to a friend's house alone
Adolescence:	going to secondary school and/or sixth-form college, having a weekend job, learning to drive (car or motorbike) and romantic relationships
Early adulthood:	leaving home, going to university, working full-time, getting married, having children
Middle adulthood:	children leave home, more time for hobbies, interests and learning new skills
Late adulthood:	take part in social groups and hobbies, loss of independence due to physical or medical needs

The choices we make as we become more independent are influenced by the culture and society we live in. Some, such as marriage or having children, might be considered as 'traditional' choices; others, such as emigration, are more unusual. Some choices may be influenced by social media or advertising. Sometimes generations become labelled by social commentators, e.g. 'millennials', 'baby boomers', because they tend to show certain generic characteristics. Social research suggests that 'millennials' (children born between the mid-1980s and 2000) are more self-obsessed, and value personal material wealth more than previous generations. However, millennials are also more involved in volunteering than previous generations and have more liberal social views.

As we become more independent, we take on the roles and responsibilities of our parents and caregivers (work, children, mortgage, etc.). These roles and responsibilities will change from generation to generation, due to social and cultural changes, particularly as 'traditional' values alter or become less valid. Social and cultural aspects of society are continually affected by the effects of globalisation, immigration and migration patterns, religious and secular changes and the fragmentation of our society as families no longer live on the same street, or even in the same town, as other relatives.

A4 Revision questions



1. Give as many reasons as you can think of for why play is important.
2. What are Mildred Parten's six stages of play?
3. What do the following terms referring to play mean: free-flow play, structured play, adult-initiated play, adult-led play, adult-directed play and child-initiated play?
4. Draw and label a picture of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs.
5. What are the social benefits of having a friendship group?
6. What can be the negative results of social interaction?
7. Name Bronfenbrenner's different circles of influence in his Ecological Systems theory, and what part of society each circle represents.
8. What is the equation for Social Exchange theory?
9. Explain Theory of Mind.
10. Provide one example of how we gain independence for each life stage.