

Learning Through Play: Functional Play

Functional play is the first play of children. It begins in infancy as a child learns to control his actions and make things happen in his environment—shaking a rattle or splashing in the bath are some examples. It is slowly replaced by other, more complex forms of play, but it never truly disappears—even older children (and adults) run for the sake of running or doodle scribbles on paper sometimes.

Functional play includes any repetitive action that the child finds enjoyable: clapping hands, splashing in water, squishing mud, digging in sand, running, jumping, climbing, twirling, swinging, dumping and filling containers, banging objects together, pushing a toy back and forth, scribbling with crayons, painting simple lines, stacking blocks and knocking them over, throwing objects, opening and closing things, rolling playdough, etc.

Functional play is also called sensorimotor play or exploratory play. It is how children learn about their world. The repetitive nature of this play helps the child learn about properties of physical objects and about cause and effect. Information that we take for granted (things fall down, not up; liquid pours but solids don't; a small object fits into a cup while a large one doesn't, etc.) is all new for children. As they play, they learn how the world works and how they can make things happen. This prepares them for learning more complex play skills and gives them the base knowledge they will need to learn academic skills later on.

The repetitive actions of functional play, along with helping a child learn about the physical world, help her develop gross and fine motor control that will allow her to accomplish more complex motor tasks. As adults describe the child's actions, vocabulary and language skills also improve. As the child learns to how to make things happen, he gains confidence and a sense of mastery, which inspires him to try new things.

Functional play is the first step in learning. As children explore their world through play, they are setting the stage for a lifetime of learning new things.