Expand Your Child's Play Skills

INCREASE VARIETY OF PLAY SCEMES WITH A FAVORITE TOY

You can help your child increase the variety of play schemes he does with a favorite toy. For example, if your child likes to line up blocks (combinatorial play), teach him other combinatorial actions to do with the blocks, such as stack the blocks or put blocks in different containers. If your child likes to fill the car with gas (symbolic play), teach him other symbolic actions to do with the car, such as to wash the car, dry the car, repair the car, or drive the car home and park the car.

ENCOURAGE PLAY WITH NEW TOYS

You can help your child to play with new toys by incorporating new objects into play with his favorite toys. For example, if your child likes to play with a train, teach him to play with farm animals by having them ride the train or by having the train go to the farm.

EXPAND NUMBER OF PLAY SEQUENCES

You can help your child to expand the number of play sequences your child does with toys. For example, if he likes to feed the baby, teach your child to expand the feeding sequence by giving the baby a bottle, burping the baby, and putting the baby to bed. Try to use sequences with which your child is familiar.

INCREASE PLAY COMPEXITY

You can help your child increase the complexity of his play with favorite toys. This means increasing the developmental level at which your child plays. Teach play behaviors that are slightly above how your child now plays on his own. For example, if your child usually plays with toys by touching, banging, or dropping them (exploratory play), teach him to play by putting his favorite toys in and out of containers (combinatorial play). If he usually plays by pushing a car (functional play), teach him to wash the car before he pushes it (symbolic play). If your child pretends to feed himself pretend food (self-directed pretend play), teach him to feed the baby (other-directed pretend play), or to pretend that a block is food and pretend to eat it (symbolic play).

Child's Current Play Level	More Complex Response
Exploratory *(ex. holding, mouthing, banging)*	Cause & Effect *(ex. Musical toys, bubbles, balloons)*
Cause & Effect	Combining objects *(ex. stacking, sorting, nesting)*
Combining Objects	Functional Play *(ex. push car, throw ball, Play-Doh)*
Functional Play	Simple pretend play *(ex. man in car, feed baby, talk on phone)*
Simple Pretend Play	Complex & Multi-step Pretend *(ex. birthday party, doctor's office)*

MODEL ACTIONS WITH DIFFERENT TOYS

Once your child is consistently imitating a range of actions, both familiar and new, you want to increase his ability to imitate with toys that your child is not currently attending to. When doing this, it is a good idea to start by modeling highly motivating or familiar actions with a different toy from the one your child is playing with. By using motivating or familiar actions, you increase the likelihood that your child will disengage from his current toy and shift focus to the toy you are playing with. Before modeling an action with a different toy, make sure that the duplicate toy is in front of your child so that he can easily find it. No more than half of the actions you model should be with a different toy. Once your child is able to shift to a new toy, you may begin to model less motivating and/or novel actions.

PLAY IDEAS

To improve your child's play, you first need to think of different ways to play with your child's toys. This can often be difficult for adults. It can help to take time to do this when you are not interacting with your child. Suggestions for brainstorming include: identify actions that can be done with the toys, identify other toys or objects that can be brought into play, or identify emotions that can be brought into play. With a car and a car ramp, for example, ideas might include: pushing the car up and down, taking people in and out of the car, washing the car, drying the car, getting gas, driving to a location such as a park, or crashing and needing repairs. Again, the type of play you model depends on your child's ability.