

Developmentally Appropriate Play: Is It More Important than Age-Appropriate Play?

Developmentally appropriate play is different from age-appropriate play. Age-appropriate play is determined by looking at a child's chronological age and identifying what types of toys and activities a child should be using and participating in to match their age-related peers interests and abilities. Developmentally appropriate play first looks at the child's abilities to communicate, move their bodies, and operate in a social environment to determine their 'developmental age'. Their social-emotional development dictates their developmental age, **and for children with diagnoses like autism and other delays, their developmental age is younger than their chronological age.** This distinction is important because when we work with a child at their developmental age, we will be more successful at encouraging development and growth. However, if we work with a child at their chronological age, then we are trying to teach them skills based on when they were born without considering which of the many prerequisite skills they may be missing from their developmental profile. **Each set of skills we learn as young children allow us to progress to the next milestone of development and enable us to fully understand what we're doing and why. This concept strongly applies to play, a child's primary medium for learning.**

Imagine you were trying to teach a 13 or 14-year-old child algebra before they had mastered addition and subtraction. Because they are 13 or 14 years old, they should ideally be able to learn algebra, but it doesn't mean they are ready for algebra. Similarly, a child who is three or four years old, ideally should be **socially** playing with cars, figurines, dollhouses, et cetera, and doing what we call symbolic or pretend play. However, their age does not mean that they're ready for that type of play. They first need to develop an understanding of their bodies and the world around them, and how to interact with it in a controlled, purposeful, and intentional manner. If we skip the precursors/prerequisites to any set of skills, we never fully grasp what we're doing at the higher levels. This applies to play, academics, social skills, and basically every other thing we learn. Seeing as humans grow from the 'ground up', pretty much everything we learn has necessary precursors that allow us to get to
