

FUNCTIONAL PLAY

What Is This Developmental Skill?

Functional play involves using objects according to their purpose. Children push cars, roll balls, stack blocks, complete puzzles, feed dolls, and place objects into containers. These activities build motor skills, attention, problem-solving, and an understanding of cause and effect.

How Does This Normally Develop?

Functional play emerges as children gain better control of their bodies and begin understanding how objects work. Through repetition, they learn that actions produce predictable results. Caregivers support development by demonstrating new actions, allowing experimentation, and encouraging persistence.

How Can Neglect Interfere with Its Development?

Neglect may limit access to toys, exploration, and shared play with adults. Children may not receive the modeling or encouragement that helps them learn how objects are used. Chronic stress can also make it difficult to focus, explore, or continue when an activity becomes challenging.

What Might This Look Like?

A child may throw, bang, or mouth toys rather than use them purposefully. Play may be repetitive, brief, or disorganized. The child may avoid unfamiliar toys, become frustrated quickly, or depend heavily on adults to show what to do.

Parenting Implications

Offer simple toys such as blocks, containers, balls, vehicles, and puzzles. Demonstrate without taking over. Allow repetition, break activities into manageable steps, and praise effort rather than success. Follow the child's interests to support engagement.

From Understanding to Attunement

A child who does not know how to play may not be careless or unmotivated. The child may simply need the safe experiences, time, and encouragement that make exploration possible.