

## PLAY AND EMOTIONAL EXPRESSION

### What Is This Developmental Skill?

Play is one of the main ways children express and understand emotions. Before children can explain complex experiences, they may communicate through characters, stories, movement, and repeated play themes. Play provides distance from difficult feelings while allowing children to explore them safely.

### How Does This Normally Develop?

Emotional expression through play begins in early interactions with caregivers and becomes more symbolic as language and imagination develop. Children may comfort dolls, rescue figures, act out family routines, or create stories about fear, anger, sadness, and connection.

### How Can Neglect Interfere with Its Development?

Children who receive little emotional response may learn that feelings are unsafe, unimportant, or unlikely to bring comfort. Some suppress emotion, while others become overwhelmed. Their play may be emotionally flat, chaotic, aggressive, or repeatedly focused on abandonment, danger, or control.

### What Might This Look Like?

A child may repeat frightening themes, destroy toys, become distressed during pretend play, avoid emotional stories, or resist adults joining. Some children communicate anger or fear through play while denying those feelings verbally.

### Parenting Implications

Follow the child's lead, reflect feelings simply, and avoid analyzing every action. Remain calm when difficult themes appear. Allow repetition while maintaining safety. Seek professional help when play is persistently overwhelming, rigid, or disruptive to daily functioning.

### From Understanding to Attunement

Rather than asking what a particular toy or story "means," notice the feelings the child may be communicating. A calm, accepting caregiver helps the child experience emotions without facing them alone.