



Your Child and Play

From Birth to 3 Years

Play is a very important part of healthy development. Through play and curiosity, your child develops language skills, social skills such as cooperation and sharing, emotional skills such as identifying and dealing with feelings, physical skills such as fine and gross motor skills, and thinking skills such as how to do things or how things work.

Your Child and Play

As a parent, you are the first to play with your baby. Playing with your baby helps you build a strong attachment that will give your child a safe place from which to explore the world as they grow. Responding to and playing with your baby in a caring and nurturing way will support all aspects of their healthy development.

As your child grows from newborn to toddler and beyond, play should continue to have an important place in their life and in your relationship with them.

The principle of “serve and return” is an important idea that can guide your interactions with your child, during playtime or at other times of the day. Pay attention to what your child is “serving” to you, such as a smile or an interest in a book or toy, and “return” that interest. Repeated, positive “serve and return” interactions can play a big role in your child’s healthy development.

Play for Babies

By being attentive to your baby, you will learn the cues they give to tell you what they need and how they are feeling. These cues will also help you know when your baby is ready for interaction and play and when they need to take a break from being stimulated.

An environment with lots of language is very good for a baby. Talk to your baby about what you are doing or how they might be feeling. For example, say, “I am changing your diaper and you feel upset because you want to be cozy in your pajamas.” Point out and name things like objects and colors. Babies love colourful pictures in books and the sounds of your voice as you read. It is never too early to start reading to your child. Speaking and reading in different languages will not confuse your baby.

Babies also enjoy music and like when you sing to them. Play the music you like and your baby will probably enjoy it too. Remember to keep the volume low.

Babies also learn through touch. Help them explore their world by giving them lots of different shapes and textures. Talk to them as they feel different things, such as a soft stuffed toy or different body parts, such as their hands and feet. Babies like to make noise, so give them toys such as plastic keys or rattles.

Any toy that can fit through a toilet paper roll is too small and can cause choking. Make sure a toy cannot be made smaller.

Take time each day to cuddle and play with your baby. Hold your baby skin-to-skin regularly in the first months of their life. Look your baby in the eyes and mirror their expressions. Smile and sing to your baby. This will help your baby connect with you and grow in healthy ways.

Tummy time is when you lay your baby on their stomach or side when they are awake. You can put your baby on the floor, on a safe firm surface, on your lap or on your chest for tummy time. It’s recommended that babies have lots of supervised tummy time, spread out throughout the day. Tummy time is a chance for your baby to strengthen their muscles. It helps them grow socially and emotionally as they play with parents, siblings, or other family members and friends.

Start tummy time when your baby is a newborn. Some babies do not like tummy time at first. You may have to help your baby learn to enjoy tummy time. Some ways to do this are by:

- Slowly adding more tummy time each day
- Talking and singing to your baby
- Giving your baby interesting things to look at like colorful pictures or a mirror
- Gently touching or massaging your baby’s arms and legs
- Getting down on the floor so your baby can see your face
- Putting your hand under your baby’s chin to support the head until your baby is strong enough to do it by themselves
- Rolling up a towel and putting it under your baby’s chest with their arms propped up for support

Babies enjoy walks in a baby carrier or stroller but try not to keep your baby in a carrier or stroller for more than an hour. As they get older, babies like to play and move around outdoors. To support their development, play with your baby as they are sitting, reaching and grabbing. Let your child struggle and reach for objects in order for them to learn to move to get what they want.

For more information about social and emotional play, visit Appetite to Play at www.appetitetoplay.com. This web resource contains activities, games, ideas that can be used to support and encourage physical activity early on, and is updated on a weekly basis.

Play for Toddlers

As your child grows, experts recommend that parents support and encourage their children to play as follows:

- Play actively – toddlers need at least 180 minutes of physical activity every day to build strong bones, muscles, heart and lungs. Try dancing, skipping, jumping or running
- Play with other children when possible to help develop social skills such as sharing
- Play in ways that foster your child’s creativity, curiosity and self-expression. Children need playful chances to learn about and explore the world

Children do not need costly or fancy toys to grow, learn, and develop. What they need is someone to talk to them, notice what they do, and comfort them when they are upset. The principle of “serve and return” applies to your toddler. Encourage learning through play by being interested in what interests your child. Offer new toys or activities based on your child’s lead. When your child’s exploration through play makes them upset (for example, their block tower has fallen over), be patient and empathetic. This will help give them confidence to keep exploring and learning through play.

With time, toddlers will offer to help parents with activities around the house. Find creative and safe ways that your child can help you. Helping around the house gives children other opportunities to learn cause and effect, new skills, new words, and knowledge of the world.

Types of Play

While you may organize your child’s play at times, or sometimes have to give toddlers a choice between several activities, play should be spontaneous and unstructured as much as possible. When toddlers have the freedom to explore and move at their own speed, they learn the most.

Children learn through various types of play. You will probably see your child play in the following ways:

- Solitary play – this is when your child plays by themselves. All children like solitary play at times
- Parallel play – this happens when your child plays beside another child, but they do not interact or play together. Toddlers enjoy parallel play where they observe and often imitate what others do
- Imitative play – children imitate or copy each other
- Social activity – this is the first step toward playing and having fun with others. Before 2 years of age, your child will offer toys and communicate with other children
- Cooperative play – as your child gets older, usually around age 3, they will start to play with other children

Safety During Play

To ensure safety, stay ahead of your baby to keep them from grabbing dangerous things or falling down steps. Child-proof your home and create a safe place for play. For more information on keeping your child safe, see BC Children’s Hospital’s Home Safety Checklist at www.bcchildrens.ca/Child-Safety-Site/Documents/homesafetychecklist.pdf, or visit Toddler’s First Steps at www.health.gov.bc.ca/library/publications/year/2019/TFS-3rd-edition-FINAL-Nov2019.pdf (PDF 14.46 MB)

For More Information

For more information about child health and development, see the following resources:

- [HealthLinkBC File #92b Your Child’s Development from Birth to 3 Years](#)
- [HealthLinkBC File #92c Your Child’s Feelings](#)
- [HealthLinkBC File #92d Toilet Learning](#)
- [HealthLinkBC File #92e Time for Bed](#)
- Baby’s Best Chance (PDF 14.88 MB) - www.health.gov.bc.ca/library/publications/year/2019/BC-7th-edition-FINAL-Nov2019.pdf
- Appetite to Play - www.appetitetoplay.com

Some information in this file has been adapted with the permission of the BC Healthy Child Development Alliance. For more information, visit their website at www.childhealthbc.ca/initiatives/bc-healthy-child-development-alliance.