



Your child and play from birth to 3 years

Play is an important way to support your child's healthy development and helps your child learn about themselves, others and the world around them. Play helps your child grow in all 5 major areas of child development. It builds:

- **Physical skills** like crawling, climbing, walking, running, using their fingers, seeing and hearing
- **Social skills** like cooperating, sharing, being polite, taking turns, and leading and following others
- **Emotional skills** like identifying and dealing with feelings
- **Cognitive skills** like problem solving, using their imagination, figuring out how things work, and learning shapes, colours and numbers
- **Language skills** like learning the names of things, forming sentences, telling stories and listening

Importance of unstructured, outdoor play

Unstructured, outdoor play is an excellent way to help your child develop skills in all 5 areas listed above. It also allows them to learn to play with others, use their imagination, plan, manage risks, and build self-esteem and resilience. Examples of unstructured, outdoor play include:

- Looking at bugs and other wildlife
- Collecting stones, leaves, flowers and other natural "treasures"
- Playing with dirt, sand or water

Playing with your child

Set aside time to play with your child each day. You can:

- Take them outside to play or go for walks
- Read books, listen to music and sing songs with them
- Play simple games together, like peek-a-boo or pretending to be animals
- Use supervised bath time to interact and have fun with your child
- Do arts and crafts together
- Show them how to do something you enjoy, like puzzles or dancing

Play for babies (birth to 6 months)

In addition to the activities already listed, you can help your baby to play and explore by:

- Holding them, touching them, and cuddling them skin-to-skin
- Smiling back when they smile and making lots of eye contact
- Repeating and responding to their coos and babbles
- Giving them lots of supervised tummy time
- Holding up bright objects that make noise when your baby hits them
- Letting them feel things with different textures
- Putting them in front of a mirror
- Going for walks in the fresh air and letting them sit on the grass to explore nature

Play for toddlers (6 months to 3 years)

In addition to the activities previously listed, you can help your toddler play and explore by:

- Giving them lots of free, unscheduled playtime to be creative and see where their imagination leads them
- Offering choices and letting them decide what they play
- Encouraging both active and quiet activities
- Giving them praise and proudly showing their work
- Taking a break when they seem tired, hungry, uninterested or over-stimulated

Toys

The best toys encourage your child to learn, explore and use their imagination. The toys do not have to be fancy or expensive, or specific to any gender. Additionally, fewer toys can improve your child's ability to engage in play as too many toys can be overwhelming. Try putting a small number of safe toys within reach of your child so that they can engage freely with these toys.

Toys can include:

Items you have around the house

- Cardboard boxes
- Pots and pans
- Plastic bowls for filling and dumping
- Clothes for dress-up

Classic toys

- Blocks and nesting toys
- Stuffed animals and dolls
- Trucks, cars and trains
- Balls

Nature's toys

- Dirt and sand
- Water

- Stones

Safer toys

Prevent injuries to your child by:

- Ensuring toys are well-made and fit your child's age
- Not using toys with broken, sharp or loose pieces
- Avoiding toys with small batteries
- Ensuring your child cannot take batteries out of toys
- Ensuring your toy box lid can't trap your child inside or slam down on them
- Not using toys with strings, cords or ribbons longer than 15 cm (6 inches)
- Avoid small toys that can fit inside your child's mouth

Small toys (choking hazards)

Check if the toy fits through a toilet paper roll. If it does, it's too small.

For more information

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

- [HealthLinkBC File #92b Your child's development from birth to 3 years](#)
- [HealthLinkBC File #92c Your child's social and emotional development from birth to 3 years](#)
- [HealthLinkBC File #92d Toilet learning](#)
- [HealthLinkBC File #92e Time for bed](#)
- [Baby's Best Chance: Parents' Handbook of Pregnancy and Baby Care](#)
- [Toddler's First Steps: A Best Chance Guide to Parenting Your 6-to-36 Month-Old Child](#)

For more HealthLinkBC File topics, visit www.HealthLinkBC.ca/health-library/healthlinkbc-files or your local public health unit. For non-emergency health information and advice in B.C. visit www.HealthLinkBC.ca or call **8-1-1** (toll-free). For the deaf and hard of hearing, call **7-1-1**. Translation services are available in more than 130 languages on request.