

Keys to Great Parenting

Fun and Learning with Your Baby or Toddler

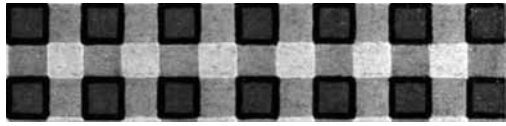


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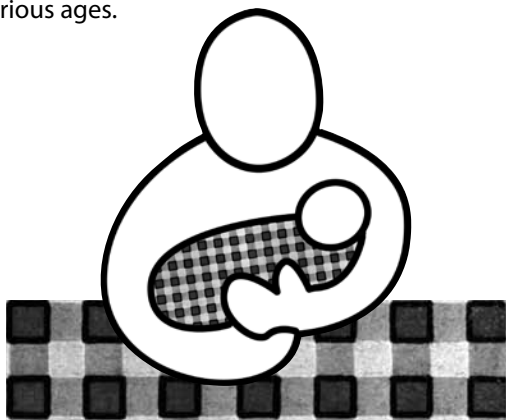
Be Playful with Your Child

Babies and toddlers love to play with their parents. They also have a wonderful time with other family members, caregivers, and friends. Babies show their eagerness to play through kicks and squirms, coos, bright eyes, and wide smiles. Toddlers may tug at your pant leg or sleeve to urge your attention. They may hold out a toy or picture book or just say “Play!”

Even if you have had a long day and are tired, it is hard to resist a child’s invitation. Your young child somehow knows that her brain grows and functions best when she is having fun with other people who care about her. You and other family members are her most important playmates and teachers.

Highly skilled at the fine art of play, your baby or toddler is a perfect teacher for you, too. As a busy adult, you probably do not play as much as you should. Being playful reduces your stress and increases your creativity. Best of all, it is lots of fun.

Play is not only fun, it is a way for your child to learn. It does not have to cost a lot of money. Forget the boring flash cards and expensive educational toys. You as well as family members and friends will find in the fourth key—**Be Playful with Your Child**—some ideas for inexpensive play and learning with babies and toddlers at various ages.



Active Play Is Important

Make time for active as well as quiet play to help your child learn. Babies and toddlers usually have lots of energy, and they are learning every moment—during diaper changes, meal times, and travel in the car. They learn especially well at playtimes, when they use their five senses to have fun and take in all kinds of information.

Because a baby’s brain is growing huge numbers of cells and connecting them in order to learn, his waking mind is always active, pushing him to explore his world. Two-year-olds generally have as many brain cell connections as adults. By the third birthday, the typical child has some 1,000 trillion brain connections—2½ times more than adults.

Floor Time

Floor time is time you spend indoors on the floor or outdoors on the ground giving your baby or toddler your full attention. This is her time. Look into her eyes, talk softly, and smile. Do not tell her how to play. Instead, offer her interesting items and watch how she reacts. She might come up with something you never would have expected. Laugh and enjoy yourself!

Babies and toddlers often are more fascinated with simple homemade toys than they are with expensive store-bought ones. They also enjoy having one or two other children near their own age to watch and play alongside them.

Here are some ideas for safe and inexpensive indoor floor time:

- Invite another parent over who has a baby or toddler near your child’s age. Put younger babies on the floor near each other with a few toys nearby. They will enjoy looking, smiling, and cooing at each other.
- Babies who can crawl like for you to pay attention and tell them what they are doing (“Now you’re crawling toward the sofa—look at you go!”). They may wiggle into your lap or sit up and imitate your hand clapping as you sing “Pat-a-cake . . .” They like watching older brothers and sisters play nearby.



Babies and toddlers usually have lots of energy, and they are learning every moment—during diaper changes, meal times, and travel in the car.

- Toddlers enjoy playing by imitating other children and adults. For example, they may like to push small grocery carts and toy lawn mowers alongside Mom or Dad. They may have fun walking, running, or shoveling sand alongside a friend. The more experience they have with other toddlers, children, and adults, the better they learn to take turns and share. Toddlers need adults to say things to them like “Tell Christa ‘I want the bucket.’” or “Here’s another block you can use. Give Jimmy’s block back to him.”
- Discount stores, yard sales, and flea markets can be sources for inexpensive items such as lightweight balls, puzzles, water toys, plastic or wooden blocks, and household items. Make sure, before you buy toys or accept used toys, that you carefully look over items for rough edges, flaking paper or paint, or other evidence of danger or poor quality. Also watch for small objects or toy parts that could break off and cause choking. Any object that would fit inside a toilet paper tube, such as a wheel from a small car or a token from a board game, is too small for a child under 3.
- Collect kitchen utensils that can be handled and put in the mouth safely, such as plastic molded ice cream scoops or measuring cups, and put them in a cupboard, tub, or box at floor level where your toddler can reach them anytime. Show your child how to stack kitchen items and how to use them to fill and empty tubs, buckets, or bowls.

- To give your child practice sorting toys into groups, use different containers for each type of play item and label the containers with pictures of the toys or utensils.
- Use household items you have gathered to teach matching as well as differences in shapes, lengths, sounds, and colors.
- Find a large, open box. Turn it on its side to make a great hideaway.

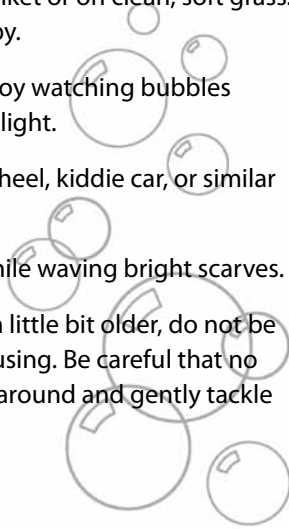
When you and other family members enjoy the outdoors with your baby or toddler, she learns many things through her five senses.

Here are some suggestions for outdoor play:

- Take your child outdoors each day unless the weather is very rainy, windy, cold, or hot.
- Dress your child in loose clothing so she can move freely.
- Keep your eyes on your baby or toddler at all times.
- Join in your child’s play: stretch, roll, twist, walk, run, kick, throw, and climb with her.
- Show her the shadow her body makes in the sun and play games with it.

When you and other family members enjoy the outdoors with your baby or toddler, she learns many things through her five senses.

- Place your baby on a blanket or on clean, soft grass. Put toys and books nearby.
- Blow bubbles! Babies enjoy watching bubbles catch the breeze and sunlight.
- Play with a wagon, big wheel, kiddie car, or similar toys.
- Run with your toddler while waving bright scarves.
- When your toddler gets a little bit older, do not be afraid of a little roughhousing. Be careful that no one gets hurt as you roll around and gently tackle each other.



Ages of Play

Babies and toddlers change in their play interests as they grow and develop, and these interests can be divided into types of play for each stage. (Because every child is different, the age for each stage is not exact.) Make the most of each age period by playing in ways that suit your child best. Big brothers and sisters or other family members may also enjoy the suggestions that follow.

Birth to 3 months: Your baby's brain is working on regulating body functions and organizing the way the senses take in information from the world around him. He needs plenty of calmness and soothing touches and sounds to reduce the confusion of an entirely new world.

Try to provide the experiences that please him most:

- Talk and sing quietly to him about whatever thoughts or feelings come to you.
- Place your face about 8 to 10 inches from his eyes and move your face slowly from side to side. See if his eyes follow you.
- Smile warmly and often as you speak to, diaper, and feed him.
- Move his arms and legs gently and calmly in a rhythmic motion as you change him.

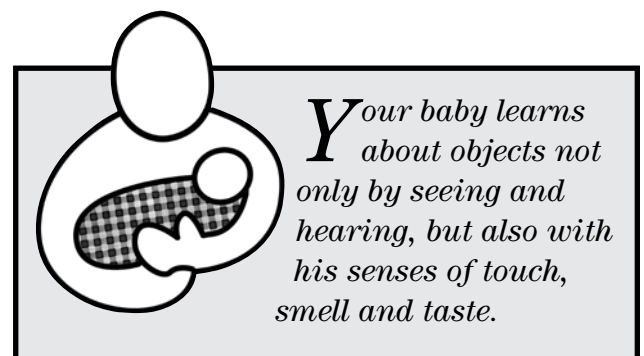
Hold him in an upright position. Walk with him around the house or yard. Show him and talk to him about what you see.

3 to 6 months: Your baby can hold her head up and her eye muscles have become much stronger. She welcomes you with radiant smiles, coos, and gurgles. She discovers that playing with her hands and feet is lots of fun. She will take hold of a rattle if you offer it to her.

Notice what activities your baby likes and repeat them. Try smiling at her, imitating her gurgles, and making high and low sounds or funny syllables. You are teaching her the art of conversation. Experiment more with physical touch and movement, trying these ideas:

- Blow gently on her skin, move her arms and legs in new ways, cuddle her feet, and stroke her back.
- Try rhythmic movements while you chant a nursery rhyme or sing a simple song.
- Place her in warm bath water. Give her gentle splashes, and touch her with a washcloth. Be sure to keep your eyes and hands on her every moment. Babies can drown in 1 inch of water.
- Place her on the floor with her stomach down. Get down on the floor so she can see your face at her eye level. Praise her, first when she lifts her head and later when she lifts her chest by propping herself up with her arms. She is gaining important muscle strength and coordination.

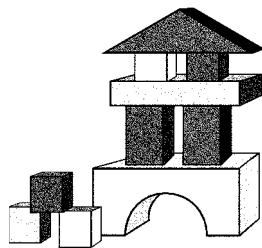
6 to 10 months: Your baby is beginning to make things happen. He strengthens his neck, shoulder, back, and stomach muscles as he works to roll over, sit, and a little later, crawl. The more he moves around, the more fun he has discovering new ways to play.



Put him on your lap and read to him often. Hold out a toy to see what he will do with it. Your baby learns about objects not only by seeing and hearing, but also with his senses of touch, smell and taste. Toys *will* go into his mouth. Simple toys like the following are good choices:

- medium-size, colorful, lightweight balls.
- large plastic rings and rattles for easy grasping and shaking.
- soft, washable stuffed toys (without buttons or other objects than can be pulled off and placed in the mouth).
- simple, washable picture books.
- small, colorful blankets or scarves for hiding objects and yourself.
- squeaky toys.
- plastic cars.
- blocks for stacking.
- cups and bowls for filling and emptying.
- small, soft dolls (without hair or eyes that could be pulled off and placed in the mouth).

Simple games are also teaching activities. Peekaboo teaches that things continue to exist even when they are not in sight. Rhyming games that involve moving your child's fingers and toes such as "This Little Piggy Went to Market" teach language sounds, rhythms, and names for body parts. Handing groups of small objects back and forth while you say "Now you, now me," can teach about numbers. It can also teach how to take turns.



10 to 18 months: Your baby communicates with gestures, expressions, sounds, and a few words. She works at balancing herself to stand and walk.

She is eager to solve problems, such as finding hidden objects and learning how stairs, doors, and machines work. As she explores and solves problems, she may burst into laughter, tears, and anger. She needs you to calmly and firmly tell and show her what behavior is OK and what is not. Do not label her as bad. She is just acting her age. Relax and enjoy the humor of it all!

Here are some ideas for playing with your 10- to 18-month-old:

- Try playing games like hide-and-seek that help her know that you are close by even when she cannot see you.
- Use her favorite toys to create playful problems that she needs your help to solve. For example, place her toy just a little out of her reach and say "Oh, how are you going to get your teddy bear?" Wait while she figures out what to do. Be careful not to tease her. If she reaches her limit of frustration, give her a little clue so she can solve the problem.
- Encourage her to repeat single words and simple refrains in storybooks you read to her.
- As your child nears the 18-month milestone, she is better able to think in mental images. It is time for make-believe. For example, collect some dress-up clothes and other fun objects for pretend play. Both boys and girls enjoy dressing up. Hats of all kinds, cooking and eating utensils, dolls, men's and women's shoes, men's pants, dresses, and the like are great for pretend play.



Communicating in words, songs, and gestures builds those all-important brain cell connections.

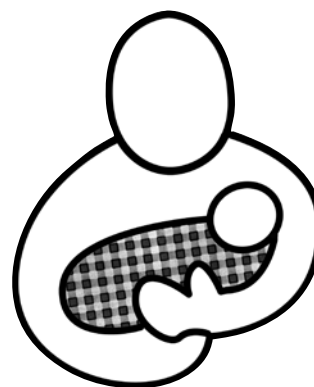
18 to 36 months: Your child is rapidly becoming a preschooler. His abilities to move, think, talk, control his emotions, and take care of himself have come a long way. Having his favorite grown-ups join him for playtime fills him with joy and confidence.

Follow his natural interests when you play. He enjoys being the leader. Continue to look for opportunities for him to make choices and solve problems. Whatever else you do, use lots of conversation. Communicating in words, songs, and gestures builds those all-important brain cell connections.

- Give your child many chances to walk, run, and climb. Take him to open spaces indoors or outdoors. Watch him closely, but let him go!
- Let your child explore how objects behave in water. Fill a plastic bucket or tub about half full of lukewarm water. Give him common objects such as corks, pieces of wood, a toy boat, funnels, small bottles and containers, metal bolts or washers, and a plastic truck. Show him how to fill and pour with the containers. Show how some of the objects float and some sink. He is learning as he tries out new ways to play in the water. During water play, just as with bathing, stay close and keep your eyes on your child at all times to help prevent drowning.
- Lay out two or three choices of clothing for your child. Make up a guessing game about what colors match. Encourage him to help with his own dressing.
- Let him help you fix simple foods. You can have fun together while teaching good nutrition and building muscle control.
- Sometimes your child's world can be a scary place. He may need your permission to act out what is scary to him so that he can overcome his fears. For example, let him be a scary monster while he chases you around the house.
- Give your child plain paper and large crayons. At this age both boys and girls enjoy learning about colors and making repeated squiggles and lines on paper. Enjoy this scribbling stage. It is the beginning of drawing real things and people, a skill which blossoms around age 4 or 5.

- Two-year-olds like to experiment with clay and play dough. Things like cookie cutters and popsicle sticks make clay and play dough even more fun.
- Your 2-year-old can begin using children's safety scissors with your help. Give him stiff paper to practice cutting.
- Did you know that your child will have more fun creating art if you draw, paint, cut, and squeeze play dough along with him? It is true!

A final word: As much fun as it is to play with your baby or toddler, be sensitive to her cues about when she has had enough. Most young children need to calm down and rest, mentally and physically. She may act distracted, become fussy, avoid eye contact, or rub her eyes. She may even walk away. It is OK to say "It looks to me as if you are ready to stop playing. We'll play again really soon." You have given your child two gifts: your presence and rest.



With your playful presence, even if for only a short time each day, your child makes enormous strides. Through play she is creating a foundation of self-confidence, strong brain functioning, and the ability to get along with others—skills that will ensure her success in school and in life. Your time and love make all the difference in the world!

This publication provides information about good parenting. Readers are encouraged to use it for education but not as a substitute for other professional advice.

Original edition was prepared by Carole Gnatuk, Ed.D., Child Development Specialist, and Sam Quick, Ph.D., Human Development and Family Relations Specialist, Emeritus. Contact for current revised edition is Carole Gnatuk, Ed.D., cgnatuk@email.uky.edu.

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Be Playful with Your Child

This publication is No. 4 in a seven-part series on fun and learning with your baby or toddler, an educational program based on seven keys to unlocking your child's wonderful abilities:

- 1 Care for Yourself
- 2 Cuddle, Talk, and Read with Your Child
- 3 Know How Your Child Develops
- 4 Be Playful with Your Child
- 5 Show Your Child the World
- 6 Teach Self-Control
- 7 Practice Health and Safety

