



Changing life stories

Toy suggestions by age group

Children just love to play and the great news is that play is good for them. From four months old a baby will smile and giggle when you make funny sounds or cuddle them up close. By eight months they've grasped the 'where's it gone?' theory and are delighted by peek-a-boo games.

Remember that Children's Centres often have toy libraries where you can borrow toys for free to play with at home.

Early days

Dr Julie C Coultas, a social psychologist at East Sussex University, says playing has an essential role in children's mental and physical development and as such says parents should see their role in helping babies and children play as 'parental investment'. She explains that before 15 months the games should be led by the mother or carer with little peer interaction.

The National Literacy Trust believe that what babies and young children learn from playing, equips them with valuable skills later on, and that it's never too early to start. "Babies are born social and need an adult partner to develop their social skills. Playing involves being engaged in an enjoyable activity and you can begin playing with your baby as soon as she is conceived. Your baby will already be familiar with your voice if you talk to your bump while you're pregnant, and you can start interacting now, when you feel the baby kick, gently tap back to see if you get a response."

Development skills

Child development falls into the two main categories of physical and neurological. Physical skills involve both gross motor skills such as rolling over, crawling and walking, and fine motor skills such as hand-eye coordination, grasping objects, drawing and later writing.

Sensory development is also physical and includes sight, sound, touch, smell and taste. Intellectual and cognitive development centre on activity in the brain including use of language, smiling and giggling, imagination and working out. Our children's emotional wellbeing also develops in the brain and comprises many areas such as self-awareness, self-esteem and the ability to interact with others. Playing in some form or another helps to refine these different areas of development in babies and young children.

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T: 020 7587 1842 W: www.literacytrust.org.uk Twitter: @Literacy_Trust Facebook: nationalliteracytrust

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Communication

Good communication makes for good and rewarding play, although in young children under two years this doesn't necessarily mean having to speak with words. Facial expressions of surprise, pleasure, not knowing where something is and praise will all help your child find enjoyment in play. Talking to your toddler in simple language helps them learn to give their feelings expression. Use single words such as 'Happy', 'Gone', 'Oh no' right from the beginning.

How to help

Young children usually have short attention spans which adults can find frustrating. You can create a more beneficial atmosphere that encourages your little one to 'stay with it', by avoiding distractions such as the television or other people.

If you lack confidence in how to play, start with a board book for a baby of around 6 months that you can look at together. Ask your son or daughter if they can see certain pictures and see if they can point to them. You show them how, then let them try. Try covering things up with your hand to see if they can remember what's there. As they get older you'll notice how more perceptive they become. Simple games that have a clear cause and effect are good to begin with.

As they grow

Psychologists agree that babies learn much through watching other babies and imitating their parents. According to Dr. Coultas, from **around 15 months** a child is able to imitate, watch and comply with his mother's suggestions, which means time to offer up plenty of ideas.

Toddlers don't actually play together properly until **about 21 months** when they begin to learn independence. You can now take on the more passive role of spectator. Pretend tea parties are a favourite at about this age.

At **about 25-30 months** your child will be able to develop a story with his friends. They love to mimic scenes from home, playgroup and television.

From around three years of age children create pretend worlds together and enjoy adding in greater detail as they get older. All this leads to the important social skill of the 'theory of mind', which simply means that they have now learnt that what they think isn't always what others will think, and they are able to put themselves in someone else's shoes.

Age appropriate toys and games

0-3 months: Wind chimes, unbreakable mirrors (babies tend to look right 80% of the time so make sure you put any objects in their line of vision), high contrasting mobiles, cloth books

3-6 months: Baby play gyms, rattles, squeaky rubber toys, colourful teethers, socks with bells

6-9 months: Textured books, soft blocks to knock down, activity boards, toys that pop up when your baby pushes the button, balls - throw the ball and encourage your baby to crawl after it

9-12 months: Walker, rocker, toy, telephone, shape sorter, books with flaps, bucket and spade for natural sand play - your baby will love the texture

12-18 months: Simple puzzles such as cut-out circles and squares, stacking, pull toys for confident walkers; climbing frame, washable non-toxic crayons, ride-on vehicle, toy buggy

18-24 months: Musical instruments such as keyboards, drum, plastic tea set, play house or den (throw a blanket on the old baby gym), shopping trolley, gardening tools, building blocks

24-36 months: Illustrated books, dressing-up clothes, child-size household equipment, construction toys, eg Lego, wooden puzzles, dolls to undress

36 months +: Basic jigsaw puzzles, memory games such as snap, child-size pots and pans, plasticine, bats and balls, golf sets, reference books

Originally created for Talk to Your Baby