

# The importance of play (0-6 years)

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## Play for babies and children

Play is more than just fun for babies and children. It's how they learn best, and work out who they are, how the world works and where they fit into it.

## Why is play important?

Playing is one of the most important things you can do with your child, because play is essential for her brain development. The time you spend playing together gives your child lots of different ways to learn.

Play also helps your child:

- build confidence.
- feel loved, happy and safe.
- develop social skills, language and communication.
- learn about caring for others and the environment.
- develop physical skills.

Your child will love playing with you. She will also like to play by herself sometimes, so she might just want you to give her some ideas and leave her to it.

Play is important for newborns and babies too. When you play with your baby, she learns to trust and depend on you, and the bond between you gets stronger.

## Different types of play

**Unstructured, free play** is the best type of play for young children. This is play that just happens, depending on what takes your child's interest at the time. Free play isn't planned and lets your child use her imagination and move at her own pace. Here are some ideas:

- creative play with artistic or musical games.
- imaginative games – for example, making tents with blankets, dressing up or playing make-believe.
- exploring different play spaces like cupboards, parks and playgrounds.

**Structured play** is more organised and happens at a fixed time or in a set space. It is often led by a grown-up. Here are some ideas:

- storytelling groups for toddlers and preschoolers at the public library.
- sporting activities, like joining a soccer team.

- dance or music classes for children of all ages.
- family board or card games.

### Tips to help your child play

As your child grows, her play will change – she will get more creative and experiment more with toys, games and ideas. This might mean she needs more space and time to play.

Also, children move through different forms of play as they grow. This includes playing alone, playing alongside other children and interactive play with other children.

For **newborns and babies**, the best toy is you. Just looking at your face and hearing your voice is play for your baby, especially if you are smiling. Here are some more ideas for playing with newborns and babies:

- Music and songs help develop hearing and movement.
- Objects of different sizes, colours and shapes can encourage your baby to reach and grasp.

Here are some ideas your **toddler** might enjoy:

- Big and light things like cardboard boxes, buckets or blow-up balls can encourage your child to run, build, push or drag.
- Hoops are good for twisting, rolling and swaying.
- Large rocks or pillows are good for climbing on.
- Boxes are good for balancing on top of one another.
- Put on some favourite music so she can also experiment with different sounds and rhythms. You might also like to sing, dance and clap along to music with her.

Here are some play ideas for your **older** child:

- Plastic bottles and tubs, wooden spoons, sticks, crumpled-up paper, plastic buckets, saucepans and old clothes are great for imaginative, unstructured play.
- Playdough and clay help your child develop fine-motor skills as well as creativity.
- Home-made obstacle courses can get your child moving in different ways, directions and speeds.
- Your child's own imagination can turn her into a favourite animal, superhero or story character.
- Furniture, sheets and towels, washing baskets, tents and boxes are great for building and making pretend houses.
- Rhymes or games like 'I spy' are great for word play and help develop literacy skills.
- Simple cooking or food preparation like measuring, stirring and serving food develop numeracy and everyday skills.



## Recommended Reads by the National Library Board

For some suggestions on rhymes, click [here](#) to download a booklet on rhymes!

### Recommended Reads

- [What every parent needs to know: love, nurture and play with your child](#)
- [Early childhood play matters : intentional teaching through play : birth to six years](#)
- [The Excellence of Play](#)

Engage your child with simple activities at home! Check out some of these things you can do together:

- [Animal Masks](#)