

Baby Play

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Introduction

Play is fundamental to healthy brain and physical development. It provides an emotional outlet for tension and frustration, and it is crucial to the socialisation process. Play allows babies to interact in the world around them, to make sense of it and to learn about their own culture.

Play also lays the foundation for reading, writing, mathematical reasoning, critical thinking, language, and scientific discovery. In fact, play is so important that it has been globally recognised to be a fundamental human right.

Play is universal. Even though the play varies from culture to culture, all babies play. It is how they learn about the world, themselves and other people. Play is an essential part of growing up.

Play can be quiet or noisy, energetic or passive, social or non-social, relaxed or serious, imaginative or purposeful. Play may or may not require toys or equipment. It does not require an end product.





The benefits of play

Play has so many benefits that it is impossible to fully list them all. However, the following may serve as a starting point. Play enables babies to:

- Explore their bodies
- Gain muscle strength
- Control and coordinate movements
- Develop fine motor skills
- Refine hand-eye coordination
- Experiment and make discoveries
- Make choices
- Make decisions
- Solve problems
- Improve memory and concentration
- Expand intelligence
- Develop language
- Stimulate imagination
- Develop confidence and self-esteem
- Learn important new skills
- Build relationships with other people
- Develop the senses

Babies learn best when they can experience things that they can see, hear, feel, touch, smell, and taste. It is how they gain knowledge of themselves and learn about the world.

The simplest form of play

The best opportunities for play often occur during routine activities such as feeding, nappy changing, dressing, having a bath or preparing for bed time. The simplest form of play involves plenty of eye contact, facial expressions, vocalisations, smiles and words of encouragement.

When parents play with babies, they build enduring relationships, which last a lifetime. Babies also know that they are loved and that they are fun to be around.



Choosing toys

Toys are usually the main objects that babies play with because they have the advantage of being safe and specially adapted to their age and abilities. When contemplating a purchase, parents might like to consider the following questions:


- Is it age appropriate?
- Is it appropriate for the baby's stage of development?
- Will it capture the baby's interest?
- Will it stimulate the baby's senses?
- Will it encourage tummy time?
- Will it develop hand-eye co-ordination?
- Will it stimulate language development?
- Will it encourage movement and exploration?
- Is it sturdy?
- Is it washable?
- Does it have fun appeal?
- Is it safe?

Any object given to the baby must be safe, carefully supervised and removed from the cot during daytime naps and at bedtime.

Toys: Newborn to 3 months-old

Newborn babies enjoy looking at black and white objects and bright, colourful toys. They are also attracted to things that move or make soft gentle sounds. Here are a few ideas that will capture their attention and aid development:

- Cot mobiles (remove the mobile once the baby learns to sit up)
- Tummy time play mat
- Play gym
- Musical toys
- Pictures with high-contrast graphics, bright colours, or black-and-white patterns
- Soft toys with large eyes and happy faces
- Rattle toys

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- Sound toys
 - Lullaby CDs
 - Books with brightly coloured pictures

There are some beautiful songs and lullabies, which are perfect for helping newborn babies relax and drift into peaceful sleep. Classical music, rhythmic melodies and the music and songs of their own culture will also stimulate their interest and invite parental interaction.

Using the hands

Mouthing decreases when babies start using their hands to explore and manipulate objects. For example, they may squeeze a soft toy with their hands or investigate the properties of a textured object with their fingertips.

At this stage, parents must be extra cautious about safety. The toy must not contain small parts that could present a serious choking hazard. If the object fits through a kitchen roll cylinder, then it is not safe. Toys that have long cords should also be avoided, as they can cause strangulation. Toys should be securely made and without beads, buttons, magnets or batteries that could be life-threatening if swallowed.


Toys sold in the UK must meet the requirements of the Toys (Safety) Regulations 1995. They must bear the CE mark and the name and address of the person who first placed the toy on the market.

Rest-play-rest cycle

Most babies have a natural play-rest-play cycle, which can vary according to their age, temperament, and mood. Some babies will play with an object for as long as twenty minutes, while others lose interest after about five minutes. If the play becomes frustrating or boring or if babies become tired or hungry, they will simply stop playing. If the baby looks away, grimaces, clench the fists, wriggles, becomes grumpy or cries, it's time for a rest break or nap.

Brain development

All experts agree that play is critical for the growth and the development of the brain. At birth, the newborn's brain is about 25% the size of the adult brain. By the baby's first birthday, the



brain has doubled in volume as a direct result of the multitude of learning experiences encountered from birth. At two years of age, the brain will be 80% the size of the adult brain and at five years of age, it will be almost the full size of the adult brain.

Optimal brain development depends on new experiences at the appropriate developmental stage. When the baby engages in play, the growth of interconnecting circuits within and between brain cells in all parts of the brain is accelerated. Through repetitive practice, these connections become hard-wired for life. If stimulation is denied, the brain will prune connections that are not useful. Unless severe circumstances such as illness, fear or neglect limit opportunity, every waking moment provides an opportunity for babies to play.

Conclusion

Play is a crucial component for normal intellectual and physical development, and for the emotional wellbeing of babies. Through play, babies master the skills that enable them to move on to the next developmental stage. Most of the essential traits that enable babies to develop their full potential will be gained in the home or setting that creates the love, safety and security that babies need to thrive.

Given the natural benefits of play, parents naturally want to make the best use of play in the all-round development of babies. Even so, play must bring pleasure and fulfilment. If it is not fun, it is not play.

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