

Play

(Children 0–6 months)

It is said that play is a child's work, and never were truer words spoken.

There are no hard and fast rules about play, except that it should be FUN. Play can be used to teach children vital social skills like making eye contact when we speak to people, turn-taking, listening, and giving our attention to others.

Many games like “pretend” can teach these skills, and they make a very big difference when children go to school.

Play experiences are vital as our children explore new ways of doing things, gain skills, and develop very important internal connections and understandings about life through the experience of play.

From birth to six months your baby will be learning and understanding the world around them. It takes about a month or more for newborns to be able to control eye movements and focus clearly on objects. When baby is awake and alert we can offer visual adventures to help tone the muscles around the eyes.

For newborns, choose contrasting colours such as white, black and red.

Objects and items with bold larger patterns help develop eye muscles, and material that reflects light also catches their attention.

Play is essential to baby wellbeing

Babies of this age will also be learning to control other muscles. Games that help develop strong arm muscles and hand/eye coordination include things like batting and swatting hanging objects – mobiles and play gyms are a great way to encourage your baby.

Allowing your baby to have some time unwrapped and free to move around helps them to become aware of different parts of their body and begin to develop muscle strength and control.

This could be a little extra time during nappy change or while dressing, or special time on a rug on the floor for some tummy time. Tummy time encourages baby to try lifting that heavy head and strengthen their arms and necks.

Play will help your baby to:

- build confidence
- feel loved, happy and safe
- develop social skills, language and communication
- learn about caring for others and the environment
- develop physical skills
- connect and refine pathways in her brain.

Visual adventures

It takes a month or more for a new-born baby to control eye movements and focus clearly on objects. When baby is awake and alert we can offer some visual adventures to tone up the muscles around the eye, encouraging baby to look around and begin to understand his or her new world.

- Choose brightly coloured objects, red, yellow, blue
- Larger patterns are easier for baby to see clearly rather than small busy patterns
- Babies seem to prefer rounded shapes
- Material that reflects light also seems to catch their attention (e.g. a ball of crumpled foil) but not sudden beams of bright light.

Suggestions

Hang mobiles initially close to baby (30-60 cm) then move a little further away as baby's vision improves. Change mobiles regularly to create interest. Also place mobiles in different positions to encourage baby to look around. Mobiles need to be lightweight to move in the breeze and should be attached firmly.

You can also try some visual tracking games. Capture baby's attention with an interesting object and slowly move from one side to the other or up and down while baby visually tracks the object. Alternatively, you could choose some clearly defined photos or pictures of faces and display on the wall. Faces are most interesting objects for babies to study.

Swiping & Grasping

Hang some brightly coloured, lightweight objects on your cradle gym or on ribbon stretched across the cot so baby can learn to swipe and bat. It will take a couple of months before baby develops the coordination of arms, hands and fingers to actually control reaching out and grasping an object. In the meantime swiping and batting is good practise.

To stimulate grasping reflex, collect various objects that baby may be able to hold in their hand. Choose objects that have different textures as they will stimulate baby's sense of touch and the muscles in the hand to respond.

Suggestions

- Be sure not to leave these things dangling over baby while they sleep. Always supervise their play and remove the dangles, gym or ribbon when they indicate they are tired of this game.
- Choose safe objects that will not come apart, for example take care with fluffy things that might allow fluff to get in baby's eyes or small things that might become a choking hazard.
- Keep ribbons that are attached to the dangling objects short so that they will not entwine around baby's fingers or head.
- Ensure objects are firmly attached.
- Choose objects that are clean and can be washed regularly.

Freedom to move

Babies need opportunity to learn to manage that tiny and amazing human form. As suggested, allow a young baby to have some time unwrapped and free to move. This helps them to become aware of different parts of their body and begin to develop some muscle strength and control.

It is recommended to give baby some play time on their tummy but not recommended to put baby to sleep on their tummy. Visit the SIDS website for more information www.sidsandkids.org or order Safe Sleeping Leaflet by phoning 1300 308 307

Suggestions

- Choose a warm flat surface
- Stay with baby and observe when they tire of the play
- Lay baby gently on their tummy with arms brought forward to support themselves
- Place an interesting toy a little forward of baby or lie down at their level yourself to encourage them to lift their head and look up at you
- Different textures on the rug may also encourage them to push up
- When baby tires roll them gently over. Maybe they might then enjoy some gentle hand clapping while you hold their hands, perhaps a foot massage or a body awareness poem.

Balancing act

In the first few months it helps to carry baby in different ways so that they:

- feel their bodies in different positions
- develop muscle strength in balancing their bodies in these different positions
- see the world from a different viewpoint

When carrying or sitting with baby always remember the following:

- Be sure to support his head, as in proportion to his body his head is big and heavy
- Avoid propping baby up into a sitting position before they are able to hold this position themselves.

Suggestions

If you support baby in your arms against your body she can:

- Face over your shoulders to observe things moving away
- Rest with her back against you to look ahead and observe things moving towards you
- Look down while she lie across your lap.

Take care of your back too when picking up and carrying baby:

- Bring baby close to you and your centre of gravity before lifting her
- Try to keep your back straight when lifting and don't stoop or strain your back
- Squat down to pick baby up, pushing up with your leg muscles as they are bigger and stronger than back muscles.

Listening time

During the first month or so, although baby does not have the strength to turn his head towards a sound he will still take a great interest in listening.

In fact his hearing is fully developed a couple of months before birth. As such, baby will already be familiar with regular sounds in his every day world.

Let baby spend time in different areas of the house to hear the clatter of the kitchen and others at work or play. We can also provide some interesting listening experiences especially for baby.

Suggestions

Taking the time to talk to baby is very important because even though he cannot respond he will become familiar with our patterns of sounds, sentence structures and conversational ways. So stop when you are passing and tell baby about your activity. Pause in your conversation as you would when talking with others and catch his eye, so baby will become aware of the two-way nature of conversation. You could also:

- Choose some quiet and beautiful music for baby's listening. There are is specially produced music for babies. You could borrow some from the library to try before you buy.
- Hang some chimes that will gently move and create music in the breeze.
- Take baby outdoors for a walk or somewhere where you can sit for a cuddle while you listen to the sounds of nature.

Want more information?

GreatStart

Department for Education and Child Development website with lots of ideas and activities to do with children to make the most of everyday learning opportunities
www.greatstart.edu.au

The Little Big Book Club

Provides free packs of books for babies and toddlers – available from libraries and the Child and Family Health Service. The website has free Activity Time and Learning Time sheets to complement books and e-books to read online
www.thelittlebigbookclub.com.au

Dads' Read

Information for dads about reading with children
www.dadsread.org.au

Let's Read

Supports families to share words, rhymes, songs, books and stories with children
www.letsread.com.au

Parent Helpline

Phone 1300 364 100
For advice on child health and parenting

Beyond Blue

Phone: 1300 224 636 or 03 9810 6100
Website: www.beyondblue.org.au
The Beyond Blue website has fact sheets and information on mental health, and a Web Chat service 7 days a week from 4pm to 10pm or you can call them 24/7 on 1300 22 4636 to speak to a Beyond Blue counsellor.

www.raisingchildren.net.au

For information on raising children, including information for grandparents raising grandchildren.

www.families.nsw.gov.au

Various resources to help parents at any stage in life.

www.fsn.org.au

Family Workers can offer you practical and emotional support to enhance & strengthen your parenting & family relationships.

Healthdirect: Phone 1300 022 222, 24 hours To speak to a nurse
www.healthdirect.gov.au

Child and Family Health Centre: Tel 02 6625 0111 9am–4:30pm, Monday to Friday to make an appointment.