

Play

(Children 18 months to 3 years)

The first three years of a child's life are critical for development.

The experiences children have in these years help shape the adults they will become. More than anything else, your relationship with your child shapes the way your child learns and grows.

Structured and unstructured play can happen indoors or outdoors. Outdoor play gives your child the chance to explore, be active, test physical limits – and get messy!

'Unstructured play' 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.

'Structured play' is more organised and happens at a fixed time or in a set space, and is often led by a grown-up. Below are some ideas for structured and unstructured play.

Pretend play

Toddlers love to pretend to do things that they see others do every day, for example, put "baby dolly" to bed, do the washing up, go shopping, or pretend to drive around in a car. We can support pretend play by offering simple props such as spoons and cups for feeding dolly, small blankets and cushions, dress up clothes (some of your clothes will work), and by encouraging play with little suggestions "baby looks tired? Should we put her to bed now?"

Simple pretend play helps develop a young child's imagination, creative thinking and problem solving.

Suggestions

- **Baby play.** You can offer toddlers a little bottle or a cup and spoon to feed. Cushions and small rugs to put baby to bed. Some easy to manage clothes (baby singlet and pull on-pants) for dressing baby, and a stroller to take baby for a walk.
- **Shopping.** You can offer some green shopping bags with shorter handles and some empty food packets stacked on a shelf, a wallet with pretend paper money or plastic card and a trolley.
- **Dressing up.** You can offer some big shoes, bags and hats. Skirts, shorts and tops need to be easy to pull-on. A full-sized mirror would be useful too. And a picnic or somewhere to visit might create some excitement afterwards.
- **Driving.** A large cardboard box with the bottom cut out decorated with paper plate wheels and some shoulder straps attached. A row of chairs makes an easy bus to go to town with all the dolls and teddies.

Play is the way most humans, but especially young children, make sense of their world. Play-based learning is an important way to develop active learning. Active learning means using your brain in lots of ways.

OP Shops are fantastic places to get dress-ups and all sorts of things from the kitchenware section to help with playdough activities and make-believe games. OP Shops are also great to get things to stack and use for tipping and pouring games in the bath or outside on a sunny day. If you have a double sink you can let a little one stand on a chair next to you and wash up their collection of plastic "dishes" while you do yours.

Block play

To help toddlers develop hand control and precision, offer a variety of block play. To begin with young children may simply carry the blocks around depositing them in little piles. Show them how to stack the blocks or place them in rows. With your interaction they will begin to build.

Just standing the blocks up and putting a small toy or animal on top of each seems to capture their attention to take on the challenge. Toddlers' play with blocks will be very simple but will require concentration and careful, precise hand-and-eye coordination.

Suggestions

- Washed and dried milk cartons stuffed with scrunched up newspapers then taped shut are good for making long lines or paddocks for toy animals.
- Small sturdy cardboard boxes can simply be taped closed and then used by toddler to stack up high and knock down (they are lightweight and safe).
- Off cuts of soft wood from a joinery can be cut and sanded to create more durable blocks.
- Camphor Laurel branches can be cut into rounds and sanded to make interesting scented blocks.

Drawing & Painting

Toddlers will begin to experiment with writing materials, taking an adult pen and writing on anything in sight. It's time to set up a drawing and painting area with suitable non-toxic textas and paints, giving your toddler time and space to experiment.

At this stage toddlers will also be learning how to manipulate and control the drawing and painting tools rather than creating recognisable pictures. Toddlers tend to grip the brushes and textas very tightly in a full fist grip, using whole arm movements to draw a line. As such, standing up to draw or paint allows toddler to balance his movement.

At this age, toddlers also learn how to hold paper with one hand while drawing, and will be able to manage this while sitting. As they begin to understand writing they will add letters to their drawings and be interested in writing their own name.

Thick chunky textas, chalks, crayons and painting brushes are easier for toddlers to hold. Paper pegged on an easel or taped on a table is also easier for toddlers to manage.

Show your toddler how to write their own name with a capital letter first, followed by lower case letters. When painting offer different types of tools to use such as large brushes, cotton tips, sponges, rollers and even tennis balls. Collect a variety of household objects such as cotton reels, cardboard tubes, fruit and leaves for children to print with.

Suggestions

- Sheets of board already painted with chalkboard paint can be purchased at a reasonable price from a hardware shop. Chalk scribbles can be easily washed off with plain water. Drawing on the wet surface changes the colours too.
- A large whiteboard with chunky water-soluble textas saves lots of paper, and the end rolls of newspaper from a newspaper production centre are very cheap and provide loads of paper.
- Paint can be made by using cell-mix (from a craft or toy shop) and adding powder paints. Generally these paints wash out better than acrylic paints.
- On sunny days try some powder paint in water and use a big brush (or small roller) to paint a footpath or fence and watch the painting evaporate away.
- A spray bottle filled with water and powder paint needs lots of hand control to squirt amazing spray patterns on a roll of paper pegged to the fence.

It is difficult when you are just learning, not to spill drinks and drop food, and it does not help to build a child's confidence to be reprimanded when these things happen. Adults need to be patient with toddlers and toddlers need practice.

Sand & water play

Opportunities to practice pouring, stirring, and using hand held equipment is needed in a no fail situation where it doesn't matter if a little mess is involved. Sand and water play provides this kind of opportunity and is also soothing and satisfying.

Suggestions

Bath-time is an obvious time to practice. Of course, close adult supervision is needed to ensure toddler stays safe and that the bathroom will not be totally drenched. Provide some plastic cups and jugs and some spoons to catch bubbles. Maybe a water-proof doll to feed. Funnels, sieves and other kitchen utensils also provide some interesting learning experiences.

Sand is heavier and requires more strength but it's texture and flowing quality will capture a child's interest. Provide similar kitchen based equipment and perhaps a cardboard box for a stove. Add some patty-pan trays and saucepans for cooking. Second hand kitchenwares can be bought very cheaply at op-shops and are just the thing for toddlers as they are real size and will encourage imaginative play. Choose the smaller size teapots and saucepans as they will be lightweight and easier for a toddler to manage.

Finger-painting

Another soothing, satisfying, no-fail activity for toddlers is finger-painting. Probably best outdoors on the grass in the shade where it will be easy to clean up. Painting directly on the table is easiest but if you want to contain the paint try putting a few dollops on a tray that is large enough for a toddler to swirl their arms around and not make a complete mess!

Two colours that mix to create a third colour is an interesting experience so try red and yellow, or yellow and blue and so on. Different textures can be added to change the sensory feel, for example, some confetti or another day some sand and so on. Be sure to have plenty of newspaper and damp cloths nearby to clean up afterwards. Toddlers often enjoy the table washing too.

Suggestions

- For a quick recipe use cell mix made to a very thick consistency and add powder paint. Another recipe uses one heaped tablespoon of cornflour mixed with a little water to make a thick paste. Pour on some boiling water, stirring quickly till it thickens. If it doesn't thicken you will need to simmer it a while. Then add powder paint.
- Dollops of paint can also be put inside a zip-lock bag and this can be taped to the table where little fingers can push and prod paint about through the plastic. Good for rainy days and wintertime.
- Finger painting on a large sheet of bubble wrap feels different too.
- If you have a large sheet of heavy, thick plastic, pictures can be placed underneath the plastic, then children will need to smooth away finger-paint to see pictures beneath or to cover up the pictures!

You don't have to spend lots of money on toys, games and books for children. Homemade toys and free activities are often the most creative ways for you and your child to have fun together.

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In their imagination, preschool children enter into the world of make believe: fairies, witches, monsters, robotic figures. They have lots of adventures, going to outer-space, creating magic, changing shape and form, rescuing people and saving the world. Some imaginative ideas stem from stories and TV, other play revolves around home scenarios about family events, having babies, going to work, moving house.
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Dramatic Play

This type of play allows children to try different roles that people experience and develops their understanding of the relationships forged between people in different circumstances.

These scenarios often require a cubby-house. Building a cubby-house can be an extended experience and valuable play in itself, requiring problem solving and cooperation. And what's more, cubbies are places to go and think and grow!

Suggestions

- **Building cubbies.** We can offer materials, allowing children to experiment and helping when problems arise. Try to let children solve the problems and make the decisions, as long as they are safe. This helps build confidence in problem solving and encourages initiative in thinking.
- **Play equipment.** We can offer props and materials to support dramatic play, for example, bits and pieces for a witch's cauldron or boxes and bottle lids to build a computer to operate the robots.
- **Dolls houses or miniature people:** This can provide an imaginative world for a single child or 2 little friends to play together. Making peg people and furniture encourages creative skills too.

It is important to pay attention to children's dramatic play and to guide if needed, such as encouraging more compassionate roles rather than aggressive action against others.

Ball Games

At this age children are moving more smoothly when running and jumping and are beginning to hop and skip. Ball skills vary greatly amongst children and usually preschool children need practice to throw and catch with strength and accuracy. To be able to manage a ball will often mean they are invited into a game rather than left out because they fumble the ball and hold up the game.

Preschool children need time and interesting ways to practice ball skills, and of course your patience, encouragement and support when you play with them.

Try using softer and larger balls to begin with. Show children how to hold their hands for catching and how to throw the ball and look at the target for accuracy. Be sure to make it fun and not a drilled practice session. Short fun times give them practice and encourages them to keep trying.

Suggestions

- Hang a large sheet from the clothes-line down to the ground and peg the bottom with tent pegs. Children can then throw balls up onto the sheet and collect them when they roll down again. Draw some chalk targets on the sheet to aim for.
- Baskets, hanging hoops and skittles (made out of plastic bottles) are all good for target practice. Try a tub of water in summer to aim for and create a splash. (Always supervise water play and empty immediately after play).
- Batting practice can be arranged by hanging a ball in a stocking just at the right height for preschoolers to bat, a bit like totem tennis play.

"It takes a lot of slow to grow you know!"

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

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

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