

*"Supporting Parents' Involvement  
in the Development and  
Education of Their Children"*



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## Play—A Child's Way to Learn and Grow

As soon as a baby can focus and reach for things, she eagerly explores her world and tries to make sense of it. She squeezes, rolls, bangs, and puts everything she can get her hands on in her mouth. We call this play, but for a child, it is serious work. Play is how young children learn best. And all kinds of play experiences build your baby's brain.

### How Play Builds the Brain

Every time your baby hears, sees, touches, tastes, or smells something, messages are sent to her brain and a connection is made. The more varied play experiences your child has, the more brain connections are made. And the more your child has a chance to do the same things over and over again, the stronger these connections become. That's why something new or surprising often gets your child's attention. And activities she enjoys she may want to keep doing many, many times.

### Playing with Your Baby

You've probably noticed that your very young baby watches and tastes everything. This is how she explores her world. Hang a mobile over the crib and your baby will watch and track its movements. Give her a rattle or soft teething ring and she will hold it in her fist and suck on it. Your baby will probably love cuddly toys like stuffed animals, and enjoy admiring herself in a mirror.

Once your baby can sit up and crawl, the very best toys are balls, plastic rings and cups, and containers with objects she can put inside and dump out. Babies often enjoy playing with pots and pans from the kitchen, wooden spoons, clothes pins, and empty cardboard boxes. And once a baby starts walking, push and pull toys are a big favorite. When you show your child that you are interested in the things that excite her, you encourage her to keep exploring and learning.

### Playing with Your Toddler

Toddler like many of the same toys—dolls, push and pull toys, stuffed animals—plus simple puzzles and matching games. As your child grows, he will start to use these toys differently. The blocks he once carried around may now be used to build a house. Or, they might become a car moving along a road. Your toddler may take a doll and pretend to feed it, imitating you.

The ability to make believe is a very important step in your child's learning. A child who can make believe is able to hold a picture of something in his mind—meaning to think in the abstract. Thinking in the abstract is needed for learning to read and do math. It is something you should encourage and it's easy to do. All you have to do is make believe with your child.

### Playing with Your Preschooler

Between the ages of three and five, your child learns a lot by playing with other children. These are the years to really encourage make-believe play. When your child makes believe, she has to remember different experiences she has had, take on a pretend role, and involve other children (or her family) in her play. She also may use props as part of her play.

Playing with your child is the best way to encourage make-believe play. And research shows that children who good play skills tend to do well in school. Play helps develop thinking skills—recalling experiences, figuring out how to replay them, and solving problems that come up. Play develops social skills as children work together and share ideas.

Source: US Department of Education