



Helping BABIES Play

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Birth to 4 months

In these early months, babies explore their new world with their eyes. Things you can do to help this exploration are

- Provide bright, moving objects for babies to practice looking at. Mobiles should be interesting from the baby's view. Provide consistency by leaving the objects in their place so the baby begins to recognize familiar objects in the crib at home as well as in out-of-home care settings.
- Move objects close to and away from babies. Also, move your face close to and away from them. This will make a different visual impact than things that stay still. It helps babies judge the relationship between objects and between themselves and objects.
- Hold babies up to your shoulder and move them around to provide a better view.
- Show the baby in a mirror how beautiful and wonderful he is.
- Playfully engage the baby in repetitions of looking, smiling, talking, and laughing. The adult usually starts the game by smiling and talking to gain baby's attention. Experienced caregivers and mothers find that tongue clicking, head shaking, moving quickly toward baby and then stopping, and repeating certain sounds are entertaining to babies. Perform in a clownlike fashion and stop to wait for baby to do her part—laughing, smiling, or moving her arms and legs in excitement. Repeat the clown show several times, each time stopping for baby to have a turn. The show stops when baby starts to look away or shows other signs of fatigue, over-stimulation, or lack of interest.

Babies explore sound and motion too. Some suggestions for increasing these explorations are

- Talk to babies in a playful way. Smile and repeat soft sounds—again, again. Stop between sounds and watch for them to smile or move in response to your voice. If you get a playful response, repeat the show.

- Sing to the baby. Make up songs just for this baby. Dance with the baby nestled on your shoulder.
- Play with the baby's hands and feet, gently patting and rubbing, saying silly, soft sounds to match. "Pedal" the baby's legs for a bike ride, describing where you're going.

4 to 8 months

In this stage, infants can use not only eyes and ears but hands and mouth to explore objects. Some ideas for this age group's play are

- Keep toy safety a primary concern. Provide objects that can be held by small hands but that are not small enough to fit entirely in the mouth. Toys must be washable and made of tough, durable materials. There must be no sharp edges or points that can injure and no small parts that can come off—small wheels or buttons, for example.
- Toys that move or make a sound in response to the baby's actions are best. Look for toys that pop up, turn, honk, rattle, or play music when the baby pushes, punches, hits, or pokes at them.
- Minimize interruptions to protect babies' exploration of new objects. Watch but don't interrupt when babies are busy exploring. Also prevent other children (especially older ones) from interrupting play. Having duplicates of several toys will help prevent would-be "snatchers" from robbing the explorer.

Babies are also becoming more social and enjoy your efforts to entertain them by

- playing "This Little Piggy Went to Market" with their toes and
- singing special songs while changing diapers and clothes or cutting nails.

8 to 12 months

Babies now are fully active in exploring their world. Almost all babies crawl or creep; many walk around the room holding on, some are independently walking. Babies now combine objects and practice dropping, throwing, and squeezing. Some suggestions for fostering their play are

- Provide objects to put in containers and dump out. Some good containers are plastic bowls, plastic storage boxes, baskets, and shoe boxes. Make sure that items to put in the containers are small enough for small hands but not small enough to fit entirely in the mouth. Good things to put in are small blocks, yam balls, plastic lids, and rings from stack-a-ring toys.
- Hide objects for baby to find. Hide objects under covers. At first, leave part of the toy visible or cover with a see-through material (thin scarf, plastic lid, cheese cloth). Hide the baby under a cover—look and look until baby pops out, while asking, “Where’s the baby? Where’s Lucy?”
- Help babies practice sounds by repeating their sounds back—for example, *dada*, *oh oh*, and by the end of the first year, words like *kitty*, *baby*, and *doll*. Don’t limit speech to imitating babies, but extend and expand their words into sentences.
- Read to the baby.
- Provide toys that challenge the infant’s skills. Children this age practice pulling, pushing, poking, punching.
- Be sure toys are in working order. Toys that don’t work are just no fun. They can be very frustrating.
- Introduce toys with more than one part. Infants this age especially like things that fit inside something else.
- Stretch baby’s arms above her head, asking, “How big is baby? SOOOO big!” After a while, baby will hold her arms up alone to respond to your question.
- Play Pat-a-Cake, Peek-a-Boo, and Copycat with the baby.
- Children in this age group enjoy the sensory feeling of moving through space—riding piggyback, swinging in child-seat swings, riding in wagons, and dancing in an adult’s arms. They and older babies also enjoy bouncing on an adult’s knee to the accompaniment of a song or verse such as “This Is the Way the Lady Rides.”

12 to 18 months

Infants in this age group are great experimenters, trying out all their skills this way and that just to see what will happen. The first pretend play occurs in this group when infants begin to act “as if” doing daily activities. They pretend to sleep, eat, or bathe. They then apply these acts to others and later copy others’ behaviors as their own. Some suggestions for supporting play for these babies are

- Provide simple pictures of familiar items (laminated, covered with clear plastic, or put into zip-type plastic bags) for baby to practice naming.
- Read to the baby, talking about the book as you go.
- Provide safe places (indoors and outdoors) for moving—walking and climbing. Due to the likelihood of many falls, climbing steps should be plastic or covered with carpet. Tunnels and cabinets provide opportunities for going in, out, through, and under.
- Be the receiver of the child’s pretend actions. Take a drink from the empty cup, smack your lips, and say, “Ummmm, good.” Let the child comb your hair or pretend to wash your face. Then extend the pretense to another recipient such as a doll. Support the child’s language development by narrating the drama as it progresses: “Jimmy is asleep,” or “Oh, I’m going to be clean. I’m getting a bath.”
- Provide real-looking toys for daily activities such as eating, bathing, riding, and cleaning. Important toys for pretense at this age are

Dolls (realistic, representative of a variety of racial/ethnic groups): daddy, mommy, brother, sister, baby.

Transportation vehicles: boats, planes, cars, trains.

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