

Child's Play!

Playtime for Your Infant or Toddler

Rebecca Woods, Ph.D., Assistant Professor
Department of Human Development and Family Science, NDSU

When you have an infant or toddler, having fun with your baby may seem like child's play. But playtime actually is vital to babies' physical, cognitive and social development. Play can be any activity that you enjoy with your child or that your child enjoys alone. These early play activities involve a lot of learning and set a foundation for later play and exercise.

Because your baby is growing and changing so quickly, the best types of play activities will be changing quickly, too. During the earliest period of life, the newborn period, infants typically don't play at all. However, within just a few weeks, you'll notice your baby exploring his or her own body movements, repeatedly kicking his or her legs and moving his or her arms. These repetitive movements are enjoyable for babies and are one of the earliest forms of play. Soon your baby will realize that when he or she kicks or moves his or her arms, he or she can affect things around him or her.

As your baby gets older, he or she will become more interested in playing with and learning about toys and other items in his or her world. This period of life is all about discovery, so even things that may seem mundane to you can be fascinating to your tot. This is a great time to show your baby the different uses for objects. Starting around 8 months (and often earlier), babies become fascinated by cause and effect. Your baby will love having you show him or her that things with wheels roll down ramps or that pressing a doorbell results in a sound.

Later, during toddlerhood, the social aspects of play will become more important. During this period, learning the basics of relationships, such as sharing and turn taking, becomes central. However, guiding these social play interactions is up to you because toddlers still are learning.

Parents can enjoy many activities with their infant or toddler. Here are some tips for getting the most out of playtime.

Playtime Tips

- **Keep it simple.** Because your baby still is learning about how the world works, some of the best activities for this age group are those that involve exploring what things do. Toys don't need to be costly or covered in bells and whistles. A box of fabric scraps with sewn edges, plastic mirrors and stackable boxes can be just as fun and educational as expensive toys.
- **Keep it safe.** Carefully consider the toys or other items you give to your baby. Objects that disassemble or have small pieces that can break off are a dangerous choking hazard. Even stuffed animals can be hazardous for infants or toddlers if the animals have small plastic eyes or noses. Paying attention to the play environment also is important. Watch out for sharp edges and corners.

- **Play at his or her level literally.** Don't be afraid to get down on the floor to play. Not only will you be able to see the world from your child's perspective, the up-close eye contact will strengthen your relationship with your toddler and let him or her know that he or she is important to you.
- **Play at your level.** Make regular exercise (especially fun exercise) a part of your life and include your youngster in your activities as much as you can. Although your toddler may not be able to run a marathon, get your child involved in the activities you enjoy early. You may have to think creatively to find ways to make your favorite exercise activities fun for your toddler, but it's worth it. When you play with your baby, you build a special relationship with your child. As your baby grows older, he or she will not only see the value and fun in exercise but will be involved in an activity that you can share together.

- **Pay attention to body language.** Infants don't have the ability to tell you when they've had enough. Even toddlers whose vocabulary is rapidly expanding have a difficult time verbalizing or even recognizing when they need a break. If your infant is avoiding your eye contact or your toddler is getting cranky, take those cues as a sign that you may need to switch activities or have some rest time.
- **Focus on the fundamentals of taking turns and sharing.** Sometimes what you do isn't as important as how you do it. Even very young infants learn about taking turns when you play with them. Try taking turns making silly faces.
- **Avoid TV or videos.** While videos can be a useful distraction if you need a few minutes to finish a task or get a breather during a stressful day, watching videos doesn't count as play and doesn't do much to encourage development.

Video use with infants and toddlers should be kept to a minimum. Why not try pulling out the serving-spoon drawer and letting your baby do some exploring instead?

- **Get physical.** Some of the very best activities for infants and toddlers involve nothing more than their body. Dancing, for example, is a fun way for toddlers to use up some of what seems like an endless supply of energy. At the same time, they'll be learning about their body (heads, shoulders, knees and toes) as well as exploring and practicing movements.
- **Most importantly, keep it fun.** If both you and your baby aren't truly having fun, change what you are doing. Sometimes figuring out what types of activities are best for you both takes awhile.

