



Young Children and the Tools of Play

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Play often is considered a child's work. It is even more. It is a child's world. Skills and concepts learned during play will last a lifetime. When do we see children most happy and growing? At play. When do we see children at their most creative? In play. What do most children ask parents to do? Come and play. Play in all its myriad types and activities is the cornerstone of a child's learning and development. Why wait? Go out and play!

Enhancing a Child's Play

How can adults assist children and enhance their play experiences? Understanding the importance of play is the first step. Being supportive and giving young children the time and patience they need for meaningful play is critical. The following tips provide some suggestions for enhancing a child's play:

- **Provide an adequate amount of time.** Make sure that children have enough uninterrupted time to fully play out the sequence of their play. The amount of time is going to depend on the age of the child and sophistication of the play. A young child playing alone is not necessarily going to need as much time at an activity as a group of children building and playing out a grocery store theme. Children may become frustrated if they are interrupted or play is unable to continue to its natural end. Parents should allow children to play in sufficiently large amounts of time. When play does need to end, adults need to give children a reminder so children can finish their play activities (such as, "Five more minutes until it's time to clean up").
- **Limit the number of choices.** Limit the number of play items so a young child is not overwhelmed. Having four or five well-chosen

toys that are accessible for your child will be more appealing and will allow a child more creativity than having 10 to 12 different toys available. Rotate toys available to children so they have a variety of play experiences.

- **Select toys that grow with the child.** When selecting toys, consider toys that can be manipulated and used throughout the various ages and stages of development.
- **Be a role model.** Because children don't automatically know how to use a toy, give them some time to explore new things and experiment with them. But be available to help if they are getting so frustrated that the play is unproductive. Model how a toy can be used and played with for your child.
- **Follow the child's lead.** If a child is using a toy in a new way, follow his or her lead and see where the play takes the child. Ensure safety but also give support and respond to a child's invitation to be involved.
- **Ask open-ended questions.** Further the play by asking questions that get the child to talk about what is happening and what is going to happen next (for example, "How did that happen?" or "What do you think will happen if ..."). Avoid simple yes/no questions, which don't lead to further exploration.

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The Rhythms of Play

What can parents and other adults expect of a child in his/her play activities as he/she grows? The following information provides some brief guidelines related to how children’s play develops as they grow older and a few possible toys to consider. This list is not all-inclusive and adults should follow children’s interests and skills in toy selection.

A Child’s Age	Toys to Consider
<p>0 to 12 months</p> <p>In infancy, a child is exploring movement, balance and recognition. Parents can expect:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rolling, sitting, standing, crawling • Exploration with eyes, ears, mouth and hands • Babbling and cooing • Exploration of toys and places 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mobiles • Teething toys • Rattles and bean bags • Push toys • Balls of all kinds • Cushions, stuffed toys • Stacking blocks or rings • Musical toys • Shape sorters • Cloth or cardboard picture books
<p>1 year</p> <p>Children at this age thrive on exploration, curiosity, imitation and physical play. Parents can expect:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lots of movement and activity • Curiosity, hide-and-seek, questioning • Pretend play, experiments with objects 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Balls of all kinds • Gym equipment (infant swing, slide) • Water toys • Sandbox toys • Ride-on toys, wagon • Art supplies (nontoxic) such as large crayons and paper, play dough • Cardboard, picture and pop-up books • Blocks, stacking toys
<p>2 to 3 years</p> <p>Toddlers engage in much large motor play (active) and imagination, and develop coordination skills. Parents can expect:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Play interactions with other kids • Running, jumping, climbing • Drawing and painting 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Puzzles (wood), blocks, building toys • Dolls with accessories (clothes, etc.) • Dress-up clothes and materials • Bubbles, musical instruments • Play scenes with figures • Storybooks
<p>4 to 6 years</p> <p>Preschool and kindergarten children are learning social skills, language, imaginary and cooperative play, and physical abilities. Parents can expect:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Running, jumping, throwing • Describing imaginary play scenes • Connecting with other children. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Construction toys • Tricycle/bicycle and helmet • Arts and crafts supplies (scissors, paper, crayons, etc.) • Props for make-believe play • Easy board games, word or matching games • Storybooks

Toy Tips

Children do not need a lot of things to play with as they grow, but they do need a variety. They mostly need carefully selected, well-made and affordable toys that come from a variety of the categories listed below. *Remember: Not all categories of toys are appropriate for all ages.* This list is meant to give you ideas you may not have thought about offering your child.

- *Art and Craft Materials* (scissors, tape, glue, chalkboard/chalk, crayons, paper, play dough)
- *Audiovisual Materials* (recorded tapes; short videos about familiar themes such as animals, babies)
- *Balls and Sports Equipment* (clutch balls, chime balls, see-through balls, beach balls, kick balls)
- *Books* (good variety; bright, clean illustrations; few words to start; pop-up and homemade books)
- *Construction Materials* (cloth, rubber, wood, cardboard, snap-together blocks, pounding toys)
- *Dolls* (safe cloth, cuddly dolls; plastic-body dolls to wash; clothing, etc., for older children's dolls)
- *Dressing, Lacing and Stringing* (lacing cards, stringing beads, toy to snap, zip, button, buckle)
- *Games* (matching games, card games, board games, dominoes, marbles, checkers, picture bingo)
- *Grasping Toys* (for babies only: rattles, open/shut toys, suction-cup toys, knob puzzles, switches)
- *Mirrors* (nonbreakable crib, hand, full length, for play props as well as self-awareness)
- *Mobiles/Visuals* (start 14 inches from baby, move it up as he/she grows, remove before he/she starts standing)
- *Musical Instruments* (rattles, bells, rhythm sticks, sand blocks, sturdy drums, crank music box)
- *Outdoor and Gym Equipment* (large foam blocks, tunnels, boxes)
- *Pattern Making Materials* (pegs, pegboard, magnet board and shapes, flannel board and shapes)
- *Play Scenes* (wooden or plastic people and animal shapes, vehicles, buildings and furniture)
- *Puppets* (safe and sturdy hand and finger puppets, mitten and sock puppets, theater, scenery)
- *Push and Pull Toys* (plastic push and pull toys, buggies, wagons for 4- to 6-year-olds' "work")
- *Puzzles* (wood, plastic, cardboard, knobs; start with two to three pieces, work up to more; number puzzles)
- *Ride-on Equipment* (low, sturdy, one-year-old toy, rocking horse, tricycle, bike with training wheels)
- *Role Play Material* (dolls and stuffed animals, toy phone, dishes, dress-up material, firefighter materials)
- *Sand and Water Play Material* (floating toys, sprinkling can, funnels, water pumps, sand molds)
- *Specific Skill Development Material* (nesting cups, shape sorters, prism, stethoscope, pulley)
- *Stuffed Toys/Play Animals* (washable cloth, sturdy rubber, vinyl or plastic, reptiles and dinosaurs, too)
- *Transportation Toys* (one-piece, big wheels for babies, work machines, vehicles and trains for older kids)

Recommended Resources

■ Books and Pamphlets

Anderson, Rita, and Neuman, Linda. (1995). *Partners in Play: Creative Homemade Toys for Toddlers*. New York, N.Y.: Henry Holt and Company Inc.

A book that provides valuable knowledge and ideas for ensuring children experience play as part of their learning and growth.

Cohen, L.J. (2001). *Playful Parenting*. New York: Ballantine Books.

Johnson, James E., Christie, James F., and Yawkey, Thomas D. (1999). *Play and Early Childhood Development* (2nd ed.). New York: Addison-Wesley Educational Publishers.

This book brings together research on the importance of play and its function in child development.

McCracken, Janet Brown. (2000). *Play Is Fundamental* (pamphlet). Washington, D.C.: National Association for the Education of Young Children.

This pamphlet highlights the fundamentals of play and how parents can enhance play in the lives of children. This NAEYC brochure can be ordered by contacting the National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1509 16th St. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036-1426 or calling (800) 424-2460 or going online at www.naeyc.org.

Rogers, C.S., and Sawyers, J.K. (1998). *Play in the Lives of Children*. Washington, D.C.: National Association for the Education of Young Children.

This book is a useful and positive overview of the importance of play in the lives of children. Copies can be ordered from the National Association for the Education of Young Children by calling the number above or through its online Web site (see above example).

Sheridan, M.D., Harding, J., and Meldon-Smith, L. (2001). *Play in early childhood: From birth to six years* (2nd ed.). London: Routledge.

Classic work on play in the lives of children and the importance of play for early education and development.

Toy Industry Foundation. *Fun Play, Safe Play* (pamphlet). New York, N.Y.: Toy Industry Foundation.

This pamphlet provides insights into toys as Atools of play, @ an age-linked guide for toys to use with children, and safety guidelines in toy use and purchase. This resource can be ordered from the Toy Industry Foundation, 1115 Broadway, Suite 400, New York, N.Y. 10010. The resource also can be printed from the foundation's Web site at www.toyindustryfoundation.org.

References

- Anderson, R., and Neuman, L. (1995). *Partners in Play: Creative Homemade Toys for Toddlers*. New York, N.Y.: Henry Holt and Company Inc.
- Brotherson, S.E., and Bushaw, K. (2003). Fathers and the world of play. *Father Times Parenting Newsletter, Issue 4*, p. 4. Fargo, ND: NDSU Extension Service, North Dakota State University.
- Johnson, J.E., Christie, J.F., and Yawkey, T.D. (1999). *Play and Early Childhood Development* (2nd ed.). New York: Addison-Wesley Educational Publishers.
- Johnson, J.E., Christie, J.F., and Wardle, F. (2004). *Play, Development and Early Education*. New York: Addison-Wesley Educational Publishers.
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