

Playing together, playing alone



When we look back at our own childhood, good memories are often attached to the games we played, the things we did with our parents and with other children. One of the best parts of being a parent is being allowed to play, to have the chance to relive all those things we did as children or to make up for activities we never did as children; swinging on swings, getting really messy using finger paints, dressing up and so on.

For your children play is vital. Play is a child's work. Everything a child does, or doesn't do, influences the next stage of their development. The early years are the time when a child's brain is developing, making connections and creating a network of skills that are built on throughout their lives. By the age of five, a

child has learned all the basic skills needed to survive walking, talking, muscle and body control, figuring out interpersonal relationships, amongst others. It's pretty amazing when you think about it and it all takes a lot of practice.

We can help our children by understanding that they develop skills in different areas and by providing opportunities and activities to help them on their way. By watching and tuning in to our children we can get a feel for the best activity at a given time. Some children are active doers and will need lots of outdoor physical, energetic play. Others are happy sitting at home with toys and can play on their own for hours. There are lots of ways of learning and if you and your child are having fun and enjoying both the activity and each other then you are helping your child. As parents you know your children best of all so home activities can be geared to what your child likes and geared to the pace that suits them.

Lots of the ideas we are suggesting are things to do with your child. Playing together is one way of showing your child that you care for and love them. You are giving them attention and making them feel special. But giving children opportunities to play on their own is also very valuable and providing them with things to do helps them get more out of play. Here are some ideas to get you started or to remind you of what is possible. Playing together doesn't have to be expensive. Your time and attention count for more than costly toys.



From birth

Faces

New born babies watch faces more than anything else. Your face is their first plaything. Even tiny babies will look into your eyes and copy what you do. Try sticking your tongue out and pulling faces and see what happens.

Gazers

Babies like to fix their gaze on shapes and patterns in contrasting black and white. You can make your own 'gazers' for them to look at. Cut out the pictures attached and stick them on to pieces of card (cereal boxes, cut to size are ideal). You can attach them to the sides of the cot, or attach them to a lolly stick and hold them for the baby to look at. They should be near and no more than 12 inches or 30 cms away. If you make your own patterns use a water-based thick black marker on some white card or paper.



From birth



From birth

Mobiles and play gyms

Babies are stimulated by having things to look at. If you make your own mobile or adapt bought ones, you can ring the changes and keep your baby interested. They notice when something new comes along and it holds their interest. A good place for a mobile is over your changing mat so that there is a distraction for a wriggling child.

Be aware that as your child gets older and begins to grab, the mobile must not be within reach. If you have adapted it then the manufacturer will not guarantee it adheres to the recognized safety standards. Most mobiles become unstable if touched so better to be safe than sorry and **keep them out of baby's reach.**

Making a mobile

Mobile 1

Tools and materials needed:

- 1 or 2 coat hangers
- Fabric
- Scissors
- Ribbon
- Tape
- P.V.A. Glue
- Needle and thread
- Felt, if creating own shape objects
- Objects for hanging, for example: soft toys, plastic toys, selection of paper



You can use one hanger and attach three or four objects or you can tape hangers together to create two layers. Cut lengths of ribbon and sew or attach to hangers. Choose objects to hang, attach objects firmly to the ribbon. At this point you must make sure objects are not too heavy for the coat hanger.

Mobile 2

You can also make a mobile using wooden dowelling. First cut dowelling to required length and attach together in the shape of a cross either using tape or string.

From birth

Circular mobile

If you can find or buy a plastic clothes-airer in a circle shape with pegs attached (for drying underwear and socks), this makes a great mobile. The things you hang on the mobile can be changed regularly to provide changing stimulation. An older child can help choose and be involved in this.

Play gym

If you have a commercial play gym, and there are lots available on Ebay, you can make them more interesting by changing the toys. Attach things that are safe to be chewed and touched by short pieces of string so as to avoid baby getting tangled in them. Use things like rattles and teething toys, small soft toys, large plastic cotton reels, wooded spoons, pieces of cloth of different textures and so on.

Please note: be aware that all bought toys conform to safety standards and must have the 'kite mark'  or the legend BS EN 71. The  mark ensures that the toy complies with the European Directive. By changing the gym the toy is no longer meeting the standards. Make sure items are fastened on securely as the responsibility for safety is now with you rather than the manufacturer.

To create a play gym that is safe to leave a baby under, hang objects from a piece of thick dowelling or rope across two chairs. You may wish to put some of the objects onto elastic – 2cm wide is ideal – for added interest. Or, if you have a bar across your door that you use for doing press-ups or for a baby bouncer, you may wish to attach your objects to that.



From birth

Making a memory box

A memory box can help your child develop new language; you are creating a way of talking to your child about their feelings and their past. There may be a particular event or person that you want to mark. This can be a happy occasion, a holiday, christening or birthday; a change such as moving house or transition from pre-school to school; or a loss such as the death of a pet or person. A memory box allows you to revisit the topic and it can be added to and changed as time goes on.

Another way is to have a box or envelope for each year and put in reminders of important events that happened in that year. You can make a memory box of your child's birth to share with them later and, as your child gets older, they can choose for themselves what to put in.



What to do

Choose a box to hold things in, a shoe box is a good size and you can decorate this with pictures or stickers. Decide what you want to remember and collect photographs, drawings, favourite objects, everyday items such as bus tickets, objects that smell, and so on, that will remind you of an event, person, pet or period of time and put them into the box.

Every time you look at the box there is a chance to talk about memories. You and your child can make up a story or a poem to go in the box and add memories as you go along. Playing with and handling objects in the box can reaffirm good times and also help them come to terms with loss and changes.

From 6 months to 1 year

Treasure baskets

Once your baby can sit up, treasure baskets provide a range of learning and play activities for you to play together or for your baby to play with alone. Babies learn through their senses. They need to touch, smell, hear, see and, very importantly, taste and learn through their mouths to develop their understanding of the world around them. A baby's mouth is the most sensitive part of their body and some experts say that babies need to put things into their mouths to find out about them. There is no right or wrong way to play with these objects. Babies learn by experimenting, handling and finding out what exactly different things can do. When your baby is playing you can join in, it helps to get down to their level and sit on the floor with them or sometimes just watch them and see what they do. How long can they concentrate? Do they use one sense more than others? Have they likes or dislikes? How are they using their hands and fingers? What goes into their mouths?

What to do

Collect a range of objects that are not commercial toys. The idea is to provide as wide a range of materials and sensations as possible. Put out a selection in a basket or on a piece of cloth and enjoy. Make sure none of the objects are small enough to choke on and if you are worried about using items that are not bought toys then stay close at hand. You can choose items that can easily be washed or thrown away at the end of the playtime.



From 6 months to 1 year

Treasure baskets (continued)

Here is a list of suggestions, just to give you some ideas:

Natural objects

Fir cones
Large stones or pebbles
Pumice stone
Loofah
Lemon - unwaxed
Apple
Shells
Natural sponge

Metal objects

Teaspoons
A garlic crusher
A tea strainer
A whisk
Bunch of keys
Tin lids
Small lidded tins
Pieces of chain link
Measuring spoons

Fabric items

A purse
Woollen balls (pom-poms)
Powder puff
Small pieces of fabric

Wooden objects

Dolly pegs
Smooth blocks
Egg cup
Spoons
Spatula
Small massage roller

Paper objects

Cardboard tubes
Scrunched up balls of paper or tin foil
Small notebook
Paper bags
A collection of boxes

Objects that make a noise

Whistle
Bells
Wooden stick to hit things with
Shakers and other musical instruments

From 6 months to 18 months

Baby obstacle course

This activity will help your child feel good about themselves and develop body strength, balance and coordination.

What to do

When your baby is crawling set up a pile of cushions or pillows. Encourage them to climb over the pile and play with them, it helps to get down to floor level with your baby, and use the cushions to play 'peek-a-boo' or hide a toy underneath and help them look for it.

From 18 months

A dressing-up box can be put together without great expense. It encourages children to play together and to share and compromise. The games they play develop their imagination and give them opportunities to begin to see the world from another perspective. Playing mums and dads lets them express their feelings as well as begin to think about what a mum feels.

Jumble sales, charity shops and friends' cast-offs can provide plenty of possibilities. Shoes, hats and handbags always seem to work. Children love the opportunity to try out being someone else and it is natural for both girls and boys to experiment with high heels, handbags and swirly dresses as well as being firemen, doctors and so on.

It is easy to breathe new life into their games by providing new resources such as a picnic, a few balloons or a doctor's set. Sometimes you can join in and play with your child or children and then the talking and listening adds to their learning. At other times, children very happily play alone or with each other and that too has value as a learning experience.



Over twos

Creating an obstacle course

This is a fun activity which is good when there are a few children around and they have lots of energy. It can be adapted to the ages and skills of children and is about setting the children a challenge which gives them a chance to practice and develop their physical skills

Set up a course that children have to navigate. The idea is to think of some tasks which are age appropriate, in other words, not too difficult but still a challenge. For young children under three, four activities is plenty. You can mix the activities so that some need physical skills such as kicking, running and balancing whereas others need hand eye coordination. You can set different tasks or targets for different ages or make the same activity more difficult by adding a time element or setting different targets. A five year old may need to throw six balls in a bucket whereas a two year old can run and put two balls in a bucket.

What to do - outdoors

- Set up a course in the garden or the park.
- Set a sequence of tasks for children to complete. What you do depends on space and equipment.
- Make sure what you use is unbreakable and safe.
- When you have decided what to do, show the children what's involved by talking them through it or better, doing it yourself so they know what to do.
- If it gets too competitive, you can give extra points for helping each other or playing without fighting, for example.

Some ideas for tasks

- Egg and spoon lap.
- Fill up a bucket with objects, stones or sand and emptying into a bowl.
- Knock down an empty plastic bottle with a ball.
- Kick a ball through a tube.
- Throw a ball into a box.
- Put on a hat and dressing up clothes and running ten yards.
- Make a line of bricks, boxes or sheets of paper to cross without touching the ground.
- Turn three somersaults.
- Blow a bubble.
- Transport water from one container to another.

Indoors

The idea of a series of tasks can be adapted for indoors but this depends on your living space. A hall or stairs can be a useful play space and you can set tasks accordingly. Have a big box with lots of things in it. How long does it take to put an object on each stair? This helps to give an idea of time as well as providing physical activity.