

PLAY!

Playing with babies is fun, but did you know that play helps babies learn, too? When a parent plays effectively with an infant, parent and baby bond, and the baby's development -- language, motor, intellectual, and social/emotional -- is enhanced.

Learning doesn't happen automatically with play though. A baby really learns when the play is a successful social interaction -- parent and baby are both actively engaged with each other, and both are really enjoying themselves. Simple cooperative games, like imitating sounds or passing objects, teach:

- taking turns
- offering toys back and forth
- watching each other and
- signaling each other to get involved.

A good play partner has:

1. An appropriate attitude. When a parent believes that playing with a baby is important and fun, a baby will enjoy it, will learn from it, and will even encourage the parent to keep playing.
2. A knowledge of child development. When a parent has some basic information about how babies learn and how certain activities encourage development, the parent can choose appropriate activities to match a baby's developmental stage in language, motor, intellectual, and emotional growth.
3. An ability to read a baby's cues. If a parent recognizes when a baby is bored or overstimulated and knows when to change a toy or game, playtime will be fun for both parent and baby. Both will feel successful, too, and baby will continue to learn and grow.

Babies who play regularly with adults play for longer times, and their play is more complex than babies who play mostly alone. By following a baby's cues, a parent can act as a social director and designer who:

- offers reassurance if a baby is having difficulty
- reduces activity if a baby is over-excited
- increases activity if a baby is bored
- reinforces a baby who is doing well
- changes toys or starts a new activity
- knows when a child doesn't want to play

Having a parent as a playmate benefits a baby, if the adult is: willing to play, available to play, and sensitive to baby's cues.

Developmental Skills of Babies

0-4 months

- Follows object with eyes
- Lets glance linger where absent object had been
- Continues actions to produce interesting effects -- kicks, coos, babbles

4-8 months

- Uncovers partially hidden object
- Imitates familiar actions
- Tries to produce or repeat interesting effects with objects

8-12 months

- Uncovers hidden object, but may look in previous location after seeing it moved
- Imitates somewhat novel actions
- Puts familiar actions together in new combinations

12-18 months

- Uncovers objects, but is still unable to follow through several hidden moves
- Modifies familiar actions to solve new problems
- Imitates completely new actions

Games for Babies and Parents

- Show and move interesting, colorful objects
- Position interesting objects nearby to kick, bat, grasp, and explore
- Talk with baby. Imitate her. Use her name.
- Provide lots of objects to grasp and manipulate
- Begin to play hiding games, peek-a-boo games
- Provide a safe space & interesting objects to find, carry, and experiment with
- Verbalize your actions ("I'm putting the ball behind me. Can you get it?")
- Try more complex hiding games
- Play with puppets and dolls
- Use parallel talk, describing what baby is doing
- Imitate baby and encourage him to imitate
- Explain how things happened ("The ball rolled away because you kicked it!")
- Share in water play, with a variety of pouring, stirring, and squeezing toys
- Ask questions, giving time for child to find solution
- Provide more toys for pretending

from "A Program of Play for Infants and Their Caregivers", in *Young Children*,

January 1995, by Fergus P. Hughes, James Elicker, and Linn C. Veen

For more information on how babies learn, call Project FREE at 1-800-870-7746.