

Play is all about learning - A guide to play for parents of children 2½- 5 years

The following article is produced by NSW Department of Health.

There's more to play than having fun. Play is an important part of babies' and children's lives. Play is the 'daily work' of children – it helps them learn and grow. Parents are their children's first – and most important – teachers. Both mothers and fathers can help children get the most out of play. It's good for children to have grandparents, older children and other relatives and friends to play with them too.

Play is important for children because it helps them:

- learn about their world
- learn how to do things
- solve problems
- deal with feelings
- become confident
- get stronger
- learn to get on with other people (sharing and taking turns)

Here are some examples of how play helps children learn and develop

- Putting a smaller box into a bigger box – helps babies and toddlers learn to use their fingers and fit things in.
- Drawing, painting, pasting, threading - help children learn and practise skills (and learn patience).
- Dressing up. Helps them become imaginative and creative.
- Dramatic play. Pretending to be other people (eg parents and other adults) helps them understand adult roles. Re-enacting upsetting situations can help children cope with their feelings. Dramatic play helps children use their imagination.

It's good to play with your babies and children because:

- It helps you get to know each other and become close.
- It lets children know you love them and are interested in them. Feeling loved helps children learn and develop well.
- Parents know their child best. They can help their children learn through play.

Parents can help children get more out of play by:

Having interesting things for them to play with.

- You don't need expensive toys. Children can have fun and learn with low cost toys (wooden blocks, sets of animals, paint and paper). In fact you are the most interesting 'toy' your child enjoys playing with.
- Use things around the house, e.g. cardboard boxes, wooden spoons, plastic containers, pots and pans, old clothes for dressing up.
- There may be a toy library* in your area – ask your local Early Childhood Health Centre or library.



Finding time to play with children

Life gets busy sometimes, and parents may feel tired. But some things don't take much time and energy. Both mothers and fathers can:

- Talk or sing to children when they're working around the house.
- Include them in simple chores children can manage - e.g. passing Dad the sponge when he's washing the car; passing the pegs for hanging out washing; helping with dusting.
- Pointing to things when you're on the bus or going shopping.
- Having quiet times together with picture books or a story.

Ask older children or relatives to help by playing or talking with the children.

Letting children play in their own way

- Adults often 'take over' children's play by telling them how to play (e.g. 'build a house with the blocks'). You need to show children how to do things sometimes, (e.g. how to put one block on top of another). But it's important to let children come up with their own ideas. This helps them think for themselves and learn to solve problems. Letting them play in their own way doesn't mean they can do anything they want – like drawing on the wall. You still need to make sure they don't harm themselves or anything in the house.
- Let your child be your guide. Sometimes they want to do things themselves and just want you close by. Other times they want you to be part of their play. Let them decide. At this age it is normal for children to 'parallel play' or play alongside others rather than with them. Games you can both do side by side (such as drawing) can be most comfortable for young children.
- Try not to force your ideas for play on to your child.

Playing with them

- Sit on the floor and play with toys with them. Be part of their game, not just someone who supervises.
- Instead of asking questions like, 'Why don't you build a house?' it's better to just comment on what they're doing, e.g.

'Now you're building a house'
'You've put some blocks in the truck.'

This is a good way of following their lead, rather than telling them what to do. It lets them know you're interested in them too.

Know when children want to play – and when they want to stop

Good times to play with babies and children are when they're wide awake – not tired or hungry. Babies and small children can't concentrate for long. Short, frequent playtimes with your child may be best. Signs that children want to stop playing include:

- yawning,
- turning away
- looking restless

These are your 'cues' to try a new game or have a break.

Play at different ages

Here are some ideas for children at different ages. You can get more ideas from your Early Childhood Health Centre or a playgroup.

Talking, singing, telling stories or reading books are good at any age. When babies are a few months old, show them pictures in books and tell them simple stories. If you don't enjoy reading yourself, it's still good to have books around – you can point to the pictures. Tell toddlers and children stories about you and your family, e.g. 'when I was a little girl/boy, my father used to ...' or 'when grandma was young, she used to...' This gets children used to the sounds and patterns of language.

If there's little room to play, it can seem easier to let children watch TV. But that means less time to play and learn (unless you sit together and talk about what you watch). Many play ideas below are good for small spaces.

2 ½ to 3 ½ years

- Music and songs. Moving and dancing to music. Playing with home made instruments (e.g. a pot and a spoon for a 'drum').
- Drawing with non-toxic crayons.
- Cooking. Let them help (e.g. pour flour into a bowl or mix ingredients).
- Modelling. Use play dough or plasticine. Helps with concentration and memory.



- Going to the park to run and climb – helps strengthen muscles and builds confidence.

3 ½ to 5

- Pretend play. Dressing up. Playing shop, playing school. Play-acting and imitating helps them understand their world; helps them learn to solve problems.
- Threading large beads (don't let them swallow them),
- Painting. Use different things for painting - fat brushes, thin brushes, cotton buds or fingers all make different effects.
- Drawing, cutting (with child-safe scissors); pasting
- Jigsaws
- Tying shoelaces and bows.
- Tracing around different shapes and objects.
- Growing things – vegetables, flowers in pots.

Playing with a small child when there's a new baby to look after

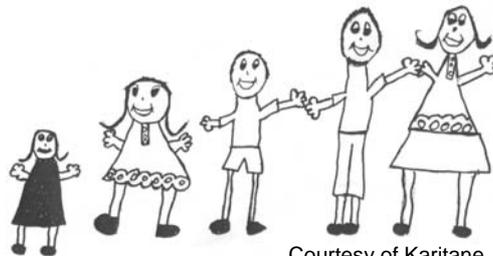
- Have an activity your child can do nearby while you're with the baby. Start the activity (e.g. scribbling with crayons or paper) with your child before feeding or bathing the baby.

What if playing makes the house untidy?

Have a special box or cupboard for toys – you can tidy up quickly. Make a game of tidying up so the children can help. It's nice to have a tidy house – but it's also good to know that play is helping your children learn and grow.

Playgroups - good for parents and children

- Playgroups are available in most areas. They're a friendly way for parents (fathers and mothers) and children to get together with other parents and children. Some playgroups have people who speak your language. Don't be shy of joining a playgroup because you speak little or no English – children can help you get to know other parents without needing too many words. Children get to play with other children and make new friends. Parents make friends too. Parents give playgroups the chance to share ideas about parenting.
- Some playgroups are run by community groups. Others are run by parents themselves. Sometimes playgroups are free, sometimes members pay a small fee to help buy playthings. Parents are responsible for supervising children in all playgroups. But in some playgroups, trained workers help with activities.



Courtesy of Karitane

To find out about playgroups in your area, contact your local Early Childhood Health Centre or the Playgroup Association of NSW Inc. If you want to start a playgroup in your area (e.g. for parents who speak the same language), the Playgroup Association can help.

If you need help making phone calls in English, ring the Translating and Interpreting Service (TIS) on 131 450.

You can find more health information in your language on the Multicultural Communication website at <http://mhcs.health.nsw.gov.au>

This fact sheet is based on information provided by health professionals at NSW Health, Karitane, Tresillian and the Playgroup Association of NSW

Telephone numbers are correct at time of publication but are not continually updated. You may need to check the numbers in the telephone directory.