

# Play Helps Children Thrive

More than just a chance to have fun, play is serious business when it comes to a child's health and development. From peek-a-boo to pat-a-cake and hide-and-seek to hopscotch, the many forms of play enrich a child's brain, body and life in important ways.



Research shows play can improve children's abilities to plan, organize, get along with others and regulate emotions. In addition, play helps with language, math and social skills, and even helps children cope with stress.

Despite its many benefits, statistics show that the amount of time children get to play has been declining for decades. Tightly structured family and school schedules, fewer safe places to play and rising media use and screen time are among the reasons.

Pediatricians advise families to look for quality child care or preschool programs that include playful approaches to learning.



## Play as a toxic stress buster

In addition to boosting a child's health and development, play helps to build the safe, stable and nurturing relationships that buffer against toxic stress and build social-emotional resilience. The mutual joy and one-on-one interaction that happens during play can manage the body's stress response. In one study, 3- to 4-year-old children, anxious about entering preschool, were two times more likely to feel less stressed when allowed to play for 15 minutes, compared to classmates who listened to a story.

## Remember

Giving your child plenty of opportunities to play is one of the best ways to help them grow into curious, creative, healthy, and happy adults equipped with the skills they need today. Next time your child asks to play with you, jump at the opportunity! Share the joy of discovery as you connect with each other and the world around you.



[www.ksdetasn.org/kpirc](http://www.ksdetasn.org/kpirc)

Toll-free: 1-866-711-6711 or Local 785-783-2975

The American Academy of Pediatrics encourages parents to use play to help meet their child's health and developmental milestones, beginning from birth. Some examples of ways to do this:

## Birth to 6 months old

- Playful learning can start with a baby's first smile. Responding with a smile of your own is a form of play that also teaches a baby a critical social-emotional skill: "You can get my attention and a smile from me anytime you want—just by smiling yourself."
- Imitate your baby's coos and babbles and have back-and-forth "conversation" using your baby's sounds as a prompt. This sort of vocal turn-taking forms the basis of social language skills.
- Place your baby in different positions so they can see the world from different angles. Supervised tummy time play is great for this.

## 7 to 12 months old

- Make sure your baby has a safe environment to crawl and explore.
- Give your baby opportunities to learn that their actions have effects—for example, when they drop a toy, it falls to the ground. Put a few toys within reach of your baby so they can take toys out and play with them.
- Play peek-a-boo. This reinforces object permanence, the idea that something still exists even if you can't see it. You'll know your baby gets the idea if you hide a toy under a blanket and they go looking for it.
- Expose your baby to a variety of sensory experiences. Taking them outside to play on the grass or catch bubbles, for example, is a great way to do this.

## 1 to 3 years old

- When choosing child care and preschools, look for those that include unstructured playtime. Playful learning, where children take the lead and follow their own curiosity, should be the main focus of high-quality early childhood education.
- Let your child play with blocks, empty containers, wooden spoons, shape sorters and puzzles. Simple and inexpensive objects are some of the best ways to support a child's creativity and grasp of how the world works. Remember, it is the presence and attention of parents and caregivers that enriches children—not fancy electronic gadgets.
- Read regularly to and with your child. Encourage pretend play based on these stories. Ask your child to tell you what else might happen in the story.

## 4 to 6 years old

- Provide opportunities for your child to sing, dance and draw. Activities that involve music and art support cognitive, social-emotional and multisensory skills.
- Give your child time and space to act out imaginary scenes, roles and activities. You can provide dress-up clothes and props, but allow play to be unstructured. Remember that some boredom allows for creativity.
- Schedule time for your child to interact with friends to practice socializing and building friendships. These are great opportunities to encourage sharing and cooperative play.

Michael Yogman, M.D., FAAP, American Academy of Pediatrics (2023). The Power of Play: How Fun and Play Help Children Thrive. [Healthychildren.org](https://www.healthychildren.org)