

# ESSENTIALS OF BABY PLAY

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Play is fundamental to healthy brain development. It lays the foundation for reading, writing, mathematical reasoning and problem solving. Play provides an emotional outlet for tension and frustration and it is crucial to the socialisation process. In fact, play is so important that it has been globally recognised to be a fundamental human right.

Play can be quiet or noisy, energetic or passive, social or non-social, relaxed or serious, imaginative or purposeful. Play may or may not require toys or equipment. It does not need an end product. Play is a spontaneous, self-motivated activity that is initiated and controlled by the baby. However, play at all levels must bring pleasure and fulfilment. If it is not fun, it is not play.



## THE PROCESS OF PLAY

Most play involves use of the hands in some way, starting first with swiping and then with proper reaching. These little experiments soon lead on to grasping, which means that objects can be brought to the mouth for further exploration.

Mouthing generally decreases when babies start using their hands to explore and manipulate objects. With the development of the pincer grip, babies waste little time in working out how to pick up the smallest object. At this time, parents must be extra cautious about safety. Anything that is small enough to be swallowed should be removed and plug sockets should be covered up.

## OPPORTUNITIES FOR PLAY

The process of play is far more important than toys. However, toys are usually the main objects that babies play with because they have the advantage of being safe and specially adapted to their age and abilities.

Toys that capture attention and provide endless entertainment include rattles, plastic tea sets, books with brightly coloured pictures and a toy telephone. Toys that help develop crucial skills such as problem-solving and perseverance include large plastic bricks, balls, nesting cups and stackers. Toys that develop fine motor skills include puzzles and crayons. Toys that develop large motor skills include push-along or ride-on toys.

The best opportunities for play usually occur during routine activities such as feeding, nappy changing, dressing, bath or bedtime. The simplest form of play involves plenty of eye contact, facial expressions, vocalisations, smiles and words of encouragement.

## IDEAS FOR PLAY

Providing the best conditions for play does not mean purchasing the most expensive toys on the market. Very often, homemade or household objects offer the best value and will keep baby happy, interested and busy. Exploring everyday items can fill babies with wonder and excitement and create an extremely rich learning experience. However, if the object fits through a kitchen roll cylinder then it is not safe. Homemade or everyday objects must be carefully supervised and removed from the cot during daytime naps and at bedtime.

Here are a few ideas that will capture baby's attention and lead learning and development forwards:

- *A blanket or quilt with toys attached to short lengths of ribbon sewn along the sides can be used as a play mat (also useful on long car journeys)*
- *A cardboard box filled with different fabrics*
- *Pots and pans*
- *Books with different textures glued to each page*
- *Plastic containers made into sound shakers (the lids must be secured)*
- *Measuring cups and large plastic spoons*
- *A treasure basket filled with interesting objects such as paper cups and plates, a sock with a ball in the toe, a soft brush, reflective paper or a shiny box.*

Other types of play might include listening to stories or music, dancing, singing, rhymes and songs, bouncing games and peek-a-boo. Including babies in household chores, taking them shopping and swimming are also forms of play. In addition, going to a parent and baby group can offer scope for social play and the opportunity for fun conversations to develop. Babies also enjoy going to the park, going on a nature walk or just being outside where they can investigate the world with their senses and their whole bodies.

Play time with carers, extended family members and close friends can also be enriching. For example, they can show the baby how a new toy works or get involved in turn-taking activities such as rolling a ball back and forth. Babies also know that they are loved and that they are fun to be around.



## CREATING A BALANCE

In the midst of so many conflicting messages about what parents should do to support their baby's play, it is hardly surprising that they feel under pressure to provide the best conditions. Studies show that rich adult interaction is vital to healthy development, but that babies also need to explore the world around them on their own terms. A balance of quality adult interactions and baby-driven play is a time-tested way of producing a happy, healthy baby.

Studies show that babies learn best, retain interest longer and enjoy play more when they decide what they want to play with and at what pace. When given a choice of play materials, they are surprisingly adept at choosing the right one for their developmental stage, their temperament and their interests. Even so, they still need the support and interest of a loving adult. If they do not feel safe, secure and loved, they will not play.

The best opportunities for play often occur during routine activities such as feeding, nappy changing, dressing, having a bath or preparing for bed time. The play doesn't have to be elaborate as it is often the simplest play that is the most effective. The simplest form of play involves plenty of eye contact, facial expressions, vocalisations, smiles and words of encouragement.

## OBSERVING PLAY

If parents observe how their baby plays, they will gain a valuable insight into how they think and feel and what interests and motivates them. They will also know how much or how little stimulation babies can handle and when they are ready for play or rest.

The following observations may be helpful:

- *How does the baby decide what to play with?*
- *Which objects interest the baby the most?*
- *What strategies does the baby use to obtain a toy?*
- *How does the baby explore an object?*
- *How much enjoyment is there?*
- *How does the baby express his feelings and thoughts?*
- *How are problems solved?*
- *When does the baby need help or support?*
- *When are they most active?*
- *How long does the play last?*

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Babies have a natural play-rest-play cycle, which can vary according to their age, temperament and mood. Some babies will play with an object for as long as twenty minutes, while others lose interest after about five minutes. If the play becomes frustrating or boring or if babies become tired or hungry, they will simply stop playing. If they look away, grimace, clench their fists, wriggle, become grumpy or cry, it's time to change the activity. These observations can have an effect on what parents can do to enrich or decompress the baby's level of involvement.

## SUMMARY

All babies benefit from enriched parental involvement. However, they still need time for unstructured play. The challenge for parents is to find out what interests them and to provide materials that satisfy their emotional and psychological needs. For example, if babies want to climb, then the parent can prepare the environment so that they can explore freely. Parents should support the play, but not direct it or take over. Play at all levels must bring pleasure and fulfilment. If it is not fun, it is not play.

## A special thanks

The Neonatal Trust would like to acknowledge, and thank, Baby Sensory and Founder Dr Lin Day for their help with producing this resource.

Dr Lin Day (PhD, M.Phil, PGCE, BSc, Dip Ed), is one of the UK's leading parenting experts and a renowned author within the field of childcare and education. With over 35 years of practical experience working with parents and children and driven by the passion and commitment to offer the best possible service, Dr Lin Day developed Baby Sensory and Baby Sensory Foundations to provide the support and knowledge necessary to lead baby learning and development forwards in the most important year of life (and ran classes herself for 9 years).

**Baby Sensory™**  
Precious Early Learning for Babies

## ABOUT BABY SENSORY CLASSES

The remarkable ability of the brain to make connections and to absorb information has provided Baby Sensory with a wonderful opportunity to encourage the learning and development of babies from birth. Their classes give parents the chance to spend quality time with their babies, to interact warmly with them on a one-to-one level and to enjoy a wealth of rich sensory experiences.

All activities are accompanied by valuable developmental information. This is important because parents need to know why and how they can lead their baby's learning and development forwards in the most important year of their lives.

To learn more, head to [www.babysensory.co.nz](http://www.babysensory.co.nz)