

# The power of Play

Learning  
through play  
from birth to three



A national nonprofit promoting  
the healthy development of  
babies and toddlers

[www.zerotothree.org](http://www.zerotothree.org)

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# Play

**F**rom day one, children are eager and determined to understand how the world works. They do this through play, using all the “tools” they have at their disposal.

Watch your child at play, and you will see the kind of concentration, passion, and creative excitement that artists and scientists bring to their projects.

*An 8-week-old learns about communication and the joy of close relationships as he smiles, coos, and gurgles when his dad talks with him. A 15-month-old uses her body and mind to learn about up and down, high and low, and how strong and competent she is on a trip with grandma to the playground. A 3-year-old playing pretend develops her own ideas, uses her imagination, and builds friendships.*

Playing with your child is not only fun, it's one of the most important ways you can nurture her development. There are no rules when it comes to play. And you don't need fancy toys. In fact, you are your child's favorite toy.

Every child is unique. Your child may have special skills or special needs. Follow your child's lead. She'll let you know what interests her. When she sees the pleasure and delight you take in her discoveries, she'll want to play more and more. Play will benefit you, too. Being spontaneous and having fun can relieve stress and create positive memories for both you and your child. And when your child is engaged and having fun, she is learning. Play is truly the work of childhood.



**You are your child's favorite toy.**

## What You Can Do:

### **Safety First**

Remember, your little explorer will need you to keep his play areas safe. Make sure toys don't have parts that fit all the way in his mouth. Get down on his level to see what he can reach. This is especially important as he learns to move. It will mean far fewer "no's," which makes everyone happier.

### **Watch and Wait**

See what your child is trying to do. Provide just enough support for him to achieve his goal or take the next step towards a new goal. You might bring an object your newborn is staring at closer so he can explore it with his hands. Or, you may encourage your toddler to try a different space where the puzzle piece might fit when he is getting frustrated.

### **Follow the Leader**

Some children love lots of bells and whistles; others find a lot of noise overwhelming and prefer to explore with their eyes. Some crave lots of movement, rolling, crawling, or jumping. Others are most interested in using their hands to figure out how a toy or object works. Follow her lead, and you'll discover what kinds of activities are right for her.

# Young Explorers

## Birth to 12 months

**P**laying with your baby begins by engaging all of his senses. His eyes, ears, nose, hands, and mouth are his tools. As he grows, he learns to use his body to make discoveries. He begins to reach and grasp (watch out for long hair and dangling earrings!), which allows him to explore toys in new ways. By the time he's 9 months, he will understand cause and effect: "I push the button to make the music play." He will also understand that things he can't see still exist. This means he'll be looking for the ball that rolled behind the couch and calling for you when you leave the room. As he approaches his first birthday, he will be a great communicator, using his gestures, facial expressions, sounds, and maybe even some "words" (such as "duh" for "dog"). Before you know it, you'll have a hard time remembering when he couldn't talk.

### Close-up: **Using All My Senses**

**M**arsha's four-month-old son, Jared, loves his rattle. "Let's watch it fly," Marsha suggests. She moves the rattle through the air so Jared can see it. Jared's little arms and legs go like egg-beaters! When Marsha hands the toy to Jared, he grabs it and begins to chew. Jared then shakes the rattle and delights in the soft, tinkling noise. Soon, Jared gets tired and turns his head away. Marsha takes the rattle and continues to shake it in front of Jared's face. Jared closes his eyes and begins to wail. "Okay, I get it. Time for a break," says Marsha. She picks up Jared and cuddles him.

**During this playtime with mom, Jared learns about:**

- **sounds of words** and the **rhythm of language** as his mom talks with him.
- **communication** as he and his mom engage in a back-and-forth "conversation" and as his mom reads and responds to his cues.
- **his own self-worth** as he sees how much pleasure his mom gets from playing with him.
- **imitation** and **cause and effect** when he shakes the rattle like mom and hears the noise.
- **hand-eye coordination** as he reaches and grasps the rattle.
- **objects** when he hears the rattle's sounds, sees its colors, feels its texture, and even smells and tastes it.

# Playtime for Babies

## Back and Forth

Coo and talk to your baby. You can imitate her sounds and wait for her to respond. Encourage her to copy you, too. Show her that pushing the button makes the toy dog bark or how she can turn the pages of a book.

## Peek-a-Boo

Try hiding behind your hands, a diaper, or a onesie as you dress your baby. Early on, he may show his pleasure simply by paying close attention. Then he may smile, kick his legs, and make sounds. By 9 months, he may pull your hands away from your face to “find” you.

## Sing and Dance

Listen to different kinds of music and dance in different ways to see what your baby likes best. Sing a favorite song that has been passed down through your family. Don't worry about the sound of your voice — he loves to hear you.

## Play Ball

Offer a ball with different colors and textures. Let your baby explore it with all her senses. Encourage her to see what else she can do with it. This will eventually help her learn to roll it, drop it in a box, and take it out again.

**Q** My neighbor's baby loves his mobile. He kicks his arms and legs and squeals with delight. I got the same mobile for my baby, and he hates it. He turns his head away and cries every time I turn it on. What does this mean?

**A** Children have different levels of tolerance. While some can handle lots of sound and movement all at once, others find that overwhelming. It sounds like your baby is telling you that this mobile is more than he can handle. Try just letting him look at it without turning on the music. When he seems to be calm and enjoying that, try gently moving it so he can see it turn. If he likes it, you can try adding the music. Slowly and sensitively introducing him to more stimulation can help him build greater tolerance over time.



# Movers & Shakers

12 to 24 months

**P**ossibilities for play grow by leaps and bounds for your young toddler. She learns to communicate better with gestures, sounds, and words. She also learns to stand on two feet and walk forwards and backwards — even run, jump, and climb. And she's using her fingers and hands to play with and explore objects in more complex ways. Children also have preferences for how they like to explore. Some like lots of action. Others prefer more calm, quiet play. Watch and you will see the activities your child enjoys.

Toddlers are also entering the world of make-believe. They go from imitating what they see in “real life” to using their imagination. Whether in the sand-box, in the bath, or on the kitchen floor, children use their bodies and minds to learn how this big, exciting, complicated, and wonderful world works.

## Close-up: Figuring it Out

**K**ira, 20 months, is busy with her shape sorter. When her dad, Marcus, sees that she is starting to get frustrated, he gives a little help by putting his hand on hers. “Let’s turn the yellow square this way.” In it goes. “Yea!” says Kira as she claps her hands, clearly pleased with her accomplishment. Marcus encourages her to try some more, “One blue circle and one green triangle to go.” Kira picks up a square, shows it to her dad, and says “boo.” Marcus agrees, “Yes, that’s the *blue* circle.” Kira successfully drops it in. “Good job,” says Marcus, “how about a triangle?” But, Kira is ready for something new. She leaves the shape sorter and gets a book. “Are we done playing with shapes?” asks Marcus. “Okay, let’s read about animals.” Kira cuddles up with her dad and opens the book.

● **As Kira and her dad play, she is learning about:**

- **■ colors, numbers, and shapes** as dad names them.
- **■ communication and new words** as she and dad talk together while playing.
- **■ imitation** as she copies what dad says and does.
- **■ hand-eye coordination and problem solving** as she learns how to make the shapes fit into their spaces.
- **■ self-confidence** as she masters a new skill.
- **■ the joy of reading** as she and dad explore books together.
- **■ building close relationships** as she experiences the pleasure of sharing her discoveries with dad.

# Playtime for Young Toddlers

## Running, Climbing, and Action Games

Oldies but goodies like “Ring Around the Rosie” and “London Bridge” encourage children to move, sing, listen, take turns, and cooperate. The park, playground, and backyard offer chances to run, climb, and play with other children. On a rainy day, try creating an obstacle course indoors.

## Let's Do It Again ... and Again ... and Again ...

Through repetition, toddlers figure out how things fit together and work. They might fill and dump a pail over and over to learn about full and empty and in and out. They may want you to read the same book, and sing the same song, night after night. This kind of repetition helps children know what to expect. This gives them a sense of security and control over their world. It also helps them master new skills, which boosts their self-confidence.

## Name That Tune

Now that your child can imitate words and melodies, he'll love to sing songs and have you read books with rhyming words. Words are easier to learn when they rhyme or are put to music. See if your toddler knows the next word in the song by pausing before you sing it. Dance to the music. This is a wonderful way to exercise those arms and legs and to experience the joy of movement. Offer musical instruments so he can make his own music, too.

## Busy Hands

Young toddlers love to make things work. They use their hands and fingers for pushing buttons, opening boxes, and turning pages. This allows them to do everything from getting the music box to play their favorite song to exploring a treasured book. Many children also like to finger paint, color, play with play dough, or squeeze water out of a sponge.



**Q** I love that my 18-month-old wants to play with other toddlers, but there always seems to be a battle over a toy. How can I help her share?

**A** Sharing is a skill that takes a lot of time and practice to develop. Most young toddlers do not know how to share. It may seem like your daughter should share because she can do other things, like understand “no” and follow some directions. However, young toddlers do not yet have self-control. And, they are still learning about the feelings of others. You can help her learn to share over time by playing turn-taking games and also by modeling how you share things with her.

# Social Butterflies

24 to 36 months



Older toddlers, with their physical abilities, problem-solving skills, and love of language, are eager for playmates. Months earlier, they may have watched others playing, or even played side-by-side with another child. Now, they are beginning to play together... sometimes even without fighting! Children with older siblings may have had a chance to practice turn-taking and other social skills. For a first or only child, however, this can be a challenge. Your toddler will develop social skills with time, practice, and your guidance.

During this third year, there is also a big leap in toddlers' ability to use their imaginations. They no longer just use their toy broom to sweep. It becomes a dance partner or a cowboy's horse. Two-year-olds often spend a lot of time in pretend play with friends. As they approach three, they begin to make up stories and "rules" for their games. Pretend play also helps children work through difficult experiences, like saying good-bye to a parent at child care.

## Close-up: Pretend With Me

**T**anya is watching her almost-three-year-old daughter, Maria, play with her friend Ben. They are pretending to be kittens.

Mom helped them draw whiskers using her makeup. Their tails were once stockings. Maria and Ben crawl around on all fours and "meow." Tanya sets a shoebox "bowl" of imaginary milk on the floor. "You'll have to take turns like nice kitties do." Maria and Ben giggle in between slurps. Maria then notices that Ben's tail is longer. "I want the big tail!" she shouts as she grabs it. Tanya steps in, "Stop, Maria. You cannot take Ben's tail!" Tanya decides to redirect them by suggesting they make new tails out of paper that they can decorate. Maria and Ben happily get to work.

- **When Tanya joins Maria and Ben in play, she helps them develop:**
- **creativity** as they make their kitty costumes.
- **language skills** as they talk together while they play.
- **sharing** as they take turns "drinking" their milk.
- **self-control** as Tanya helps Maria understand limits.
- **problem-solving skills** as Tanya helps them work through the tail crisis.
- **understanding of symbols** as they use the shoebox in place of a bowl. This will help them get ready to learn skills that require symbolic thinking like reading and math.



# Playtime for Older Toddlers

## Family and Friends

Invite a friend over to play. Visit the neighborhood park or a cousin's home. This gives your child a chance to play in ways that expose her to many cultures. These are also great opportunities to act as your child's coach in helping her learn to share and resolve conflicts. She can learn new skills by watching other children, too.

## Say It With Music

"Statue," "Freeze," and "Hokey-Pokey" are fun musical games. They offer opportunities to listen and follow directions. They also teach about words and sounds and allow children to move and exercise their bodies. Toy drums, tambourines, and other instruments add to the fun.

## Quiet Play

A child's play doesn't always have to be full of action. Looking at books, listening to stories, and drawing pictures all build your child's imagination and language skills. Many children enjoy playing with sand, mud, or dough. These activities can be soothing and relaxing. Providing art supplies like paper, crayons, and paints will let them create with their hands.

## Act It Out

Encourage fantasy play by providing dress-up clothes and other props. Use items like hats, scarves, backpacks, bowls and containers, music makers, and whatever else you and your child can find. Join the fun. When you get involved, you can help her expand on her ideas and also learn about her thoughts and feelings as she acts them out through play.



**Q** My 2-year-old is so shy. He won't leave my side, talk to anyone, or try anything at our new playgroup. How can I help him open up?

**A** Children are born with their individual way of experiencing the world, known as their temperament. It sounds as if your son, like many kids, needs time and support to feel safe in new situations. Try talking in advance about what the new experience might be like and inviting one of the children over to play. Once you are there, explore together, talk about what the other kids are doing, and join another parent and child in an activity. Taking a slow and sensitive approach should help your son feel more comfortable in new situations.

# Choosing a Good Toy

**Q** When I walk into the store, I am overwhelmed by the videos, computer games, and other electronic toys that claim to make babies smarter. How do I know what to buy?

**A** Don't be fooled by the "make your baby smarter" claims. There is no research that shows that these products boost a child's brain power. In fact, safe household items — such as plastic bowls for filling and dumping, pillows for climbing or making a cave, and old clothing for dress up — are great learning tools. Classics like blocks, dump trucks, stuffed animals, and objects that imitate "real life" such as toy hammers and play kitchens are great for developing the imagination. And don't forget about books! The more a child has to use his mind and body to problem solve and develop his own ideas, the more he learns.



**Here are other types of toys that can be helpful for learning. While they are categorized by age range, you will find that many will be useful at various stages.**

**Birth to 9 months:** Toys that engage your baby's senses, such as mobiles, rattles, chew toys, and chunky board and cloth books. Toys that help him learn cause and effect, such as pop-up toys and busy boxes.

**9 to 18 months:** Toys that imitate real life, such as plastic tools, play food, and animal farms. Problem-solving toys that help children learn how things fit together, such as shape sorters and nesting cups. Push and pull toys and balls also let toddlers move their active bodies.

**18 to 36 months:** Materials that help them use their hands to create, such as play dough, crayons, and finger paints. Objects that help children use their imaginations, such as dress-up clothes, action and animal figures, dolls, and stuffed animals.

## Remember...

You make a difference in how much your child learns through play.



■ **Join in her play.** Delight in her discoveries. When learning takes place in the context of loving relationships, children become eager, lifelong learners.

■ **See what your child is trying to do or figure out.** Think about all he may be learning, such as sinking and floating when he drops different objects into the bathtub.

■ **Provide the support she needs to accomplish her goal.** Does she need you to lift her up to touch an interesting object; stand behind her to help her make it up the stairs of the slide; provide more blocks to make a taller tower?

■ **Present new challenges when you see he is ready.** When he's learning to crawl, move a desired object a little farther away so he can experience the power and joy of movement. When he's entering the world of pretend, suggest that his stack of blocks might also become a barn for his play animals.

■ **Be spontaneous and have fun.** Playing should not feel like work. It should be a joyful, exciting time that you and your child share. So relax and enjoy yourself. Play is good for you, too.

For more information on how your child learns through play and what you can do, go to:

**[www.zerotothree.org/play](http://www.zerotothree.org/play)**



Dear Parents:

Play is fun and important to young children's intellectual, social, emotional, and physical development. Through play, children learn problem-solving, interpersonal skills, communication, and other skills integral to success in school and life.

Play is also important because it involves you. Perhaps nothing is more essential and rewarding than the enjoyment your child experiences from time spent playing with you.

This brochure discusses how children learn through play, how different types of play support development, what toys are most useful, and your role in supporting your children through their daily play.

MetLife Foundation is pleased to partner with ZERO TO THREE to bring this brochure to you and to support you and your child as you have fun and learn in the months and years ahead.

Sincerely,



Sibyl Jacobson  
President  
MetLife Foundation

## MetLife Foundation

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