

THE IMPORTANCE OF
**CHILD LEARNING
THROUGH PLAY**

AGES 0-2



The best early childhood teaching aid? You.

Of course you want to give your baby every advantage. You download the Baby Einstein app. You google holographic mobiles. You look into the black-and-white-patterned play mats.

Well, good news. You don't need any of that stuff. Not the latest or the greatest or four-star rated. Nothing simulated, virtual or sensor-controlled. All your baby needs to learn and thrive is one simple tool. You.

So look at them, talk with them, sing and read to them. It's that simple. Research shows that children 0 to 3 learn best from human interaction, not screens. Or anything else you can buy. And that first year, especially, is absolutely critical to their future brain development.

Learn even more from Children's Minnesota at amazingis.org.

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LEARNING, PLAY, AND YOUR NEWBORN

What is my newborn learning?

Play is the chief way that infants learn how to move, communicate, socialize, and understand their surroundings. And during the first month of life, your baby will learn by interacting with you.



Your touch, voice, face

The first thing your baby will learn is to associate the feel of your touch, the sound of your voice, and the sight of your face with getting his or her needs for comfort and food met. You can encourage your newborn to learn by stimulating your newborn's senses in positive ways — with smiles, soothing sounds, and gentle caresses.

Even at this young age, newborns are ready to learn about the world around them. A newborn loves to look at faces. Likewise, in the first days and weeks of life, newborns can recognize their parent's voice. Your infant will respond to your voice (or other interesting sounds) by looking alert and becoming less active. The baby may try to find out where the sound is coming from by looking around and turning his or her head.

When you smile and talk to your infant, your face and the sound of your voice will become a familiar source of calm and comfort, and your little one will learn to associate you with getting nourishment, warmth, and soothing touch.

THE “ROOTING REFLEX”

Babies are born with reflexes or programmed responses to certain stimuli, such as touch. These reflexes help ensure survival. But they also provide an opportunity for a baby to interact with the world. For example, the rooting reflex is elicited by gently stroking a newborn's cheek. The infant's response is to turn head and mouth to that side, ready to eat.

By the time they're 3 weeks old, babies will turn toward the breast or bottle not just out of a reflex, but because they've learned that it's a source of food.

Asleep, Active, or Alert?

During the first month of life, your newborn will spend much of the day sleeping or seeming drowsy. Over the next several weeks to months, your baby will mature and be awake or alert for longer periods of time.

It's important to recognize when your baby is alert and ready to learn and play and when your little one would rather be left alone:

- A baby who is quiet and alert will be attentive and responsive and interested in surroundings.
- A baby who is awake but active (squirming, flapping arms, or kicking legs) or fussing will be less able to focus on you. The baby may seem agitated or start to cry when you try to get his or her attention. These are signs that your baby may be getting overstimulated.

Over the coming weeks and months, you'll learn to recognize when your infant is ready to learn or overstimulated.

Encouraging your newborn to learn

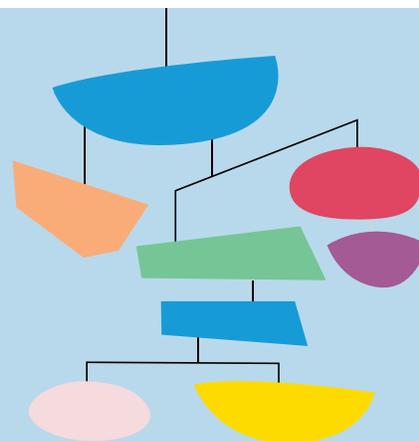
As you care for your newborn, he or she is learning to recognize your touch, the sound of your voice, and the sight of your face.

In the first few weeks you may want to introduce some simple, age-appropriate toys that appeal to the senses of sight, hearing, and touch, such as:

- rattles
- textured toys
- musical toys
- unbreakable crib mirrors

TRY THIS

Try toys and mobiles with contrasting colors and patterns. Strong contrasts (such as red, white, and black), curves, and symmetry stimulate an infant's developing vision. As vision improves and babies gain more control over their movements, they'll interact more and more with their environment.



Some other ideas

Here are some other ideas for encouraging your newborn to learn and play:

- Put on soothing music and hold your baby, gently swaying to the tune.
- Pick a soothing song or lullaby and softly sing it often to your baby. The familiarity of the sound and words will have a soothing effect, particularly during fussy times.
- Smile, stick out your tongue, and make other expressions for your infant to study, learn, and imitate.
- Use a favorite toy for your newborn to focus on and follow, or shake a rattle for your infant to find.
- Let your baby spend some awake time on his or her tummy to help strengthen the neck and shoulders. Always supervise your infant during “tummy time” and be ready to help if he or she gets tired or frustrated in this position. Never put an infant to sleep on his or her stomach — babies should sleep on their backs to reduce the risk of SIDS (sudden infant death syndrome).
- Talk to your baby.

KEEP IN MIND that babies develop at different rates, and there is a wide range of normal development. If you have any concerns about your newborn’s ability to see or hear, or your baby doesn’t seem to be developing well in other ways, talk with your pediatrician.

LEARNING, PLAY, AND YOUR 1 TO 3 MONTH OLD

What your baby is learning

After learning to recognize your voice, your face, and your touch, and to associate them with comfort, your baby will start responding even more to you during these months — and will even give you a smile!



Babies this age spend more time awake and alert and become more curious about their parents and about objects that they see. They also start getting physically stronger and better able to coordinate movements. Encourage the learning process by talking to your little one, responding to his or her vocal expressions, and providing colorful age-appropriate toys.

You'll now see your baby's personality emerge. In the first month or two of life, newborns depend on others to initiate interaction. But by the end of the third month your baby will engage you with facial expressions, vocalizations, and gestures.

As their eyesight improves, babies become better able to distinguish between different sights and sounds. Your baby will be carefully watching your facial expressions and listening to your voice, responding to you with coos and gurgles, and around 2 months, respond to your smile with a smile. Between 3 and 4 months, most infants can squeal with delight and laugh out loud.

Babies will learn to open and shut their fists and can hold a rattle placed in their hands. They'll soon discover that they're the one that caused the rattle to make noise.



Babies also start to explore their surroundings with their hands, reaching out, swatting at, and grasping for a favorite toy. They'll also begin to notice their hands and feet, and they'll become a source of amusement. They enjoy staring at their hands, playing with their fingers, and bringing their hands or a toy to their mouth.

Encouraging your baby to learn

Respond to your baby's coos and gurgling with sounds of your own so that your baby will be encouraged to keep using his or her voice for expression. In this way, your infant hears the sounds of language and learns about conversation.

Your baby's sense of touch is also getting better. Provide colorful objects of different textures, shapes, and sizes for your infant to hold and explore. This is a good age to introduce an infant gym with interesting objects that dangle for your baby to swat at. Or hold a toy just out of reach for your baby to reach for, swat,

and grab hold of. But don't string up toys on cribs or other baby equipment — your baby could get tangled in them.

At times your baby will have had enough stimulation. Watch for signs that your little one might be overstimulated and ready for a break.

Other ideas for encouraging your 1 to 3 month old baby to learn and play:

- Gently clap your baby's hands together or stretch arms (crossed, out wide, or overhead).
- Gently move your baby's legs as if pedaling a bicycle.
- Use a favorite toy for your baby to focus on and follow, or shake a rattle for your infant to find.
- While awake, let your baby spend some time on his or her tummy to help strengthen the neck and shoulders. Always supervise your infant during "tummy time" and be ready to help if he or she gets tired or frustrated in this position. Never put a baby to sleep on his or her stomach. Infants should sleep on their backs to reduce the risk of sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS).
- Make different facial expressions for your baby to imitate.
- Talk to your baby and let your baby respond.

There's a wide range of normal among babies. If you're concerned about your little one's vision or hearing, or your baby doesn't seem to be developing well in other ways, talk with your pediatrician.



LEARNING, PLAY, AND YOUR 4 TO 7 MONTH OLD

What your baby is learning

By 4 months old, your baby has learned to recognize you and familiar caregivers, focus and pay attention to things, and actively engage your attention.

Your infant will learn to sit during this time, and in the next few months will begin exploring by reaching out for objects, grasping and inspecting them.

Continue to foster the learning process by engaging, responding, and encouraging as your child develops a stronger body, a curious mind, and a feel for language. Provide chances for practicing and building on what your little one learns with age-appropriate toys and a safe environment to explore.

Exploring will be a big part of this stage. Your child will be drawn to colors, patterns, and shapes of different objects and toys. By reaching out for things, babies learn about touch, shape, and texture.

Your baby's ability to reach and hold an object will mature now, and after successfully grasping an object, your tot is likely to put it into his or her mouth for further exploration. It's important to make sure that any objects that could be [choking hazards](#) — or dangerous to your baby in other ways — are out of reach, or even better, out of sight!

Although those first words are still a couple of months away, your infant is learning a lot about language and will begin to distinguish between different sounds, even though he or she doesn't understand what the words mean. By the end of this period, babies recognize and respond to their own name.

Your baby also will learn how to use his or her voice, and cooing sounds may be mixed with other consonants (such as “ba” and “da”) and evolve into babbling like “bababababa,” “dadadadada,” or “mamamama.” Talk to your infant and respond to the sounds he or she is making — this helps teach the social aspects of language and conversation.

BABABABABABABABABA

**DA
DA
DA**

**MAMA
MAMA**

Learning object permanence

Your baby also will begin to get a sense of object permanence (knowing that something can exist, even when it's out of sight). This knowledge will prompt your baby to search for an object that you have partially hidden and to drop toys and other objects over the side of a crib or high chair to watch you retrieve them.

By doing this, babies learn that an object exists even after it's dropped out of sight and start understanding cause and effect (that an action causes a reaction).

As your baby masters this concept, expect your little one to find more ways to make things happen!

Encouraging learning

Create a safe place for exploration (with supervision), because by the end of month 7, your baby will be rolling over, sitting, and reaching for everything. It's never too soon to childproof the play space, even if your baby isn't mobile yet — it will happen before you know it.

Make the space inviting and fun with age-appropriate toys in a variety of shapes, sizes, colors, and textures. Everyday objects, like wooden spoons, plastic containers, and cups also stimulate creativity and curiosity. It's not so much the toy that's important, but the way it can help your baby learn.

As your baby babbles and explores how to use his or her voice, keep responding. Reinforce the sounds by repeating them and introduce new sounds and simple words, then watch as your baby tries to imitate you.

Introducing books

If you haven't already, [introduce books](#) now. When you read to your infant, say the names of the objects, people, and animals as you point to them, and make the sounds of the animals and the objects in the book.

Choose baby books with simple pictures and faces and those with lots of textures to feel, like Pat the Bunny. Also look for cloth, vinyl, and sturdy board books that won't rip and can withstand a little drooling and chewing.



Other ideas for encouraging learning

- During tummy time, place a favorite toy or soft ball in front of the baby to reach for.
- Hide a toy — but don't hide it very well — and encourage your baby to find it.
- Play “Peekaboo.”
- Let your baby discover that actions can make things happen. Provide toys that move or make sounds when your baby plays with them, such as baby musical instruments, busy boxes, or see-through toys that show motion.
- Sing nursery rhymes like “Baa, Baa Black Sheep” and “Hey Diddle Diddle.”

REMEMBER that there's a wide range of what's normal for babies. If you're concerned about the way your baby is developing, speak with your pediatrician.

LEARNING, PLAY, AND YOUR 8 TO 12 MONTH OLD

Your child has gone from tiny newborn to curious infant, reaching out and exploring his or her surroundings. That curiosity and readiness to learn will continue as your baby becomes more mobile during these next few months.

What is my child learning?

Your little one will make great strides in learning. Play will take on a new dimension as language emerges. During these next few months, your baby's babbling will start to morph into words like “mama,” “dada,” and “baba.” These will emerge randomly at first, but your baby will soon learn to associate them with mom, dad, and bottle.

Your baby will begin to use gestures like pointing and waving for expression. This is also the stage where your infant will understand more of what you are saying, including the word “no!”

As your child gets more mobile and interested in exploring, it's important to provide supervision and to make sure to [childproof the house](#) to prevent accidents.

Babies this age are very busy learning how to move around. They learn to crawl during this stage, though some will develop more novel ways of getting around, such as creeping on their bellies, scooting on their bottoms, or rolling to where they want to go. It doesn't matter so much how babies get around as long they're able to move their arms and legs equally and coordinate both sides of the body.

Babies also become better at changing positions, moving readily from lying to sitting, then pulling themselves to stand. Holding on to furniture and other large objects nearby, your infant will take tentative first steps and start cruising along the furniture. Some babies may even learn to walk independently during this stage.

As hand-eye coordination improves, your baby will explore objects in greater detail, also learning their functions: you use a brush on your hair, you talk on the telephone.

Stranger anxiety and [separation anxiety](#) also can start now. Your baby may get upset when a stranger approaches or you try to leave, whether you're going into the next room for a few seconds or leaving your child with a sitter for the evening. Your baby may cry, cling to you, and resist attention from others. This is normal and appropriate for this stage of development, and might intensify in the next few months, then slowly improve as your child develops the language and social skills to cope with a strange situation and feels secure that the separation isn't permanent.

If your baby has separation anxiety, keep goodbyes short and tell your baby you'll be back.
Most babies calm down quickly after a parent leaves.

Encouraging learning

Your baby's ability to get around and never-ending curiosity boost learning now, so it's important to provide chances — and a safe place — for exploration. Your baby may enjoy playing with egg cartons, blocks, balls, stacking toys, and push-pull toys. When your baby is in the bath, provide squeeze toys and cups and containers to splash around with.

Infants are learning to understand language so continue to talk to your baby. Introduce simple words by naming familiar objects and let your baby try to imitate you. Reinforce the words by repeating them. Encourage your infant's expressions by waiting for a response when you are having a "conversation."

Continue reading from books with large, colorful illustrations. Point to the pictures and say what's in them to create associations between the things your child sees and the words that describe them.

Other ideas for encouraging your 8 to 12 month old to learn and play:

- Encourage crawling during tummy time by helping your baby get into the crawling position on hands and knees. Place a favorite toy out of reach and encourage your baby to move toward it.
- Continue to play games like peekaboo, but vary it a bit by hiding your face with a blanket and letting the baby pull it off, hiding around the corner, and showing your baby how to cover his or her own face with the hands.
- Continue to play hide and seek and test your child's understanding of object permanence. Let your baby watch you hide a toy — first partially hidden, then covered completely — and let him or her find it.
- Teach your baby action songs, like "Pat-A-Cake," "This Little Piggy," "The Itsy Bitsy Spider," and "Pop Goes the Weasel." Babies love to hear and learn these songs and anticipate the accompanying movements.

There is a wide range of what is normal for babies, and some babies develop slower and faster than others. Talk with your child's pediatrician if you have any concerns.



LEARNING, PLAY, AND YOUR 1 TO 2 YEAR OLD

What your toddler is learning

Kids transition from babies to toddlers during the second year of life, as tentative first steps give way to confident walking. As your toddler starts exploring, be sure to [childproof your home](#) to prevent household accidents.

Language

Kids this age also make major strides in understanding language and figuring out [how to communicate](#). At 12 months, most say their first word and start to use hand gestures and point to things. Gradually, their vocabulary will grow from one or two words to 50 words or more.

Your child will learn about language through interaction with you and other caregivers. During year two, a toddler's vocabulary increases slowly over the first 6 months and then expands quickly during the second 6 months, when many start to use simple two-word sentences. By the second birthday, you'll probably lose count of the number of words your toddler can say!



Understanding of language also improves —
most toddlers understand much more than they can express.

Playing

Hand-eye coordination and manual dexterity will also improve. Toddlers gain better control over fingers and hands and can explore toys and surroundings more than before. Look for toys that encourage this, as mastering age-appropriate toys and games gives toddlers a sense of satisfaction and encourages them to move on to more challenging tasks.

How kids play also changes. As an infant, your child may have “played” with toys by shaking, banging, or throwing them. Your toddler now is aware of the function of objects, so is more likely to stack blocks, listen or talk into a toy phone, or push a toy car. In addition, the concept of pretend play starts. Your little one may pretend to drink from an empty cup, use a banana as a phone, or imagine a block is a car.

Emotions at play

Play dates

Many parents introduce play dates now. Toddlers enjoy having other kids around, but don't expect them to "play" cooperatively with each other or to be thrilled about sharing toys. Have plenty of toys for everyone and be prepared to step in when they don't want to share. Older siblings can be role models when it comes to teaching, sharing, and taking turns.

Emotions

Tantrums are more common during the toddler years, so expect your child to get frustrated from time to time. If you see a tantrum coming on, try to create a distraction with a book or interesting toy. Avoid letting your child get too tired or hungry, particularly while trying to master new tasks, as this can set the stage for tantrums.



While learning to walk during the second year of life, kids start becoming increasingly independent. But expect your toddler to go from wanting freedom to clinging to you for comfort and reassurance, and back again. Allow the freedom to explore but be there when you're needed.

If it hasn't come up yet, your child may develop [separation anxiety](#), crying and clinging to you when you try to leave and resisting attention from others.

The start of separation anxiety — and how long it lasts — varies from child to child. It often starts around 9 months of age, but can be later. It improves as kids master the language and social skills to cope with strange situations and start to learn that the separation is not permanent.

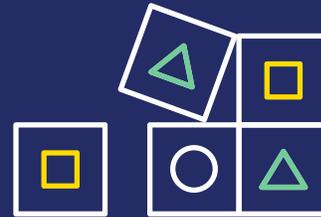
Encouraging your toddler to learn

Once toddlers learn to walk, there's no turning back. Yours will want to keep moving to build on this newfound skill. Provide lots of chances to be active and to learn and explore in safe surroundings.

Games that your child might enjoy include peekaboo, pat-a-cake, and chasing games. Toddlers love to imitate adults and are fascinated with housework. Provide age-appropriate toys that will encourage this, such as a toy vacuum to use while you're cleaning or pots, pans, and spoons to play with while you're cooking.

Other toys that toddlers enjoy include:

- brightly colored balls
- blocks, stacking and nesting toys
- fat crayons or markers
- age-appropriate animal or people figures and dolls
- toy cars and trains
- shape sorters, peg boards
- simple puzzles
- push, pull, and riding toys



Reading continues to be important. Your toddler can follow along with a story and point to objects in the pictures as you name them. Encourage your little one to name things he or she recognizes.

Chat about the books you read together and the things you did that day. Ask questions and encourage your toddler to reply by waiting for a response, then expand on those replies.

Remember that some toddlers develop slower or faster than others, and this variation is normal. Talk with your pediatrician if you have any concerns.



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