

Play is the way to learn

- Your time and attention will help your child to play and learn
- Play helps children to understand their world
- Play helps to develop their imagination
- Play helps children make friends and develop social skills
- Play does not need expensive toys but it does need you
- Play helps children understand rules and boundaries
- Children practise new skills when they play
- Children learn through play.

Children, if they're happy, will spend most of their time playing. It is their 'work'. Any situation can lead to play, so long as it's fun. Don't worry if your child likes to repeat the same games and activities a number of times; they know practice makes perfect!

Baby's play doesn't need many toys; they will find people the most interesting playmate and will love to have your time and attention. They learn most when you are talking with them, telling them what you are doing or what is going to happen. They love simple games such as 'peepo' or tickling.

Older babies still like you to play with them, but they also like to hold safe objects that they can examine and move. When your child is able to sit on their own you may like to consider making them a 'treasure basket'. This is simply a basket or box of unusual objects that are safe for your baby to explore. They could include fir cones, wooden nail brush, big feathers, large corks, large painting brush, wooden pegs, metal spoons, small cardboard boxes, greaseproof paper, tennis ball, new rubber dog chew, and so on.

Older toddlers will love to 'help' you with your household chores. These may take longer when done together but there are lots of things to talk about while you do them.

Here are some things they can help you with: collecting dirty washing; loading/unloading the washing machine; pegging out washing; dusting; putting away toys; helping get food out of the fridge; choosing food in the supermarket (cut the labels off old packs and give them to your child so they can find the same thing on the shelf); washing up (they can have a bowl of water and some plastic plates); helping to wash the car; sweeping up leaves outside; painting the fence or wall (using a paint brush and water) and so on.

When your child is able to play by themselves, you can still help them to learn.

Get down to their level and talk about what they are doing. Don't tell them what to do, but give a 'running commentary' like a sports commentator! By describing their play you can add words. This will help their vocabulary grow.

When trying to decide what toys to get your child it may be useful to think about what skills they will help your child develop. Certain toys will help develop certain skills. For example, a bike will help develop co-ordination and balance and a jigsaw puzzle will help develop motor control, thinking/observation and concentration. A tea-set will help develop social skills as you enjoy a tea party together. Whatever toys you choose, your child will learn more if you share them together!

