

LEARNING AND PLAYING



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We all know playing is fun, but did you know it's also the most effective way for children to learn? Through play, children can practise all the skills they will need as they grow up. This chapter explains how you can help your child learn through play. It also provides information about Early Years education and childcare options.

Play is important to children as it is spontaneous, and in their play children use the experiences they have and extend them to build up ideas, concepts and life long skills that they can carry with them in later life. While playing, babies and children can try things out, solve problems, take risks and use trial and error to find things out and be creative.

Babies and children have to experience play physically and emotionally. In other words, it is not enough to provide stuff to play with. The most important element for young babies is the parent or primary caregiver. It is that person who forms a close emotional bond with the baby. A child with this secure attachment feels able to rely on their parents or caregivers for safety and comfort, develops

knowledge about communication and language, and uses these important attachment relationships as bases from which to explore and learn about the world.

- Get together lots of different things for your child to look at, think about and do.
- By making what you are doing fun and interesting for your child, you can get your chores done while they are learning.
- Make sure there are times when you focus completely on your child.

- Talk about anything and everything, even the washing-up or what to put on the shopping list, so you are sharing as much as possible and your child will pick up lots of new words.
- Make sure your child gets plenty of opportunities to use their body by running, jumping and climbing, especially if you don't have much room at home.
- Find other people who can spend time with your child at those times when you really do need to focus on something else.

let's
play





PLAYING WITH YOUR CHILD

To grow and develop, children need time and attention from someone who is happy to play with them. Gradually they will learn to entertain themselves for some of the time, but first they need to learn how to do that.

It can be hard to find the time to play with your child, especially when you have plenty of other things you need to do. The answer to this can be finding ways of involving your child in what you are doing, even the chores! Children learn from everything they do and everything that is going on around them.

When you are washing up, you can let your child join in, for example by washing the saucepan lids; when you cook, you can show them what you are doing and talk to them as you are working. Getting them involved in the things you do will teach them about taking turns and being independent, and they will also learn by copying what you do.

Sometimes, things need to happen at certain times, and it's important that your child learns this. But when you are together, try not to work to a strict timetable. Your child is unlikely to fit in with it and then you will both get frustrated. There is no rule that says the washing-up has to be done before you go to the playground, especially if the sun is shining and your child is bursting with energy. As far as you can, move things around to suit you and your child's mood.

KEEPING ACTIVE

Children love using their bodies to crawl, walk, run, jump and climb. The more opportunities you give them to burn off some energy, the happier they will be. You will probably find they sleep better and are more easy-going, too. By giving them the chance to exercise, you will be helping their muscle development and general fitness, and laying down habits that will help them grow into fit, healthy adults. Visit www.bhf.org.uk/publications/children-and-young-people/early-moves or www.bit.ly/startactive for practical ideas for physically active play.

Here are some ways to keep your child active:

- Let your baby lie down and kick their legs.
- Babies should be encouraged to be physically active through floor play and water play in a safe environment.



- Once your baby has started crawling, let them crawl around the floor. You will need to make sure it's safe first.
- Children of preschool age who are capable of walking unaided should be physically active for at least 180 minutes (three hours) spread throughout the day.
- Let your toddler walk with you, rather than always using the buggy.
- Toddlers and young children love going to the park where they can climb and swing, or just run around.
- Toys that your child can pick up and move around will help improve their co-ordination and develop the muscles in their arms and hands.
- There may be activities for parents and children at your local leisure centre.
- You can take your baby swimming from a very young age. There is no need to wait until they have been immunised.

Introducing your child to books

Books can be exciting or calming. They spark the imagination. And, most importantly, they are lots of fun. Even before your baby learns to speak, they will enjoy hearing you read to them, and listening to you will give them a feel for the sounds, rhythms and rhymes of language. Introducing your child to books early on will also help with future learning.

The Libraries NI website (www.librariesni.org.uk) is a valuable source of information for all parents and carers. The website has the following information:

- Details about lots of free activities and events for young children and families

- Rub-a-Dub Hub - a free online resource with tools, tips and fun activities to help parents and carers develop their child's communication and language skills
- Recommended books for toddlers and young children to help with real life situations e.g. visiting the doctor
- Information about where to borrow or buy a copy of *Monkey See Monkey Do* – a Libraries NI book of rhymes with accompanying CD
- eBooks and eMagazines are available for members to access through the website. Be a good role model and show your children how much you enjoy reading – it's infectious!



GET CREATIVE: IDEAS TO HELP YOUR CHILD PLAY AND LEARN

Toys for children with special needs

Toys for children with special needs should match their developmental age and ability. Ideally, they should be brightly coloured, make a noise and have some moving parts. If your child is using a toy intended for a younger age group, make sure it's strong enough and will not get broken.

Children with a visual impairment will need toys with different textures to explore with their hands and mouth. Children with impaired hearing will need toys to stimulate language; for example, puzzles that involve matching 'finger-spelled' letters to appropriate pictures. The Council for Disabled Children can provide information about suitable toys. Go to www.ncb.org.uk/cdc. See pages 72–73 for more information about help and support for children with special needs.

Toy safety

When you are buying toys, look for the British Standard kitemark, Lion mark or CE mark, which show that the toy meets safety standards. Take care when buying toys from market stalls or second-hand; they may not meet safety standards and could be dangerous. Toys usually have warnings about age. So if a toy is marked 'Not suitable for children under 36 months', you should not give it to a baby or toddler aged under three. Check all toys for any sharp edges or small parts that your child could try to swallow.

Giving your child lots of different opportunities to play doesn't need to be difficult or expensive. Sharing books, songs and nursery rhymes with your child is fun, and will help them develop language and communication skills. You can also use lots of things you have already got around the house. Try some of the ideas listed here. Remember to get involved yourself – your child will learn more from you than they will from any toy.

1 Rattles

(from four months).

Wash out a plastic screw-top bottle and put lentils or dried beans inside. Shake it around in front of your child and they will learn how to make a noise with it. As some dried beans are poisonous and small objects can be dangerous for young children, it's best to glue the top securely so it will not come off.



2 Play dough

(from about 18 months). You can make your own play dough.

Put one cup of water, one cup of plain flour, two tablespoons of cream of tartar, half a cup of salt, one tablespoon of cooking oil and some food colouring or powder paint in a pan. Stir over a medium heat until it forms a dough.

Once the dough has cooled down, you can show your child how to make different shapes.

If you keep it in a plastic box in the fridge, you can use it again.



3 Pretend cooking

(from 18 months).

Use a bowl and spoons to measure out small quantities of 'real' ingredients (flour, lentils, rice, sugar, custard powder). You and your child can mix them up with water in bowls or egg cups.





- 4 Playing with water** (any age). Babies, toddlers and young children love playing with water, in the bath or paddling pool or just using the sink or a plastic bowl. Use plastic bottles for pouring and squirting at each other, plastic tubing, a sponge, colander, straws, a funnel, spoons – anything unbreakable. You will probably both get a bit wet so you might want to cover your clothes. Remember, never leave a young child alone with water. **A toddler can drown in less than 5cm (2 inches) of water.**

- 5 Dressing up** (from 18 months). Collect old hats, bags, gloves, scarves, nighties, lengths of material, tea towels and old curtains. Ask friends and relatives, or try jumble sales. Make sure there are no loose cords, strings or ribbons that could wrap around your child's neck or trip them (or you!) up. Paper plates or cut-up cereal packets make good masks – cut slits for the eyes and tie them on with string.



- 6 Reading.** You can start looking at books with your baby from an early age. You don't have to read the words, just talk about what you can see. Even quite small babies like looking at picture books. Local libraries usually have a good range of children's books and some run story sessions for young children. Looking at books with your child, even if it's just for 10 minutes a day, will help them build important skills and encourage their interest in reading. To find out more, see 'Introducing your child to books' on page 75.

GET CREATIVE: FURTHER IDEAS TO HELP YOUR CHILD PLAY AND LEARN

7 Drawing and painting

(from 18 months). Use crayons, felt tips or powder paint. You can make powder paint thicker by adding washing-up liquid as well as water. At first, your child will need you to show them how to hold the crayon or paint brush. You can use old envelopes slit open and the inside of cereal packets for paper.



8 Paper bag or envelope puppets.

Use old paper bags and envelopes to make into hand puppets. Draw faces on them or stick things on to make your own characters. Try getting the puppets to 'talk' to each other, or to you and your child.

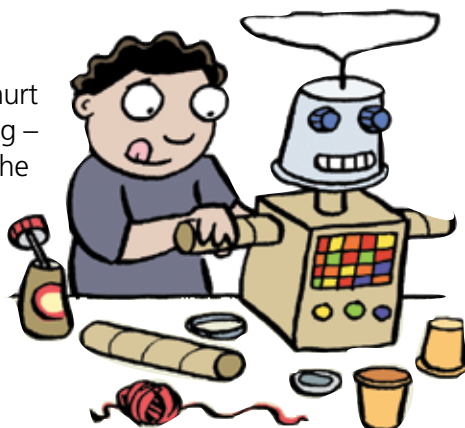
9 Walking.

Encourage your child to walk with you (you may want to use reins for safety) as soon as they are able. It might slow you down, but it's a great way for both of you to get some exercise!



10 Junk modelling

(from 30 months). Collect all sorts of cardboard boxes, cartons, yoghurt pots, milk bottle tops – anything – and buy some children's glue (the sort with a brush is easiest to use). Then you can help them to make whatever





TEACHING YOUR CHILD THE ESSENTIALS

When children play, they are learning what they want to learn. Often these will be things you want them to learn too: sometimes, though, they might need a bit of extra help from you, for example when they are learning to use a potty (see page 86), how to wash and dress themselves or what not to touch and where it's not safe to run.

The following are suggestions that can make life easier for both of you:

- **Wait until you think your child is ready.** If you try to teach them something too soon, you will both end up getting frustrated. If it doesn't work out, leave it for a few weeks and try again.
- **Don't make it into a big deal.** Your child might learn to eat with a spoon very quickly but still want to be fed when they are tired, or use the potty a few times then want to go back to nappies. Don't worry. It doesn't mean you have failed. It will not take them long to realise that they want to learn to be grown up and independent.

- **Keep it safe.** Children under three cannot really understand why they should not fiddle with electrical equipment or pull the leaves off plants. It's easier just to keep things you don't want touched well out of the way.
- **Be encouraging.** Your child wants to please you. If you give them a big smile, a cuddle or praise when they do something right, they are much more likely to do it again. This approach works a lot better than telling them off for doing something wrong.
- **Be realistic.** You cannot expect perfection or instant results. If you assume everything is going to take a bit longer than you thought, you can only be pleasantly surprised.
- **Set an example.** Your child wants to be like you and do what you do. So let them see you washing, brushing your teeth and using the toilet.
- **Be firm.** Children need firm, consistent guidelines. So once you have made a decision, stick to it. For example, if you have started potty training but decided your child is not ready, it's fine to give up and try again a few weeks later. But a child who is in nappies one day, out the next, and back in them the day after is bound to get confused.
- **Be consistent.** For the same reason, it's important that everyone who looks after your child teaches them more or less the same things in more or less the same way. If you and your partner, or you and your childminder, do things very differently, your child will not learn so easily and may well play you off against each other.
- **Do what is right for your child, for you and for the way you live.** Don't worry about what the child next door can or cannot do. It's not a competition!
- **Young children and technology at home**
Technology like computers and tablets can be really attractive to children, and with the right adult support, they can provide great learning opportunities

Some people say that using a computer is harmful and that too much time in front of a computer or TV screen is a bad thing. Others say that computers, DVDs and TV shows can help with learning numbers and letters so they're good for helping children get ready for school.

There's no definitive piece of research that proves that looking at a computer or TV screen is either good or bad for young children, so it seems safe to say that using technology in moderation is the key.

No one is perfect, and some children do find it very difficult to learn. See page 93 for help to deal with difficult behaviour.

encourage
learning



PLAYING AND LEARNING WITH OTHER CHILDREN

Learning how to make friends is one of the most important things your child can do. If your child learns early how to get on well with other children and adults, they will get off to a better start at school and generally be happier and more confident.

It's never too early to start, especially if your child is an only child. Even babies and small children like other children's company, although to start with they will often play alongside rather than actually with each other. Ask your health visitor if there is a new parents group meeting in your area. Getting together with other parents can be good for you too (see 'Loneliness' on page 150).

This section tells you about the kinds of groups you and your child can get involved in up until they are old enough to go to school.

Parent and toddler groups

Once your child starts to crawl and walk, you can try a parent and toddler group or a 'one o'clock club'. It's a great way for toddlers and children aged up to about three to burn off energy, and for you to relax and chat to other parents. Ask your health visitor or other parents you know about groups in your area. It's also worth looking at the clinic noticeboard and in shop windows. Your local library will probably have information too, and might also run story sessions for pre-school children.



Playgroups, pre-schools and nurseries

To start with, your child will want to know that you, or another trusted adult, is nearby. But by the time they are about three, your child will be ready to spend time playing with other children without you being there.

There are playgroups and pre-schools in most areas. They vary in what they offer and how they are run. Some are free. Whatever the age of your child, or hours of provision you wish to access, the Early Years team at your local HSC Trust will be able to point you towards a setting that meets your needs. Playgroups are often run by parents themselves. To find out about local playgroups or



pre-schools, contact the Early Years team at your local HSC Trust.

A nursery class is part of a primary school, while a nursery school is a separate school. Again, the services they offer will vary. You will need to ask what is available, and whether there are any costs involved.

It's worth finding out about playgroups, pre-schools and nurseries in your area well in advance as there may be waiting lists. Think about putting your child's name down for more than one group.



Preschool education

The Preschool Education Programme, funded by the Department of Education, provides one year of non-compulsory education for all children in their immediate pre-school year, which builds upon the learning children experience at home. It provides a rich variety of challenging play activities and other experiences in a stimulating environment and helps prepare children for primary school. A limited number of places may be available for younger children in some centres.

Funded pre-school places are available in a range of pre-school centres including:

- nursery schools;
- nursery units in primary schools; and
- voluntary and private playgroups and day nurseries which are part of the Pre-school Education Programme (these centres may also offer fee paying places to parents).

Primary admissions

All children who are 4 years old on or before the 1st July must begin their primary education from the beginning of the school year following their 4th birthday.

The application procedure for primary education allows parents to express



a preference for the primary school they wish their child to attend.

The Education Authority (EA) manages the procedures for the enrolment of children in pre school settings and primary schools. A parents' guide is available on the Education Authority website which provides information on schools in different areas, how the admissions procedure operates, how schools select pupils and when you will be informed of the outcome of your application. (www.eani.org.uk/admissions)

For information on Preparatory Schools and Independent Schools please contact the schools directly.

Preparing your child for school

The first two years at primary school are called the Foundation Stage which aims to build on children's earlier learning experiences at pre-school and at home. In this stage, your child will learn through well planned and challenging play that builds on their interests and curiosity. Teachers will encourage them to explore their feelings and emotions and how to work with others. These are basic skills that your child will need throughout their life.

At the heart of the Foundation Stage are the vital life-long skills of talking and listening, reading, writing and maths which will be taught in an active and enjoyable way.

You can best prepare your child for school by:

- Encouraging independence and encouraging your child to 'have a go'!

- Helping develop oral language.
- Sharing stories, information books, rhymes, songs.
- Providing lots of opportunities to play, explore and problem solve.

Preschool settings prepare children for the next stage in education and will provide you with advice and support on how best to help at home. Each primary school will invite you to an induction meeting before your child starts school to help you as well. Provide the Year 1 teacher with as much information as possible to help her get to know your child and plan the right activities for learning.

CHILDCARE

Inevitably, there will be times when you need to arrange for your child to be looked after by someone else, perhaps because you have decided it's time to go back to work. Ideally, whatever arrangements you make should give your child plenty of opportunities to spend time with other children. So, for example, you could think about using playgroups and nursery classes as well as a childminder or nanny.

Note that all childminders and daycare providers (except nannies who work in your home) should be registered with HSC Trusts. Your local FIS will be able to give you information about the care options available in your area. Your local information service can provide additional help to parents of disabled children in finding suitable childcare. You can also get information from the Early Years team at your local HSC Trust.



Additional support

You can access advice and support, including specialist health, social and parenting support, through your local Sure Start Centre. They will also have access to specialist services for children with special needs. Your health visitor will have information about all the local services available in your area.

Childminders and home child carers

Childminders look after small numbers of children in their own homes. Anybody paid to look after children under eight in this way for more than two hours a day must, by law, register as a childminder with the local HSC trust. This doesn't apply to close relatives, but does apply to friends or neighbours.

Childminders are registered to care for up to three children under five, including their own children. Annual inspections are carried out by Social Services on both the home and the childminder to assure the standard of care provided to children. In addition the police check all those aged over 10 who live in the childminder's home. Childminders can also now apply to be registered as home child carers, meaning they can look after your children in your own home. If you are using a childminder or home child carer, always ask to see their registration certificate.

Your local HSC Trust should have a list of childminders and home child carers with vacancies in your area, or you can ask other

working parents. If you don't know anyone who is using a childminder or home child carer, try asking your health visitor to put you in touch with someone.

Once you have found a childminder or home child carer you are happy with, it's a good idea to make sure you have a written agreement or contract in place before they start looking after your child. As well as providing a safeguard for both of you, it will help avoid any misunderstandings about things like holidays, extra pay for extra time, and expenses.

Home childcarers

A home childcarer (may also be known as a nanny) is a qualified child carer who will come to your home to look after your child. Duties vary from nanny to nanny, but typically you can expect a nanny to prepare meals for your child, clear up after them and do some of their laundry. If you employ a nanny you are responsible for paying their tax

registered carers

and National Insurance as well as their wages. You may find that there is another working parent nearby who would like to share the cost and services of your nanny. Working Families (see page 185) can provide you with more information on employing a nanny.

Mother's helps and au pairs don't have childcare qualifications. A mother's help can live in or live out, and will help with childcare and housework. Au pairs are young women or men who come to the UK from overseas, usually for a year, so they can learn English. An au pair will live in your house, and work for you for up to 35 hours a week. You provide bed and board and pocket money and access to English lessons in return for help in the home.

They do not have to be registered and inspected by Social Services and are not governed by national standards. However, home childcarers or nannies may now be approved under a light-touch home childcarers approval scheme, which introduces minimum requirements and suitability checks. Contact your local HSC Trust Early Years team for details or contact www.familysupportni.gov.uk

Day nurseries

Most day nurseries are run privately or by voluntary organisations.

All day nurseries must be registered with a HSC Trust. Contact your local Trust for information about nurseries

near you. You may be lucky enough to have a nursery or crèche where you work. If not, and if there are a number of parents needing childcare, you could think about asking your employer to set one up.





Coping with the cost of childcare

Childcare costs can be high. If you are on a low or moderate income, you may be able to get help with the cost of registered or approved childcare through Working Tax Credit (see page 170). You may also be able to get help with the cost of approved nannies and childminders through tax credits or tax exemptions on childcare vouchers. For more information go to the HM Revenue and Customs website at www.hmrc.gov.uk

Remember, if your child is aged three or four you will be able to access a free part-time childcare place for them.

If you are under 19 years at the start of a course of study at school or under 19 years and committed to returning to school once your baby is born, the school age mother's programme may be able to help with childcare costs. Contact your local Education and Library Board.

Making childcare work

Think about your child's needs and what is available. There are not as many childcare and/or nursery places for babies, and you might prefer to leave a small baby in the care of a single person who you can get to know. A toddler or pre-school child might be happier in a group atmosphere, making friends and learning new skills, although a very shy child might

prefer to spend most of their time with a childminder but have regular trips to a playgroup or one o'clock club to meet other children.

Your needs are important too. Will the childcare cover your working hours or will you need someone else to cover the extra time? Over-complicated arrangements will make life stressful for you and your child.

- **Don't rush into a decision.**

Visit the childminder or nursery and have a good chat with them. Ask about the basics like hours, fees and what they cover, holidays and what happens if someone is ill or there is an emergency. See the box on the right for a list of questions you might want to ask.

- **Think about transport.**

How easily can you get there from work and from home?

- **Give your child time to settle in.**

If you can, start by leaving your child for a short time and gradually build up. This might mean introducing your child to childcare before you have actually started back at work.

- **Tell your childminder or nursery all about your child.**

They will need details about their routine, likes and dislikes, feeding habits (particularly if you are still breastfeeding), and so on. When you are picking your child up or dropping them off, try to allow enough time to talk and find out how things are going.



The childcare checklist

- How many children are there in a group/school/class, and how many staff?
- How many of the staff are permanent and what are their qualifications?
- What are the arrangements for discussing what your child's been doing that day and their overall progress?
- How are children disciplined?
- How will your child be stimulated and given opportunities to learn through play? What kind of equipment is there? What sort of activities are on offer?
- Is there outside space? Can children run around outside when the weather is bad?
- Are trips and visits organised?
- How are children taught about different races, cultures and religions?
- Are parents expected to help out, perhaps with activities like cooking or outings?
- What meals and snacks are provided and is there a nutrition policy?
- Will your child's dietary needs (for example, for kosher, vegetarian or nut-free food) be met? If not, can you bring in food and will it be kept separate?

- **If you have specific concerns, talk about them.** If your child has asthma, for example, you will need to be sure that your childminder doesn't keep pets and find out whether they, or anyone else in the house, smokes. Perhaps you worry about your child being given certain things to eat. Whatever the issue, if it's important to you, you need to talk about it.
- **Make sure you and your childminder or nursery workers agree on key issues.** It's important to take a consistent approach to things like discipline and potty training.
- **Support and reassure your child in every way you can.** The early weeks are likely to be difficult for both of you. A regular routine and a handover that is as smooth as possible both help. It's perfectly normal for your child to cry when you leave, but remember that the crying usually stops once you have gone. Don't

hang around and, once you have left, don't go back. If you have said you will be back at a certain time, make sure you are.

- **Share the experience.** With older children, chat about what they have been doing while you have been away, and talk about the person or people who look after them. Show them it's all part of normal life, and something to look forward to.
- **Make time.** Whatever else you need to sacrifice – like the housework! – it's vital to carry on making time to spend with your child once you have gone back to work.
- **Don't feel guilty.** Evidence shows that children do well in high-quality childcare. There is no need to feel guilty about not being there 24/7. If you are worried about the quality of care though, it's important to do something about it as soon as possible.



Finding a child carer or early education provider

Go to see the group or school.

See a few, if you can. Talking to the people in charge, looking at what is going on and asking questions is the best way to get a sense of what it's like (see the box on page 83 for suggestions). Find out what the children do, how they are cared for and how their learning is supported.

Trust your instincts. If you like the feel of a place and the children seem happy and busy, that is a good sign. You know best the kind of place that will suit your child.

Talk to other parents whose children are at the group or school. Your health visitor may also be able to tell you about other parents' views and experiences.

Talk about ways of settling your child in happily. Staff may suggest ways of helping with this. At a playgroup or nursery school you might, for example, stay with your child at first and then go away for longer and longer periods of time. In some situations, your child might need more support and reassurance. For example, it may be that your child will be one of very few black children at a mainly white school, or the other way round. In this situation, talk to the school beforehand about any problems that might come up. Find out how the school will handle them, make suggestions yourself if you want to, and explain your child's needs. Talk to your child about it, too, in whatever way seems best.

