

5

Learning and playing

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 lifelong 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 parents or primary caregivers.



It is those people who form close emotional bonds 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.



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 vacuuming 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.

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 like 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!

Toys for children with additional needs

Toys for children with additional 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 pha.site/cdc and see page 115 for more information about help and support for children with additional needs.

Visit pha.site/kids-physical-activity 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. It is recommended this includes 30 minutes of tummy time spread throughout the day.
- Once your baby has started crawling, let them crawl around the floor. You will need to make sure it's safe first.
- Children of pre-school 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 (you may want to use reins for safety). It might slow you down, but it's a great way for both of you to get some exercise!
- 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 coordination 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.

Get creative: ideas to help your child play and learn

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.

Rattles (from four months).

Use a toy or homemade rattle – move it in front of your baby so they can follow it with their eyes, and let them grab and hold the rattle for themselves to begin to learn to make their own sounds.

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.

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.



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.



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.

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 125.



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.



you, for example when they are learning to use a potty (see page 98), how to wash and dress themselves, 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



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.

Junk modelling (from 30 months). Collect all sorts of cardboard boxes, cartons, yogurt 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 they want.



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

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.

Music and singing. Listen to music and sing with your child. Singing lullabies and nursery rhymes as well as family favourites that you love can be a great way to soothe babies or enhance bonding and interaction. Remember, everyone can sing and the voice your baby wants to hear the most is yours!

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. Try to use technology together with your child.

No one is perfect, and some children do find it very difficult to learn. See page 116 for help to deal with challenging behaviour.





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 18).

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 toddler group or 'stay and play' session. 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. Toddler groups are often run by parents or carers themselves.

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.



Pre-school education

The Pre-school 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;
- 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 school admissions

All children who are 4 years old on or before 2 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 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.





Note that all childminders and daycare providers (except nannies who work with no more than two families and au pairs) must be registered with Social Services. You can 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 HSC trust. 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.

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

Pre-school settings prepare children for this 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 them 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.

Childminders and home childcarers

Childminders look after small numbers of children in the childminder's home. 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.

A childminder can care for up to six children under 12, including their own. Only three of these may be aged under five and usually only one child below one-year old. There are some exceptions, for example, twins. 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 an Access NI criminal record check is carried out on all those aged over 10 who live in the childminder's home, see pha.site/accessni for more information. Childminders can also now apply to be registered as home childcarers, meaning they can look after your children in your own home. If you are using a childminder or home childcarer, always ask to see their registration certificate.

Your local HSC trust should have a list of childminders and home childcarers 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 childcarer, try asking your health visitor to put you in touch with someone.

Once you have found a childminder or home childcarer 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.

Nannies

A nanny is paid by you to look after your child in your home. They can live in or come to your home for set days and hours. Some may have nursery nurse training or childcare qualifications but they do not have to.

Nannies are not inspected or registered by Social Services unless they care for children from more than two families. That means it is down to you to interview them and check their references.

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 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.

Au pairs

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.

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. For more information go to the HM Revenue and Customs website at www.hmrc.gov.uk or telephone Make the call on 0800 232 1271.

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 the Education Authority.

Making childcare work

Think about your child's needs and what is available. 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

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 do the staff promote positive behaviour?
- How will your child be stimulated and given opportunities to learn through play?
- What kind of equipment is available?
- 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 do they embrace different races, cultures and religions in the setting?
- 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

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 toddler group 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 checklist on page 134 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.



- **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 childcarer or early education provider

Go to see the provider. 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. 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. Sometimes, your child might need more support and reassurance. 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.