

Pointers For Parents

Play to Learn

How do young children learn best? There is no need for special toys, videos or flashcards. It happens when a child sits down and begins to play. Play is the work of young children. They are eager to learn about how the world works and do so through play, by using all the “tools” around them.

Through play, children learn about: *communication* and the back-and-forth of *conversation* and their own *self-worth* as they see how much fun playing with their mom and dad is. In addition, they learn about *imitation* and *cause and effect* as they make things happen and *problem-solving skills* and *self-confidence* as they take on new challenges and learn to master them.

It is important to remember that there are no rules when it comes to play. Fancy toys are not needed. In fact, parents are their 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. And when your child is engaged and having fun, she is learning.

There are many fun ways parents can engage babies and toddlers during play:

- **Play 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 Together.** Listen to different kinds of music and dance in different ways to see what your baby or toddler 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.

- **Say It with Music.** “Statue,” “Freeze” and “Hokey-Pokey” are fun musical games for older toddlers. 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.

- **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



When you play with your child, you help her learn and grow.

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.

- **Play 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 back yard offer chances to run, climb, and play with other children. On a rainy day, try creating an obstacle course indoors.

- **Keep Little Hands Busy.** 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.

- **Act It Out.** For toddlers, encourage fantasy play by providing dress-up clothes and other props. Use items like hats, scarves, backpacks, bowls, 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.

It is important to remember to be spontaneous with your children 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.

These suggestions come from ZERO TO THREE. You can learn more online at: www.zerotothree.org/play.