

## Why play is Important

Play is more than just fun for kids. It's how babies and children learn, and how they work out who they are and where they fit in the world.

Playing is one of the most important things you can do with your child. The time you spend playing together gives your child lots of different ways and times to learn. It also helps your child:

- build confidence
- feel loved, happy and safe
- develop social skills, language and communication
- learn about caring for others and the environment
- develop physical skills
- connect and refine pathways in her brain.

Your child will love playing with you, but sometimes he might prefer to play by himself and won't need so much hands-on play from you. He might just want you to give him ideas and let him know how his play and games are going. Also, the way your child plays will change as he gets older.

### Different types of play

**Unstructured, free play** is the best type of play for young children. This is play that just happens, depending on what takes your child's interest at the time. Free play isn't planned and lets your child use her imagination and move at her own pace.

Examples of unstructured play might be:

- creative play alone or with others including artistic or musical games
- imaginative games – making cubby houses with boxes or blankets, dressing up, playing make-believe
- exploring new or favourite play spaces – cupboards, backyards, parks, playgrounds and so on.

You can be part of your child's unstructured play or not. Sometimes all you'll need to do is point him in the right direction – towards the jumble of dress-ups and toys on his floor, or to the table with crayons and paper. Sometimes

you might need to be a bit more active. For example, 'How about we play dress-ups? What do you want to be today?'



**Structured play** is different. It's more organised and occurs at a fixed time or in a set space, and is often led by a grown-up.

Examples of structured play include:

- water familiarisation classes for toddlers, or swimming lessons for older children – you might see these as being important lessons for your child, but she might just think they're fun
- storytelling groups for toddlers and Preschoolers at the local library
- dance, music or drama classes for children of all ages
- family board or card games
- modified sports for slightly older children, such as Auskick (Australian Rules Football), Futsal (five-a-side soccer) and Netta netball.

Structured and unstructured play can happen indoors or outdoors. Spending time outside gives your child the chance to explore, be active, test physical limits – and get messy! You can read more in our article on outdoor play.

## How play develops with your child

As your child grows, the way he plays will change – he'll get more creative and experiment more with toys, games and ideas. This might mean he needs more space and time to play.

### Newborns and babies

For babies, the best toy is you. You might like to try using the following to play with your little one:

- music, songs, bells or containers filled with different objects – these objects can help develop hearing and movement
- objects of different sizes, colours and shapes – these can encourage reaching and grasping
- sturdy furniture, balls, toys or boxes – these can get your child crawling, standing and walking.
- Tummy time and floor play are important for your baby's development. Tummy time helps your baby develop movement control by strengthening head, neck and body muscles.



### Toddlers

Your toddler might enjoy:

- a range of big and light things such as cardboard boxes, buckets or blow-up balls – these can encourage running, building, pushing or dragging movements
- chalk, rope, music or containers – these can encourage jumping, kicking, stomping, stepping and running
- hoops, boxes, large rocks, or pillows these can be used for climbing, balancing, twisting, swaying or rolling
- hills, tunnels or nooks – these can encourage physical activities like crawling and exploring.

If you put on some favourite music while your toddler plays, she can also experiment with different sounds and rhythms.

### Preschoolers

Here are some ideas to get your Preschoolers mind and body going:

- old milk containers, wooden spoons, empty pot plant containers, sticks, scrunched-up paper, plastic buckets, saucepans and old clothes – your child can use these

- for imaginative, unstructured play
- favourite CDs or pots and pans – your child can use these for a dance concert or to make up music
- balls and Frisbees – these can encourage practice in kicking, throwing or rolling.

When encouraging your child to kick or throw, try to get him to use one side of his body, then the other.

### School-age children



Your school-age child can have fun with:

- furniture, linen, washing baskets, tents and boxes that can be used for building
- her imagination alone, as she pretends to be a favourite superhero
- home-made obstacle courses that get her moving in different ways, directions and speeds.
- If your child's interested, you could think about getting him into some sports or team activities designed for young children.

Other possibilities include after-school or holiday art and craft activities.

You don't have to spend lots of money on toys and play equipment for your child. You might like to read our article on playing without paying for creative ways to have fun together. You can also check out our article on toys, games and books for all ages.



- your toddler has only a narrow interest in toys, or doesn't use toys in a functional way (for example, is only interested in spinning the wheels of a toy car instead of driving it around the room like other children the same age)
- your preschooler isn't interested in playing with other children, or playing pretend games.

**“IT’S BETTER TO PLAY  
THAN DO NOTHING”**  
*CONFUCIUS*

### **Australian guidelines recommend that children aged:-**

- 0-1 years should have some physical activity, such as floor play, each day
- 1-5 years should be physically active for at least three hours each day, with activity spread across the day
- 5-18 years should do at least one hour of moderate to vigorous physical activity each day

### **If your child doesn't want to play**

There might be times when your child doesn't want to play – for example, she could be tired or bored by doing the same activity for too long. This is normal and usually nothing to worry about.

But sometimes a lack of play – or a lack of interest in play – can be a sign of a more serious developmental disorder.

Consider speaking with your GP if:

- your baby doesn't seem to get into interactive play (such as peek-a-boo)

