

## Language & Learning

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### Learning Through Play

#### Your Baby Already Gets Something Special From Play

Your baby is learning through every sense during play, even before you begin to participate with conversation. Early play is about feeling the textures of woolly blankets, smooth sheets, fuzzy bears and bumpy carpets. It is about looking at edges, bright colors, stripes and movement. It is about becoming aware of as much sound as your baby can hear and relating sounds to their sources. It is about smelling stinky things and making faces, or smelling wonderful things and trying to get them.

Your baby gets to communicate during play, because you are your baby's favorite toy. Your facial expressions and actions as well as your speech and/or sign say, "This is fun! This is exciting! What do you think?" And, your baby's expressions and actions tell you the same thing.

Early play provides reasons for feelings. When the ball rolls out of reach or the mobile stops turning, your baby feels frustration as well as relief when you retrieve the ball or wind up the mobile again. When a toy is very interesting, your baby feels contented. When it is hidden, your baby gets curious. It is not too early to talk or sign about those feelings ("Oh, you are curious. Wind the mobile. Make it go." or "You can't find your ball. You are upset. Mommy will help.") Feelings come naturally from play, and when your baby gets bigger, those feelings will be reflected in play with dolls, animals and action figures, along with the language associated with them. Later on, understanding the feelings of others will come partly from the chance to pretend during play with toys and with other children.

Play is the basis of problem solving. If the circle block won't go into the square hole, your baby will learn to try a different hole, then to match the shapes before trying, and eventually to name the shape he needs. If a toy disappears, your baby will learn to look for it, move the box or paper bag it is hiding under, or ask for it. Later on, as children play together and disagree, they learn to use their language to reach a compromise.

Play is the beginning of creativity. Although right now your baby seems to have only one use for a toy, putting it in her mouth, soon there will be doll houses, play dough, construction toys, dress up and block and truck centers. When the stuffed pig snuffles at your baby's tummy and the stuffed dog "barks", your baby is discovering the exciting possibilities of pretend.

Most of all, play is experience. Experiences in early life, especially exciting, interesting, or calming play experiences, give your baby things to talk or sign about. The language that accompanies play will become the language of the family, the language of the community and the language of school.