

Language & Learning

Learning Through Play

Play Is a Part Of Everything Your Baby Does

Look at life from your baby's point of view. Everything is discovery and excitement when it is new. You are the tour guide, remember, and the interpreter. Now you are the play partner. What a lot you have to say to each other!

Play is eating. Mothers and fathers use games such as "Open the garage, here comes the car," to make eating into play. While eating and playing, your baby learns that cars and airplanes have places to go, that cars go Beep!, and airplanes go Zoom! When your baby is using amplification, those sounds are natural and important. The ideas that go with the sounds also are important. Babies will initiate play at eating time, too, although a baby's idea of play may be different than yours. Your baby may find the sight of the bowl of spaghetti hitting the ground very satisfying, and the sight of someone cleaning it up even more entertaining. Remember to be the tour guide and interpreter. You may not feel like using language such as "Uh-oh, fall," and "Mommy will clean it up" at such a time, but your baby is paying attention, so take advantage of the opportunity.

Play is communicating. Every parent-child interaction, from "Peek-a-boo" to "Pat-a-Cake," from knee bouncing to lullabies, comes from a love of communication games, face to face, enjoying one another. If your child is signing, play these baby games anyway, and learn the signs that signal what will happen: "Want to play bounce?" "Let's play pat-a-cake." Early speech-reading (lipreading), mouth movements, rhythm and facial expression are learned during communication play. If your infant or toddler is learning spoken language, these games let you call her attention to meaningful sounds. This is a first step in learning to listen. For example, you pull the blanket over your face, wait a moment and then start calling, "Bailey....Bailey....Peek a Boo!" As this game becomes familiar your baby will alert when she hears her name. A little later she will pull the blanket when she hears the familiar pattern of "peek-a-boo." Her reward for listening is your smiling face and chances to keep playing the game. A finger-play song like pat-a-cake has a special pattern or rhythm that your baby will start to recognize after you play the game many times. After you have played the game many times, try asking your baby, "wanna play pat-a-cake?" Wait a moment and see if the baby responds by showing excitement or moving her arms. Babies begin to show they understand around 10 to 12 months of age.

Play is bath-time. First your baby loves to just splash. Then come the floating toys, and finally the cups and sieves and bottles for filling up and pouring out. Water goes in and out. Cups are full and then empty. Your baby pours, and the water splashes. What a lot of concepts you have to label when water is the toy. "You are wet. Cup's empty. The water is all gone. Fill it up. Pour." Even though your baby will not wear his hearing aids or cochlear implant in the tub, keep talking. You are close by at bath time, and it is a special time for babies and parents. If your baby is signing, she will enjoy watching your animated expressions, gestures and signs as you talk about the feel of the water, the splashes, and the rubber ducky, and what fun you are having.

Play is hugging. Loving contact between you and your baby is just as important as loving words. The vibration of your body when you sing or speak supports your baby's understanding of sound, either by complementing what she hears from her hearing aids or implant or by feeling your voice. The safety in your arms lets your baby claim you, look around at other people and things, and know that you will be there. Babies love to be touched. Many experts suggest that massages can be a satisfying way for moms, dads and babies to get to know one another in the first three months of life. Beyond the soothing skin-to-skin contact, touch is a relaxing and nonverbal way for you to socialize with your baby. It can be calming for you both. Anne Krueger of Parenting Magazine points out that young babies use touch along with other senses to learn about their surroundings. Deaf mothers and fathers of deaf children often use touch to connect and communicate with their infants.

Play is riding. Bouncing on a knee, riding piggy back on shoulders, traveling safely strapped into a wagon, a stroller, a shopping cart or a car seat lets your baby see whole new parts of the world. Moving from place to place is the beginning of “Where?” and “Let’s go to the...?” and “Go again!” Think of all the places that you can name. If you are encouraging your baby to listen with new hearing aids, try using riding games. Here are some examples:

Long ago mothers used the following rhyme during bouncing games:

Gonna trot trot trot to Boston (bounces)

Gonna trot trot trot to Lynn (bounces)

Watch out little girl/boy (moves baby side to side)

Cause you might fall INNNNNN. (gently moves baby down over knees and brings her back up)

Babies love the changing motor actions that go with this rhyme. They will anticipate getting to “fall back” and they listen for the exaggerated pitch change in “INNNNNN.” You can hesitate a moment before the final line and final action to help your baby listen and anticipate what is next.

Horsy back rides can be adapted to encourage listening. You can be in position for a bouncy ride and wait expectantly for a moment. Then tell your baby, “Let’s go!” Make fun sounds like a horsie or say “whee.” When the action stops, stop the sound. Your baby will begin to notice that sound starts and stops. She will notice that the fun begins when we hear the sound.

Many movement games can be accompanied by sound or music to give your baby lots of chances to listen during play.

Play is watching and helping. Mama is washing dishes. Dad is folding laundry. Big sister is putting away groceries. The distance between watching an interesting activity and wanting to help isn’t very big. Pretty soon, the baby who watches from an infant seat will be the toddler who applies a plastic screwdriver to a cupboard hinge, sweeps the floor with a tiny broom, drops the carefully measured amount of fish food into the tank under close supervision, and stacks the toilet paper in the linen closet. All those objects and actions have names and qualities. “The floor is dirty. The hinge is broken. The clothes are clean. I am washing the car. Let’s feed the fish.” Whole sentences come from watching the family work. Be sure to talk about what you are doing, and the little one will begin picking up the language for these interesting ideas.

Play is creeping and cruising. When your baby can move independently, play becomes discovery of anything within reach. Your job and your language are those of a play partner and of a policeman. The language of limits as well as the language of discovery is important. “No, no. Don’t touch” are part of learning, but they will probably not be enough. You will have to work at getting your baby to look at your language, when the objective is much more interesting and the idea of giving it up is distasteful. So now is the time for you to learn about the language of distraction: “Look at that!” “Here is something new.” “Let’s play with this.” Redirecting the infant or toddler to a new idea or game can help her forget about the TV knob or the plant dirt (at least until the next time it gets her attention!)

Play is settling down to sleep. Bedtime is for sharing books and for experiencing lullabies that include familiar melodies, rocking and closeness. Even when a baby cannot hear lullabies, they can still be enjoyed through movement and vibration. Bedtime is for requesting a favorite stuffed animal and giggling when it comes flying down to tickle and cuddle. Bedtime is for crooning and gesturing to a special crib friend after the overhead light is off and parents are gone. Long before any of the words that go with bedtime, the comforting routines are there to build words on. For all babies, play is chock full of learning opportunities.