

# the parent *play* book

how to play with your child to  
encourage brain development

birth - 4 years old

# Play is incredibly important for the developing brain in early childhood.



**In fact, did you know that only about 25% of the brain is developed at birth?**

In early childhood, play helps us develop communication & language skills, motor planning, visual perception, problem solving skills, emotional intelligence, and executive functioning skills. These skills are needed throughout our whole life & impact all aspects of our lives!

Research shows that **play directly impacts brain structure & functioning** by stimulating the production of Brain Derived Neurotrophic Factor (BDNF - a growth factor responsible for the health & growth of neural pathways, long term memory, & social learning<sup>1</sup>.

**Play also promotes good mental health** by decreasing cortisol (stress hormone) levels & the chances of developing depression<sup>2,3</sup>. And we also know that a lack of play in early life can result in a lack of problem solving & social skills later in life<sup>2</sup>.

So as you can see, **play in early life is paramount to success later in life**. In this guide we are going to give you the inside occupational-therapist-approved scoop on what activities to prioritize to help your child develop through play.

<sup>1</sup>([PMID:12676333](#))

<sup>2</sup>([American Journal of Play](#)) ([PMID: 19150054](#)) ([PMID: 10212056](#))([PMID: 658602](#))

<sup>3</sup>([PMID: 6746795](#))

## Some things to remember as you read through this guide -

Praise your child for trying, not necessarily for succeeding. You want them to think & experiment - and failure is an important part of experimentation and can teach them a lot!

Encourage active play - muscle work (running, jumping, climbing, crawling, throwing) & movement (swinging, dancing, stretching).

Provide plenty of unstructured & unplanned time with your children. This will encourage them to think creatively.

Participate in play! Playing with your child will help you build a strong, healthy relationship with them.

*Play is often talked  
about as if it were a  
relief from serious  
learning.*

*But for children play is  
serious learning.*

*Play is really the work of  
childhood.*

*-Mr Rogers*

# Types of Play In Early Childhood

Below are the typical milestones for the different types of play. You may notice that there is some overlap - that is because each child is different! If you are concerned about your child's development we encourage you to reach out to a pediatric occupational therapist for further support.

## **Unoccupied Play** (Birth - 3 Months Old)

At this stage your child should be making lots of movements with their arms, legs, hands, & feet.

By moving their bodies they are learning about their body & discovering how it moves.

## **Solitary Play** (Birth - 2 Years Old)

At this stage your child generally is not interested in playing with others quite yet.

They usually gravitate towards playing by themselves.

## **Spectator/Onlooker** (2 Years Old)

At this stage your child will begin observing and watching others play, but they will generally continue to play by themselves.

## **Parallel Play** (2+ Years Old)

At this stage your child will play alongside, or near others, but they do not play with others.

## **Associate Play** (3 - 4 Years Old)

At this stage, your child will start to interact with others during play, but there is not a large amount of interaction.

ex. A group of children might all be playing on the same piece of playground equipment, but all doing different things like climbing, swinging, etc.

## **Cooperative Play** (4+ Years Old)

At this stage your child will play together with others.

They will have an interest in both the activity & the other people involved in playing.

# Infant

**Play at this stage is primarily in the form of attunement.** Attunement is the process of the parent/caregiver reading & responding to the baby's nonverbal cues. This is really big at this age as it forges a strong connection between you and your baby. Here are a few ways you can attune to your child -

**Make eye contact & get close to them.**

At this age, your baby's eyesight is still developing, so make sure you are 8 - 12 inches from their face so they can see you clearly.

**Talk to them in a quiet soothing voice.**

**Echo their sounds & mirror their facial expressions.**

**Make time to give your baby 100% of your attention.**

Make sure you are giving your baby your full attention when you can (preferably when they are wide awake).



**Hold your baby in different positions.** This will help your baby learn how to move against gravity, build muscles, and stimulate the brain. Try holding your baby in these positions -

**On their side** (both sides!)

**On their tummies at an inclined position**

When you are reclining (in bed, on the couch) place your baby on your chest. Make sure that their elbows are close to their side for support.

You could also lay them on their tummy on a pillow or on your lap.

Football hold - Rest your baby's head in the palm of your hand, and their body on your forearm. You can let their arms & legs hang. Rock them back & forth, and side to side for extra calming input.

# Infant

## **Touch is especially powerful for babies.**

Give your baby massages - squeeze their shoulders, rub their hands, & stroke their legs to stimulate the nervous system.

You could also stretch their legs, squeeze their feet, and massage their thighs.

Let them experience different textures by laying them down on different textured blankets.

## **Make a sensory bag to use during tummy time.**

Grab a large ziplock bag and fill halfway with water, food color, oil, & objects (glitter, pom poms, water beads, beans). Once the bag is filled, close & tape over the top of the bag with duck tape.

Using a sensory bag during tummy time will encourage your baby to push their body up with thier hands, hold their head up, and reach with their arms. This will help them build core strength and body awarness, and prepares them for crawling & walking.



## **Use a mirror to peak their curiosity.**

Mirrors are great tools to have on hand to capture their attention & curiosity. You can place mirrors in multiple places like on their tummy time mat, in their car seat, or on verticle surfaces like a wall or the fridge.

Using a mirror during tummy time can help develop head control, and encourages them to reach & grab which builds shoulder strength.

Placing the mirror on a wall or verticle surface can help build balance.

# 1 Year Olds

**Model play activities.** Babies learn so much through observation - even when you don't realize it, your baby is watching & learning from you. Help them build valuable skills by showing them how to do things like..

## Stack cups/objects

**Dump out items in a container.** This is a great way for your child to use their muscles, which stimulates their brain.

**Roll cars/toys.** Doing this will help to build hand/grasp skills.

**Pick up & shake a rattle/toy.** This will also help build hand/grasp skills.

**Bang container with hands.** Drumming provides an opportunity for muscle work & will increase body awareness. The banging will send signals to the brain, helping it understand where the shoulder & arm are located.



# 1 Year Olds

**Water play is excellent for littles ones!** Whether you have them play with toys in the bath, in the pool, or in a container. Put fun objects in the water for them to grab to encourage them to work on their grasp skills. The sensory bag is also still very beneficial.

## Continue to practice attunement

Sing & talk to your baby

Play peek a boo or paddy cakes

Clap your hands

Grab their feet

**Let them experience different textures.** This could be varying textures from toys, or from our natural environment. Have your child crawl in grass or sand. You could also let them play with cooked noodles, or pudding - let them get messy!



## Encourage them to crawl & move.

This is incredibly important! Crawling helps build coordination & balance, and builds strength.

One way you could encourage them to crawl is by putting their favorite toys just out of reach to motivate them to reach, move, roll.

To help your baby get use to crawling, put their legs in a kneeling position while supporting their trunk (place a pillow/your leg underneath their stomach).

This will help their knees get used to bearing weight.

If your child is having trouble with crawling, consider reaching out to a pediatric occupational therapist.

# Our Favorite Tools to Promote Development In 1 Year Olds



Rainbow Stacker



Soft Activity Book



Toy Tissue Box



Spinning Drum



Teething Rattle



Nesting Cups



Textured Flip Fish



Plastic Balls



Rainmaker Rattle

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# 2 Year Olds

**Playing at this stage is pretty simple.** The focus at this age is to encourage interaction. No need to make sure your child is following specific rules, or doing things exactly as you do them. We just want them to participate, explore, and have fun!

**Model play, and then invite them to join.** For example, build/stack cups then knock them down. Then build/stack the cups in front of your child so they can knock them down.

**Provide different sized toys/items for your child to hold in their hands.** This will help them build the muscles & coordination for grasp development.

**Dance!** Dancing provides an opportunity for your child to use their muscles, which stimulates the brain and promotes development.

## Participate in tactile play.

Have your child play with playdough, or buckets filled with rice, sand, or water.

Model filling up cups with materials (rice, sand, water) & then dumping them.

Grabbing objects out of water is great for development.

Play with shaving cream or noodles (can be cooked or hard)

Walk barefoot - on grass, mud, rocks, etc.



# 2 Year Olds

**Play with your child in different positions.** For example, on their tummy, standing up, sitting on their bottom, on their knees, crawling etc. Don't be afraid to get down at their level and hang out with them!

## Crawling is still incredibly important at this age

Encourage them to crawl to toys, under blankets, through tunnels, under tables, ect. Have your child climb over objects, like pillows, couch cushions, or even you! Crawling with their hands open also develops their grasp muscles.

**Play with bubbles.** Encourage them to reach & pop the bubbles with their fingers. This will help them understand space & develop eye tracking skills.

**Have your child stoop down to pick up an object, and then try to get them to throw the object.**

You can use simple things you have lying around the house - socks, bean bags, stuffed animals, balls, ect. For this activity, we don't expect them to be able to throw the objects at a specific target or in a bucket. The main focus for this activity is practicing the throwing motion & coordination.



# Our Favorite Tools to Promote Development In 2 Year Olds



Deer Stacking Tower



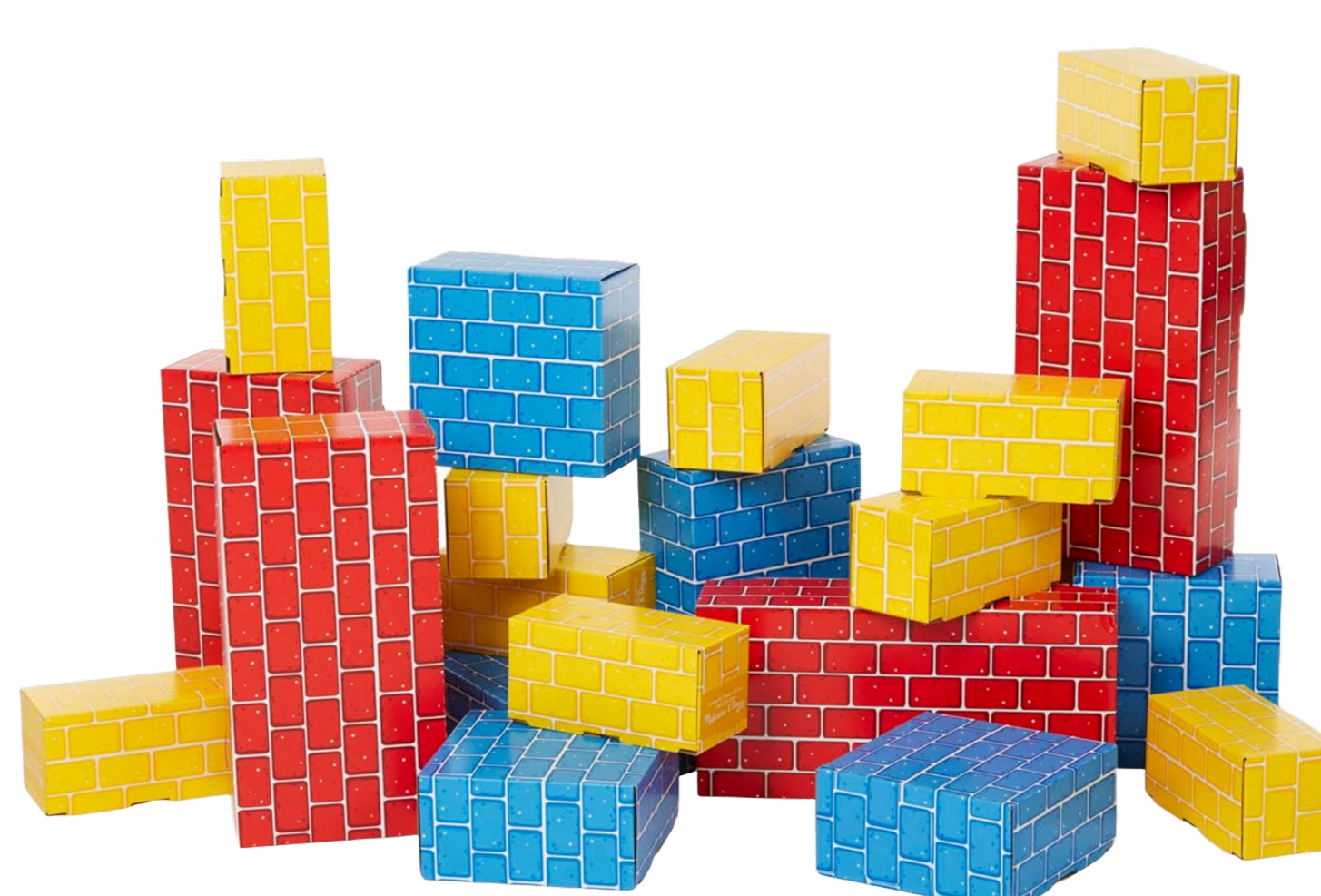
Hammer Board



Wooden Toy Car



Wooden Blocks



Cardboard Building Blocks



Bean Bags (Tossing)



Foam Crawling Blocks



Silicone Funnel



Tactile Table

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# 3 Year Olds

**At this stage your child is just beginning to learn how to share or take turns, so they don't know how to do this well just yet.**

Help them learn by modeling these kinds of interactions to them when you are playing with them.

When you are playing together say 'my turn', then take a super fast turn with whatever toy you guys are playing with. Then say 'your turn' and give them a chance to play with the toy.

Continue to practice taking turns each time you play together, enlogating the time you have a turn the more comfortable your child gets with sharing.



**Practice doing things together.** Help them learn how to communicate by saying 'I need help, can you help me? Can you put this block on top? Can you pick up the doll?'

**Throw objects like bean bags or balls that have a little weight to them.**

We like bean bags because they have weight & they can fit into your child's hands (great for developing grasp!).

At this age your child should be able to climb up onto things - the couch, chairs, steps on the playground, etc. Encourage them to use their muscles and climb up onto things!

**Play with scooting toys.**

Scooting toys are ones that you can sit on and move with your feet (excellent muscle work!)

# 3 Year Olds

**Still prioritize crawling.** You could do this by making an obstacle course, or playing on the ground with them on their stomachs.

**Start jumping - jumping up/off of objects.** Jumping repeatedly (or in a sequence) requires more skill that is not typically developed at this age.

**Blow bubbles.** At this age your child should be better at blowing. Blowing bubbles is very regulating & helps build muscles in the face & eyes.



# Our Favorite Tools to Promote Development In 3 Year Olds



Wooden Climbing Set



Tunnel



Balance Bike



Crash Pad



Scooter Board



Bubbles Bottle



Gardening Tool Set



Stepping Stones



Wooden Stacking Rocks

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# 4 Year Olds

**Play imaginary games.** This will provide opportunities for your child to develop skills like problem solving, communication, creative & critical thinking, and emotional intelligence.

To help them work on playing collaboratively with others, it could be helpful to give your child a goal that they can work towards with others. This could be something as simple as collecting all the cool rocks at the playground.

**Make an 'outdoor mud kitchen'.** Mud kitchens are a wonderful way to encourage your child to use their imagination & develop grasp/hand muscles. You can use old objects you have on hand - [check out this blog for ideas!](#)

Digging in the dirt, mud, or sand, collecting sticks/rocks (and holding them in their hands), making mud pies - these all are great opportunities to build grasp muscles. Don't be afraid to get dirty, kids are washable!

**Encourage your child to fix/solve their own problems.** An example of this could be reminding them to use their voice when they have an idea and want to play with another group of children.



**Continue to model taking turns.** This skill takes a lot of practice!

**At this age your child can participate in slightly more dynamic building.**

Encourage them to explore with building blocks, magna tiles, cardboard boxes, legos, etc.

Challenge them to build a fort - this is an excellent opportunity to get some muscle work in & seamlessly incorporates crawling (double bonus!!).

# 4 Year Olds

**Swing.** Swinging is excellent for developing your child's vestibular system. The vestibular system is responsible for maintaining balance, and helps us understand where we are in space. Additionally, the vestibular system helps with eye coordination & posture.

## Prioritize active play.

Climb - climbing onto a rock or bench, or climbing up the slide (safely!).

Throw, catch, & kick balls to help them build coordination skills.

Jump - jumping rope, jumping over items, jumping on a trampoline

Run - play tag, soccer, flag football, baseball

Crawl - Crawling is still really beneficial at this age! Encourage crawling by making a fort for your child to crawl into, or create an obstacle course they they have to crawl over pillows/objects.



# Our Favorite Tools to Promote Development In 4 Year Olds



Magnetic Tiles



Rock Climbing Holds



Modular Play Couch



Bounce House



Trampoline



Sensory Swing



Tree Swing



Reusable Water Balloons



Blance Board

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