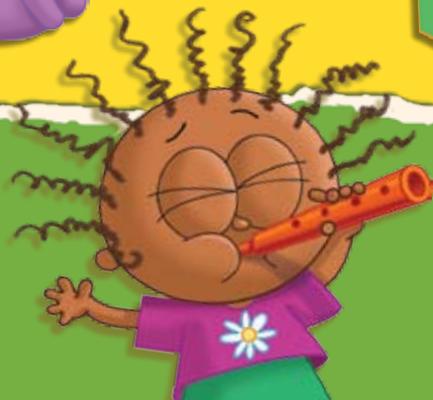




Learning and play



Giving your child the best start

© Family and Parenting Institute 2009

Family and Parenting Institute

430 Highgate Studios
53–79 Highgate Road
London NW5 1TL

Tel: 020 7424 3460

Fax: 020 7485 3590

Email: info@familyandparenting.org

Web: www.familyandparenting.org

The Family and Parenting Institute

researches what matters to families and parents. We use our knowledge to influence policymakers and foster public debate. We develop ideas to improve the services families use and the environment in which children grow up.

A range of our publications, including *Is it legal?* and *Over the top behaviour in the under tens*, are available to download from the Family and Parenting Institute website.

The Family and Parenting Institute is the operating name of the National Family and Parenting Institute (NFPI). NFPI is a company limited by guarantee, registered in England and Wales.

Charity registration number: 1077444
Company registration number: 3753345
VAT registration number: 833024365



Contents

Background	3
Why play matters	4
Your child's development	5
Getting started	7
Different types of play	8
Messy play	8
Role play	10
Food play	12
Physical play	14
Music play	15
Reading and storytelling	17
Mark making	18
Puzzles and board games	19



Background

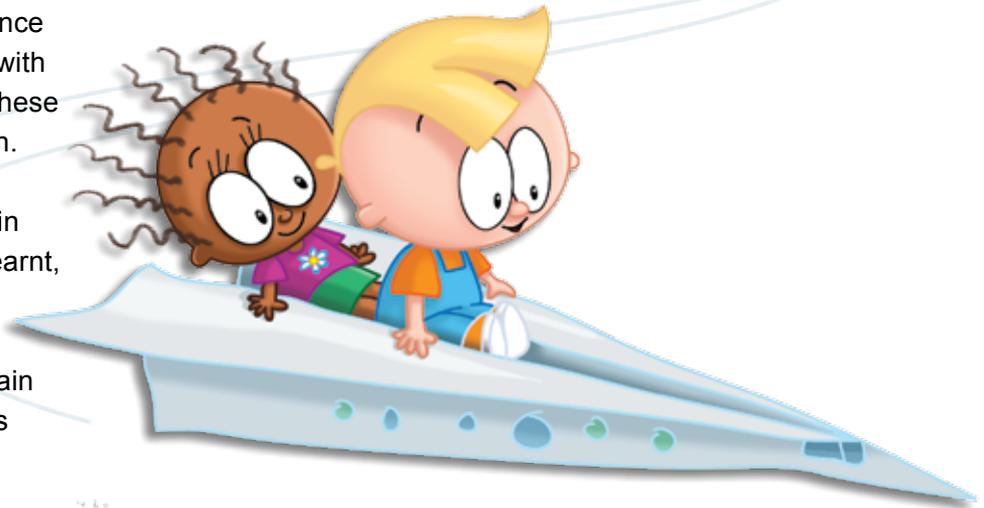
The Early Learning Partnerships Project looked at ways to encourage early learning for young children in the home. It was funded by the Government and coordinated by the Family and Parenting Institute.

The agencies involved in the project provided a range of services to parents to help them discover the importance of singing, reading and playing (among other things) with their 1- to 3-year-old children, and to see how doing these things together can help their children's ability to learn.

We talked to some of the parents who were involved in the project and asked them to tell us what they had learnt, and what they would like to let other parents know.

This booklet is based on what parents told us. The main message that they wanted to pass on to other parents

was that you really can be your child's special first teacher, and give them a flying start in life.



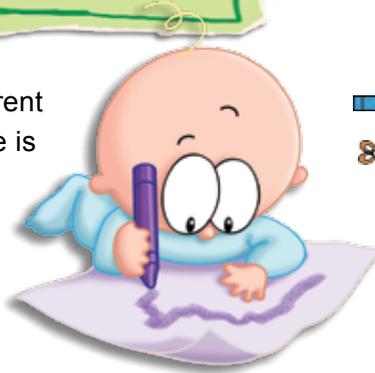
Why play matters

The day-to-day pressures on your time as a parent can sometimes mean that any time you do have is taken up with household chores, such as cooking, cleaning and washing. As a result, play can take a back seat.

But finding time each day to play with your young child, even if it's just a few minutes, strengthens your relationship with them, and also gives them more opportunities to learn about the world and the basic starting blocks for their future life at school.

Through play, your child will learn to:

-  develop their hand-eye coordination
-  walk, run, jump and balance
-  take turns with other members of your family and other children

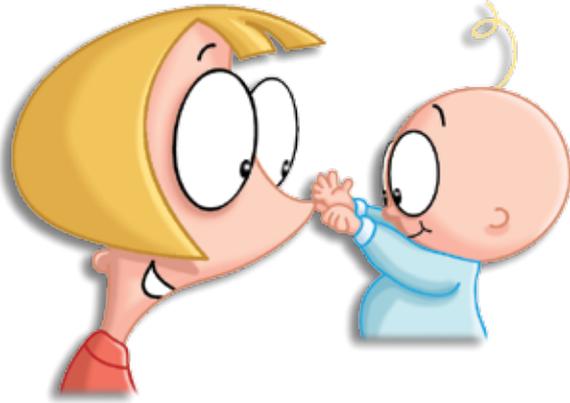


-  explore their emotions and feelings
-  develop curiosity and interest in what's around them.

The parents we spoke to said that they found that it's not just your child that benefits – play can be relaxing and enjoyable for adults, and is a great way for you to find out what your child loves doing.

Playing together can help you to recognise and understand your child's feelings, concerns and also the things that they are really good at.





“It took me a while to get into the idea that I could just sit down and play – it was hard not to think about the washing or cleaning – but now that I can see how much he enjoys it, I’m beginning to really get stuck in!”

This doesn’t mean that you have to spend time planning your play – the things that you do every day at mealtimes, on journeys and at bedtime, like talking, listening, singing and reading, all add to your child’s learning about the world and their environment.

This is especially true for babies and toddlers – even though they can’t talk yet, they get a lot out of watching, listening and joining in when they can. The way they begin to talk is shaped by how they are spoken to.

Your child's development

Every child develops at their own pace, but there are some landmarks that you can look out for, which also give you opportunities to introduce new play ideas as your child grows.

At 10 to 12 months, your baby will probably:

-  play with an object with both hands when sitting up on their own
-  turn the pages of a board or thick plastic book
-  use taste and touch to explore everything within their reach
-  begin to move themselves across the room by crawling, shuffling or walking
-  say “mama” or “dada”/“papa” to call you.

At 13 to 18 months, your toddler is likely to:

-  walk alone with heels on the floor
-  respond to their name
-  feed themselves finger food and begin to use a spoon
-  be able to scribble with a large crayon
-  follow a simple request like, "give me the ball".

From 18 months, your toddler may start to:

-  use lots of new words and sentences
-  run and skip.

Some children may take longer to do these things.



Each child's development can vary greatly. If your child is not walking by 18 months, or can't talk in single words by the time they are two, ask for some advice from your health visitor or GP.

An important part of every child's development is getting used to learning new things and becoming curious. Research shows that children who play with and are talked to by their parents when very young, learn much better and do better at school.



Getting started

All the time you spend with your child is an opportunity to play together. You don't have to set aside loads of time – just joining in with what your child is doing is a great start and will show them that you are interested in playing with them.

When the TV is switched off, try doing a puzzle or reading a book. Even though your child might not understand all the words, they are still learning and will enjoy being read to. Watch out for the things that your child really loves doing and spend a bit of time each day joining in.

Some children love a bit of rough and tumble, giving them the confidence to move around and not feel restricted. Others prefer imaginative games with dressing-up clothes (these could be some of your old clothes – they don't have to be special outfits), and you can join in too.



Different types of play

This section doesn't cover every type of play – your child's imagination will give you lots of different ideas – but it offers a starting point, with simple ideas for you and your child.

You don't need to buy expensive new toys or equipment. This section will show how you can use things that you have around your home, or you can go to drop-ins or toddler groups and use the equipment there.

The most important thing is that you join in with some of your child's play – they will love having you around.



Messy play

This doesn't mean that you need to let your home become a place where 'anything goes' – this is controlled mess! Think about anything that your child can get their hands into and experiment with, such as water, sand, mud, glue, glitter and paint.

It is a good idea to buy a plastic sheet and keep all messy play on this, in a particular part of your home. If you can't face the mess, parent and toddler drop-ins often provide the sort of activities that are hard to do at home, especially if you don't have much space, or you have other children.



“Once I realised how much she loved painting with her hands, I sorted out one of my old work shirts and bought a plastic decorator’s sheet from the DIY shop. Then she can enjoy herself and I’m not fussing around her.”

If you have a garden, you might want to restrict messy play to outside. A water fight on a hot day is a great way to cool off!

Don’t forget playing in the bath. From about 7 to 9 months, your baby will begin to be able to sit up on their own and will enjoy the splashing freedom of bath time.

A plastic cup and jug can provide young children with endless fun, pouring water from one to the other, and older children enjoy taking a few plastic toys into the water.

Remember: Never leave a baby or young child in the bath unattended, even for a minute.

You can create your own play dough using the following recipe. It’s simple to make, can be used in lots of types of play and made from ingredients that you probably already

have in your kitchen. Although it’s not meant for eating, you will know what is in your play dough if your child experiments with eating it – it’s very salty and they will probably spit it out.

Play dough recipe

You will need:

-  1 cup of plain flour
-  1 cup of water
-  1 tablespoon of cooking oil
-  2 teaspoons of cream of tartar
-  ½ cup of salt
-  food colouring



1. Place all the ingredients in the saucepan over a low heat.
2. Keep stirring together until the mixture thickens to a firm dough.
3. Leave to cool before giving to your child.
4. Store in the fridge in a plastic container with a lid – it will last about two weeks.

You can experiment with different colours and adding other things, like glitter. Your child could help with measuring out the ingredients and stirring the dough away from the heat.

If you...

... make a simple play dough, your child will improve the muscles and control in their hands, preparing them for writing and drawing in the future.

Role play

You can encourage your child to explore their imagination by giving them some dressing-up clothes. You don't have to buy expensive fancy dress outfits: sort out a few of your own clothes and add in a few hats, scarves and bags from charity shops – the more colourful, the better.

Try making a paper crown and decorating it to use in dressing-up games – instructions are included on the next page.





Paper crown instructions

You will need:

-  stiff card
-  sticky tape
-  pens or crayons
-  glue, glitter, paper shapes, sequins, bits of material to decorate



1. Measure a strip of card to fit around your child's head. You may need to stick two pieces together to get the right size.
2. Fasten the card with sticky tape to make the basic crown shape.
3. Cut a zig-zag pattern along the top of the crown.
4. Your child can now decorate the crown with whatever you have available.

You could also make a crown to fit your head and ask your child to decorate it for you – they could do the same for other members of the family.

Boys and girls both enjoy dressing up. It's a good idea to try not to restrict what boys or girls can do and to offer a range of clothes, as well as puppets, dolls and figures that they can use.

If you...

... encourage your child to play with different types of toys, they will be able to explore all parts of their personality through their natural curiosity.



Food play

Pretend tea parties and picnics are a great way for children to learn about sharing, turn taking and looking after others – even if it is just cuddly toy guests! You could also try experimenting with real food by doing some simple baking or cooking together.

There are a couple of recipes in this booklet to get you started. Your child will enjoy doing a ‘grown up’ job and even making a sandwich will give them a great sense of achievement.

“On a Saturday, we have a do-it-yourself lunch with everyone making their own sandwiches – the older kids have a competition to see who can make the strangest combination and the younger ones enjoy making something all by themselves.”

Fruit faces recipe

You will need:

-  a range of cut-up fruit to make different parts of a face
-  eyes: grapes, slices of kiwi or raisins
-  nose: strawberries, piece of banana or cherry tomato
-  mouth: slice of melon, cut-up apple or orange



You could choose your child's favourite fruits or try something they haven't tasted before.

See who can make the silliest or most delicious face! Older children (over three years) may be able to use a plastic knife to cut up a banana or other soft fruit.

Butterfly cakes recipe

Makes 24 little cakes

You will need:

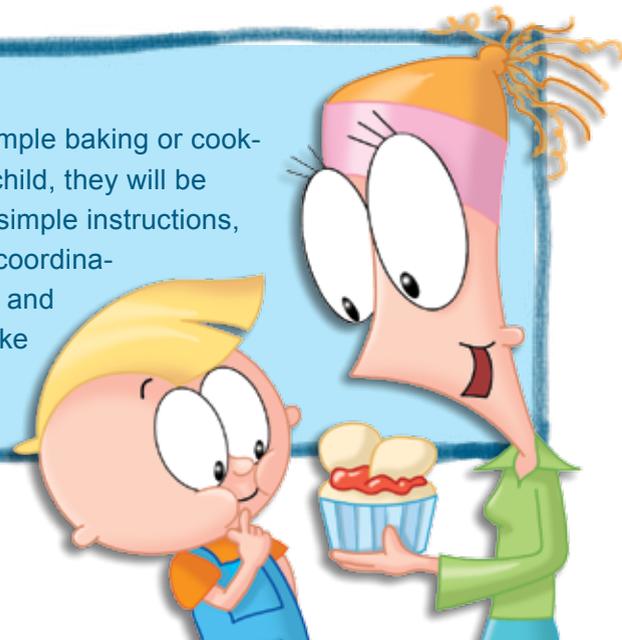
-  125g self-raising flour
-  125g butter (take it out of the fridge to let it soften before you start)
-  125g caster sugar
-  1 teaspoon baking powder
-  2 eggs
-  your favourite jam
-  2 bun tins filled with paper cake cases

1. Set the oven to 190°C/375°F/gas mark 5.
2. Sieve the flour and baking powder into a mixing bowl.
3. Beat the eggs and add to the bowl with the sugar and butter.

4. Beat the mixture with a wooden spoon or use an electric whisk – you want a smooth batter that drops easily off the spoon.
5. Spoon the mixture into paper cake cases.
6. Bake for 20 minutes.
7. Once the cakes have cooled, cut the top off each of the cakes and cut this piece in half.
8. Put some jam on the top of the cake and put the two pieces of cut cake in the jam, like wings.

If you...

... do some simple baking or cooking with your child, they will be able to follow simple instructions, improve their coordination by stirring and cutting, and take pride in their achievement.



Physical play

This aspect of play can be hard to do at home if you have limited space or other children around, but climbing, jumping, sliding, swinging, balancing, throwing and catching form a really important part of your child's development.

All children need a space to let off steam and use up their energy. A run around at your local park or playground can mean that your child is then more able to listen to you and do what you ask. You can also use this time as a way of keeping fit by getting involved in chase, hide-and-seek, or kicking a football!

"I've noticed that since we've been going to the park on the weekend, I've felt less out of breath and more able to keep up with them!"

From about 18 months to two years old, your child will start to learn how to catch and kick a ball – the larger the ball, the easier it will be for them to kick and catch, but make sure it's not too heavy.

At this age, they will probably enjoy being pushed on a baby swing or want to try out a small slide. It's great to encourage their sense of adventure, but make sure they don't attempt to use playground equipment that is too big for them – it may not be safe, or they might get scared and be put off exploring.



Music play

It is natural for parents to sing lullabies and soothing songs to their babies, but it's often hard to carry this on when your baby becomes a toddler. Both singing and dancing give your child a great way to express themselves, have fun, and learn words and actions.

Singing with your child can be a good way to relieve your stress and share an activity with them – many toddler groups hold music sessions or include some singing in their sessions.

“Our local Children’s Centre runs a free singing and movement group, which we started going to when my son was about 18 months. He really enjoyed playing the instruments and learning new songs to sing to his mum!”

Children also enjoy playing instruments. At this age, anything that your child can bang, shake or blow into is great fun! Instructions for making a simple shaker with your child are included on the next page.





Shaker instructions

You will need:

-  1 empty, clean yogurt pot
-  1 piece of paper
-  some rice or dried beans
-  a rubber band
-  pens and stickers to decorate your shaker

1. Cut out a circle of paper large enough to fold over the sides of the top of the pot.
2. Put some rice or dried beans into the pot – not too much or you won't get a good sound.
3. Put the paper circle over the top of the pot and secure with a rubber band.
4. Decorate the lid of the shaker with stickers or drawings.

If you...

... make a shaker with your child, they can express themselves by playing along to their favourite songs, and entertain you and the rest of the family!



Reading and storytelling

Sharing picture and storybooks with your child will give them an excellent start on the journey to being able to read. Encourage your child to point out different things in the pictures and, as they get older, see if they can guess what might happen next in the story.

Your child may want to 'read' well-loved books that they know very well – try not to correct them if they are not word perfect, but praise their efforts and help them to recognise letters in the words.

Public libraries are very keen to welcome families and have children's sections with books, CDs and DVDs to borrow. Many also have story time sessions for parents and toddlers. Joining your library is free and can give your child the chance to explore and feel confident with more books than any family could have at home.

"We found that our library gave out stickers and posters to encourage children to take out books – my daughter loved this and now always points out the library when we go past."

If you...

... write a story with your child, with them drawing the pictures, you can develop their language skills and explore storytelling skills (having a beginning, middle and an end), which will set them up for starting school.



Mark making

Drawing, painting, scribbling, cutting and sticking are all brilliant ways for your child to express themselves, and improve coordination and the basics of the skills needed for writing.

Parent and toddler sessions often provide painting and arts and crafts equipment, and can be a good place for your child to explore, especially if you have limited space at home.



If you...

... give your child chunky crayons and scrap paper, they will develop early writing skills (holding a pencil, pressing hard enough, drawing lines, circles) and be able to create something to be proud of.

Puzzles and board games

This type of play helps your child to develop their problem-solving skills and learn about taking turns. It is also a way for them to learn, in a safe and loving environment, about the pleasure of winning and the pain of losing!

Toy libraries offer puzzles and simple board games, as well as other toys and equipment, for you to share with your child. Your local Children's Centre will know if there is one in your area – they may even run one. Keep an eye out for puzzles and games in charity shops – check all the pieces are there before buying.

If you...

... share a puzzle with your child, you can help them to develop their problem-solving skills and take pride in their achievements.



Useful organisations and websites

If you are worried about your child's health:

- speak to your health visitor or your GP as soon as possible
- you can also phone **NHS Direct** on 0845 4647

If you want to talk to someone about your child:

- **Parentline Plus** has a freephone helpline 24 hours a day – 0808 800 2222 or visit www.parentlineplus.org.uk
- **Home-Start UK** is a registered charity that provides support, friendship and practical help to families with children under five in their own homes – www.home-start.org.uk
- **Contact a Family** has a freephone helpline for families with a disabled child – 0808 808 3555 or visit www.cafamily.org.uk

Finding out about local services and support

- Contact your council and ask for the Family (or Children's) Information Services who also advise on childcare facilities.

Finding things to do

- **Bookstart**, the national books for babies programme, is run by **Booktrust**, an independent charity – www.bookstart.org.uk
- Have a look at www.show.me.uk

More about learning and play

- The **Early Home Learning Matters** website has a section for parents that includes lots of information about how you can help your child learn through play – www.earlyhomelearning.org.uk

Original text by Sophie Lington, with thanks to the parents who participated in the Early Learning Partnerships Project. We would like to thank the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) for their funding support.