Play Is Learning

Your child loves to play. From the time she was born, she has been discovering what her body can do. Every time she plays, your child’s brain is making new connections that help her development.

To your child, there’s only one reason to play: to have fun. Her play may look messy, silly, noisy, or repetitive. But you know that she is doing some serious learning! Play is how she tests the possibilities and explores her world.

There is no “right” way to play. Any types of play will give your child a chance to develop new skills.

### How play helps your child’s development

| Social | > When you play with your child, it builds attachment between you.  
| > Playing with others teaches your child cooperation, sharing, empathy, and helping. |
| Emotional | > Expressing herself through play boosts your child’s feeling of self-worth.  
| > When your child pretends, it helps her understand and learn to control her feelings. |
| Physical | > Exploring with her body helps your child strengthen her large and small muscles.  
| > As she repeats actions, your child gains hand-eye coordination and other skills that prepare her for later learning. |
| Intellectual | > Pretend play helps your child make sense of her everyday experiences.  
| > Playing enhances your child’s persistence, attention span, memory, and ability to focus – all skills that are important for success in school. |
| Language | > The more practice she has at making sounds – even silly ones! – the better your child’s tongue and mouth can coordinate to say words.  
| > When she cooperates with you or with another playmate, your child uses words to tell you her ideas. |

Play is good for your child’s brain no matter what. But it can be even better if you join in! Remember to let her lead the way – when you take over, she feels that her ideas don’t have value.
What you can do

Be patient while your child plays. She will probably repeat things over and over. That is how her brain makes new connections.

It may feel strange to let your child lead you in play. And it may be hard at first to participate in the things she enjoys, like doing silly dances, making lots of noise, getting messy, and sitting on the floor. You may need to practice playfulness!

There may be times when she doesn’t want you to play with her. Play beside her. That way you are close by, and you can talk about what she is doing. “Wow, you built a really tall tower. I wonder what will happen to it. Are you going to knock it down?”

Let her try to solve problems during play. Praise her attempts. This makes her confident in her ability to tackle challenges. If she needs help, step in before she gets frustrated.

To your child, everything in your home is a potential toy. That’s why it is important for you to make sure she plays with safe, age-appropriate toys and household objects. Choose toys that can be used in many ways, like blocks, balls, dolls, and books.

Your child will not like it when you tell her to stop playing and transition to another activity! Give her warnings at 5 minutes and again at 1 minute.

Play can happen at any time. You can play while you cook or shop or give your child a bath. In fact, it’s better if you let her decide when she feels like playing – scheduling playtime doesn’t always work with babies and toddlers!

Types of play
Do you recognize any of these from observing your child?

1. Practice play: Enjoying an activity enough to repeat it, like pouring sand through her fingers.
2. Constructive play: Building with blocks to create a structure of some kind.
3. Functional play: Using an object to do a job, like cleaning the floor with a toy vacuum.
4. Rough and tumble play: Laughing and being physically active. (This play should not be aggressive or hurt other children.)
5. Dramatic play: Pretending to do something (like drink juice from an empty cup) or be someone.
6. Games with rules: Young children are just starting to understand cooperation and sharing. They like games where everyone can play, like ring around the rosie or duck, duck, goose.

How does your child show her readiness to play?

What are your child’s favorite types of play?

Think about a time when you took over your child’s play and a time when you guided her. What differences did you notice? How did your child respond?