

Fun ways to play

The importance of play

Play is the single most important activity for the under-fives; it is the 'work' of your child. It is how they learn about themselves, the world around them, and their place in it. Play encourages them to be flexible as they adapt to challenges they encounter. Through play, your child develops their physical, learning and social skills.

There are many easy ways you can encourage your child to play:

- Turn off the television and ensure there is plenty of time for play throughout the day.
- Take play outside, as well as indoors.
- Leave toys out for them to use over time, if you can. That way the play scene can continue over several days
- Join in with your child at times, following their lead. Let them decide what you are going to do and how you are going to do it
- Playing with your child should be fun and is a great way to find out what is important to them.
- Remember, there is no right or wrong way to play and there are not necessarily any results to show at the end. Your child should be able to play in their own way

Tummy time

All babies need some time playing on their tummies every day, so long as you are supervising them. 'Tummy time' helps them learn about movement and develop the skills to roll over, sit and crawl. It allows babies to move about freely, unconstrained by a car seat or buggy.

Tummy time also develops their visual skills by allowing them to look at the world at eye level (rather than seeing only the ceiling!).

You can place your baby on their tummy from birth. It's best to start off with a few minutes of tummy time twice a day and build up from there as they get older. If they find this difficult, you can always begin with laying them across your legs or on your chest. Being face-to-face with your baby or placing a mirror or brightly coloured toy in front of them will also help.

Please remember, you should always supervise your baby when they are on their tummy and always lay your baby down to sleep on their back.

Try different games, toys and experiences

Children learn through their senses. As well as touch, taste, sight, smell and hearing, the senses also include 'proprioception' (body awareness) and 'vestibular' (balance and movement).

It is important for your child's development that they get lots of opportunity to experience a wide range of sensations.

'Messy' play is a great way to give your child lots of different sensations and it helps them to develop hand and finger coordination. You could try:

- Playing in water or sand and making bubbles at bath time
- Hiding toys to find in sand, a box of lentils, jelly or shredded paper
- Painting and making marks with finger paints
- Helping with cooking and baking, especially mixing by hand
- Making and kneading play dough (see recipe below)
- Playing in 'Gloop' (a mixture of corn flour and water).

Children need a range of play experiences. As well as activities that develop hand and finger coordination, they need games that let them use their big muscles and develop large movements.

It is important that your child has toys that are suitable for their stage of development – But toys need not be expensive and simple household items can keep a toddler amused for many an hour!

Don't forget to let your child play with items from nature, such as sand, water, shells and pine cones.

From the age of two, your child will use their imagination in games. There are lots of fun things you can do to support this and join in – let your own imagination run free!

Home

Give your child play food, a dustpan and brush, tea sets, and let them play at being a home owner. Add stuffed toys, dolls, and a high chair or play bath and let them role-play being a mummy or daddy.

Office

Let your child play at being at work. Give them an old keyboard, a toy phone, pens and paper or a handbag. Give them forms from the bank or post office to fill in.

Shop

Using empty boxes or packages, canvas shopping bags, plastic cards, play money and a till or tin to collect it in, help your child to set up their own shop. They will love having you as their customer!

Play in different positions

Experiencing a range of different body positions during play will help your child to develop their muscles and stability. Activities do not always need to be done at a table and you could try:

- Lying on tummy, propped up on elbows
- On all fours – elbows and knees
- Standing
- High kneeling at a table
- Half kneeling
- Lying on one side

Encourage independence and give praise

As children get older they will want to do more for themselves and become more independent. Encourage this by giving support and praise and give them time to try doing things for themselves.

Help your child to feel safe trying new things and reassure them it is okay not to get it right the first time.

Give lots of praise and be specific, for example "Thank you for waiting quietly while I was talking on the phone". Try to give more praise than criticism. Praise doesn't need to be in words - hugs, smiles, a wink or pat on the back can mean just as much.

Tell your children what they have done well and that you are proud of them. And give praise for trying new things, persevering and for being helpful and friendly so that praise is not always linked to achievement.

Recipe for uncooked play dough

Ingredients

- 3 cups of flour
- 1/4 cup of salt
- 1 tablespoon of cooking oil
- 1 cup of water
- Food colouring (liquid is best)
- Optional - flavouring, such as peppermint or vanilla to create a scent.

Method

1. Mix flour and salt together in a large bowl
2. Add water, oil and food colouring (and flavouring if using)
3. Mix it all together - You will have to knead it with your hands at the end
4. If mixture is too stiff, add more water; if it is too sticky, add more flour
5. Store dough in airtight container