



What Babies Learn from Play

By [Alice Sterling Honig, Ph.D.](#)

Many folks think that as babies reach and grab for mobiles over the crib or squeeze banana through their fingers, they are just having a good time. But every time babies use their senses and slowly growing motor skills while playing, they are learning. So you'll want to help your baby or toddler gain the most learning through her play.

Here are some of the developmental skills that babies gain through play:

1. **Senses and motor skills.** Starting when he's only a month old, when you playfully call to your baby from just out of sight, he often tries to turn his head to find where that beloved sound (your voice) is coming from, and connect it to the sight of your face. When your six-month-old baby lifts a rattle so he can see it, and then shakes and listens to it, he is working on vision, hearing, and eye-hand coordination.
2. **Wrist control.** Your baby is born with her hands closed into a fist and thumb tucked inside. By three months, her hands are mostly open (though curled). By ten months, she learns to use just her forefinger to point out all kinds of exciting stuff to you. She may point and vocalize so that you give her a drink. Before 12 months, she will learn to use her thumb and forefinger precisely to pick up a small bit of food. But wrist control takes even longer. Many toddlers still have trouble controlling wrist motions until they are about 1½ years old. Help build her dexterity with toys such as bean bags to toss, soft balls to roll, a cylinder that makes "rain" sounds when turned upside down, or a [snow globe](#).
3. **Separate hand coordination.** Many toys and sports require one hand to do one activity while the other does another motion (think of sharpening a pencil or drawing a bow in archery). Provide your toddler with toys that encourage such separate hand uses. For example, he has to hold a paper still with one hand while he holds a crayon in the other. Wind-up toys require steadying the toy with one hand and turning the handle with the other. Twisting the cap off a toy jar to get at an attractive toy within is another such activity. Holding a xylophone steady while banging on the metal pieces to create musical sounds is another.
4. **Social skills.** Be sure your tot has opportunities to play with peers who are gentle and sociable. They will learn to take turns running inside a cardboard playhouse

- or going "zoom-zoom" with cars on a track. When you see your toddler standing at the edge of a group of other toddlers giggling and chasing, give her the reassurance to enter group play. If she has some words, encourage her to tell the others her name and that she would love to play too.
5. **Sorting and making groups.** Preschoolers need to learn classification and seriation (lining things up in order). Choose toys that will help your baby or toddler learn how to order toys and items from smaller to larger, or skinnier to fatter. Stacking cups and ring stack toys are great aids for this early learning.
 6. **Cause and effect.** At 9 months, your baby loves to push down and then up on the light switch while nestled in your arms. What a feeling of power to get the light to turn on and off! Choose toys that will do something when your baby acts on them. If he pushes a lever, a ball rolls down a slope. If he pushes a pillow aside, he can retrieve a toy you have hidden.
 7. **Size and space concepts.** Provide your child with blocks of assorted sizes. Trial and error stacking attempts will teach her that the tower balances much better when smaller blocks are placed on top of larger blocks rather than the other way around.
 8. **Time concepts.** Before he moves a line of train cars along the track, your toddler has to attach the track together using the tongues and grooves of each section. He also has to attach each car to the next one by hooking them together or snapping the magnet of one onto the magnet of another. Feeding experiences and outdoor times also advance your toddler's understanding of the concepts of "before" and "after." Before your baby can grab a banana to enjoy, you have to peel it for him. Before he can go to the park to play, he has to have his coat and hat on and be buckled into his stroller.
 9. **Counting, numbers, and "more" and "less."** Make heaps of small toys to teach estimation as you play with your baby. She will notice that one pile has more toys than another or that a playmate has more crayons to color with. Introduce numbers by counting fingers and toes in playful games such as "This little piggy goes to market."
 10. **Language learning.** As you play interactive games with him, your baby will be learning lots of words. Use chants and songs. Try: "See saw, Margery Daw" as your toddler rocks on a toy horse. Sing "Row, row, row your boat" and "Twinkle, twinkle, little star." Try chants that involve hand and body motions (such as "The Wheels on the Bus") to get your tot really involved in happy play with you.