



Child Development Service

Play and Learning 1

Baby play: birth to 18 months

You are your baby's first teacher and playmate.

- The first years of life are the most **important time for your child's brain development**.
- Babies learn best when they are **actively involved** and **having fun with you** during everyday activities, so spend time each day playing, learning and having fun with your baby.
- **Keep baby with you** – talk and sing as you do your daily activities. Your baby needs your love, warmth and comfort to grow and develop.
- Watch what your baby is interested in. **Join in and copy** baby's actions, facial expressions, and the sounds they make. Later, add your own actions and sounds for your baby to copy.

When it comes to play, babies:

- **learn through exploring** – looking, listening, touching, sucking, smelling, shaking, banging, dropping
- **communicate from birth** – listening and responding when you speak to them, imitating sounds, babbling, smiling, laughing and crying. Lots of single words start to appear between 12 to 18 months (most 18-month-olds have at least 20 to 24 words). These early words may not sound exactly like they should, for example, 'wawa' for 'water'.
- **learn to use their hands** by reaching for, then holding onto things, and passing them from hand to hand – later, shaking, squeezing and banging toys together. By 12 months, most babies can finger feed, and pick up small things with their thumb and index finger.
- **start by pushing themselves up from their tummies**, then go on to rolling, sitting, crawling, and standing, usually taking first steps at around 12 to 15 months.

What you can do

- **Screen time** – babies learn best through doing things with you. Screen time is not recommended for children younger than 2 years. Make the most of playtime – **turn off** all screens including phones, TVs and computers.
- **Join a playgroup** – visit playgroupwa.com.au or phone 1800 171 882.
- **Join a toy library** – visit toylibraries.org.au
- **Join your local library** – visit slwa.wa.gov.au

Some activities to try

- **Talk, read and sing to your baby** – encourage your baby to look at your face when you talk with them. Enjoy picture books together, sing rhymes and action songs. As your baby grows, help them to join in with you.
- **Bath time play** – with sponges, funnels, floating toys, bubbles, cups, and strainers. Always supervise baby closely at bath time.
- **Move to music** – babies find being rocked and swayed slowly to music soothing. Gentle jiggling and bouncing can also be fun. Never shake or throw babies in the air. Shaking can damage their brains.



Some activities to try (continued)

■ **Active play** – young babies need lots of tummy time. When your baby starts to move, provide opportunities for them to move their body – a large cardboard box to crawl through, sit and ride-on toys, push and pull-along toys, playing with toys while standing at a sofa or coffee table, balls to throw and kick, toys that roll and move. When your baby starts moving they need close supervision as they may fall over, fall off furniture or bump into things.



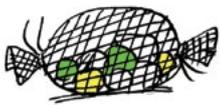
■ **Thinking play** – babies are learning ‘if I do this – that happens’.

Show them how to pull a string or push a button to make a toy light up or make a sound, drop a ball and watch where it goes, pull away a cloth or look under a cup to find a toy.

Other thinking toys include shape sorters, chunky blocks or rings to stack, nesting cups or barrels, pegboards with a few large pegs, simple posting boxes and early puzzles.

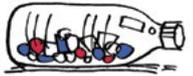
Homemade toys for babies

Homemade toys are fun, easy to make, cheap, and help to develop your child’s creativity.



Scrunch bag – put cellophane or tissue paper into a mesh fruit or onion bag (make sure the mesh is small enough that little fingers can’t get caught).

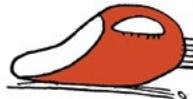
Tie a strong knot at each end.



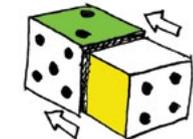
Shakers and rolling toys – fill a washed and dried strong plastic container with rice, pasta, lentils, pieces of coloured paper, or water with food colouring. Close the lid of the container firmly and secure with electrical tape to make sure the lid stays on during play.



Boats – plastic containers make great boats in the bath.



Scoops – cut down a plastic milk bottle to make a scoop. Punch holes in it to make a sieve, or take off the lid to make a funnel (make sure there are no sharp or rough edges).



Blocks – cut two cardboard (1 litre) milk cartons and slip one into the other to make a cube. Secure with tape and decorate.

Keeping your child safe

- Supervise your child closely at all times.
- Babies, toddlers and young children can choke on small toys and objects. Regularly check toys to make sure they are safe and in good condition.
 - Toys should be bigger than a 20 cent coin.
 - Strings on toys should be less than 20 centimetres long.
- Do a safety check and make sure your home is safe for your baby to actively explore.

Find out more

For more information on play, learning, and a range of other topics, visit:

- playgroupwa.com.au
- bringingupgreatkids.org
- raisingchildren.net.au
- cahs.health.wa.gov.au/childhealthresources



For more information about the metropolitan **Child Development Service** phone 1300 551 827 or visit cahs.health.wa.gov.au/childdevelopment

This document can be made available in alternative formats on request for a person with a disability.

This publication is provided for general education and information purposes.

Contact a qualified healthcare professional for any medical advice needed.

© State of Western Australia, Child and Adolescent Health Service – Community Health June 2023 CAH-000920