



ZERO TO THREE
Early connections last a lifetime



Play

is Your Child's Superpower

Babies and toddlers learn so fast. It is amazing to watch. And the *best* way for young children to learn is through play. Play helps your child's brain grow and helps them learn about the world.

What kids learn through play

When kids pick what to do and have fun, they learn about themselves and the world around them. Some people worry that play is “wasting time.” You may feel like your child should be learning letters or numbers. With adults’ help, they can learn these things during play. For example, counting socks while helping with laundry is a great way to practice math.

Play builds important social skills

Play helps children learn self-control. Pretend play helps them imagine how others feel. They can be the mom, a dinosaur, or the bad guy. And playing with other children helps them learn rules and take turns. Play also helps kids:

- ▶ pay attention
- ▶ solve problems
- ▶ experiment
- ▶ keep trying when things are hard

This kind of learning helps kids be ready for school.



How parents can help

- ▶ **Give choices:** Almost anything child-safe can be a toy. Use blankets to make forts. Plastic food containers can be blocks. Use containers with rice or beans to make music.
- ▶ **Simple toys are better:** “Old-fashioned” toys are often the best for learning. If a toy does too much by itself when you push a button, your little one is not learning.
- ▶ **You are your child’s first and favorite playmate.** Try to play with your child every day. Even 5–10 minutes can make a big difference.

Tips for free play

- 1 Set up a safe space:** Make sure your play area is safe.
- 2 Follow your child:** Let your child explore toys in their own way. There is no “wrong” way to play.
- 3 Repetition is important:** Kids need to do things over and over to learn. It might get boring for you, but they are learning a lot.
- 4 Allow small challenges:** Don’t help too soon when your child gets frustrated. Children feel proud and learn about persistence when they solve problems on their own.
- 5 Try different things:** Let them explore different touches, smells, and safe tastes.
- 6 Keep the TV off:** Having the TV on distracts your child. It will also distract you from joining the fun. Turn on some music instead.

Make play a daily habit

Make play a part of your child’s everyday life. Try not to interrupt. Step back and watch. Your child will gain confidence, learn problem-solving, and enjoy learning.

Have more questions?

Talk to your baby’s healthcare provider or one of the professionals supporting your family.

©2026 by the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai. All rights reserved.

Receive messages like this on your phone

Text **SPARKS**
to **274 448**