

Child Development and Play

From birth to age five, children's brains develop rapidly, reaching up to 90% of their full capacity. These early years are crucial for growth, and play is key to supporting social, emotional, physical, and cognitive development. This guide explores why play matters and how to nurture it effectively.

Play to support social development

Play helps children develop social skills like cooperation, negotiation, and problem-solving. Adults can scaffold learning by introducing new ideas and information to extend play.

Examples include:

- **Role play:** such as pretending to be doctors and nurses, police officers, shopkeepers, or vets.
- **Serve-and-return communication:** engaging in two-way conversations.
- **Turn-taking games:** activities like Jenga, skittles, or musical games where players take turns making and repeating sounds.
- **Collaborative construction:** building together through activities like den making, block play, or creating with Lego.

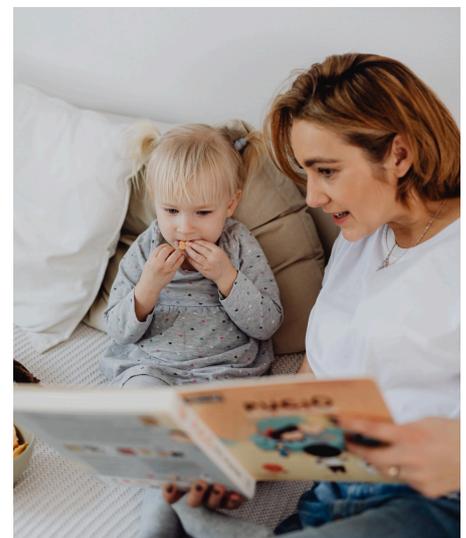


Play to support emotional development

Play helps children build emotional skills by learning to manage impulses and understand their feelings. Adults support this process through co-regulation.

Examples include:

- **Story time:** offer opportunities to observe facial expressions and discuss how characters might be feeling and why.
- **Emotion charades:** make a facial expression for the child to guess the emotion being shown.
- **Short Pixar films:** a fun way to talk about characters' emotions and what might be causing them.
- **Group free play:** allows children to build self-confidence and explore a range of emotions in different settings.

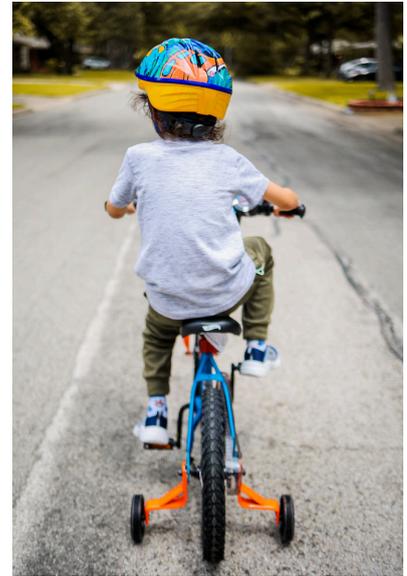


Play to support physical development

Physical play helps children build strong, healthy bodies while developing coordination and fine and gross motor skills. It also supports their social and emotional growth.

Examples include:

- **Sensory circuits:** (see our Sensory Circuits guide for more details)
- **Outdoor play:** visiting the park, going for walks, or bike rides
- **Fine motor activities:** threading pipe cleaners through a sieve, cutting, Lego building, or pegging items on a washing line
- **Gross motor activities:** running, jumping, throwing a ball, or climbing



Play to support cognitive development

Play is essential for developing children's cognitive skills. Through it, children begin to think independently, build early literacy and numeracy skills, and explore basic scientific and mathematical concepts. It fosters problem-solving, creativity, reasoning, and curiosity, helping them understand the world around them in a hands-on, engaging way.

Examples include:

- **Pretend/Object play:** children use objects imaginatively, such as turning a banana into a phone or fabric into a superhero cape
- **Small world play:** engaging with figures like dinosaurs, animals, or superheroes in imaginative scenarios
- **Block play:** building and creating with blocks
- **Shape matching:** activities like matching lids to the correct pots and pans

