

Having fun with your baby is really important

Babies are individuals

All babies are different; some are calm, some are active. At first, it can be confusing to know what your baby needs and how to respond. This leaflet has been designed to help you tune in to your baby. This will promote a good strong bond between you. We also hope you'll find the activities fun.

Building strong relationships

Some parents may feel 'bonded' with their baby even before the birth. For others this bonding does not happen 'automatically'. Once your baby is born, there are lots of things that can influence the way your relationship develops. These include:

- the kind of temperament your baby has
- how you look at, speak to and handle your baby
- how you are feeling
- how much support you are getting with your new baby.

Your positive, calm interactions with your baby help him or her to be calm too. And using different ways to interact not only helps to build a strong bond between you, but also stimulates your baby's brain development.

Developing healthy baby brains

Your baby's brain development speeds up after birth so your interactions in these early months are crucial. From day one, babies are learning about you, your feelings, your words and your touches. All these experiences stimulate healthy brain growth, setting up strong connections for their future learning. Young babies who have had good interaction experiences with their carers are more able to learn about how to communicate with others. These children are more likely to do better in school, make friends more easily and display fewer behavioural difficulties later on in childhood.

Babies love to communicate with you

Watch closely and you will see that your baby is sending out signals from the day they are born. This is their way of saying '*Hey! Over here! Come and interact with me!*' They often let you know they're ready to interact by looking for your face or turning round until you have eye contact. They often follow this by increasing face and body movements and making more noises. Imagine this like a dance – by following your baby's lead you can join in the steps at a level your baby feels comfortable with. Babies will probably tell you when they've had enough by turning or looking away, yawning, or putting their hands to their face.

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Most important of all – relax!

Parents often naturally provide all the right kinds of interactions with babies so the most important thing for you to do is slow down, relax and spend time with your baby. There are hundreds of interactions between you and your baby occurring everyday during normal activities like feeding, nappy changing and bathing.

Here are a few parent-and-baby activities that we know are really helpful for baby brain development and developing healthy relationships.

Before starting these activities, why not have a go at watching your baby closely and trying to work out what are the different ways he or she is trying to tell you something?

1 Taking turns to talk to each other

After spending nine months in the womb, babies can recognise their mother's voice as early as a few minutes after birth. Babies are biologically wired up to tune into the sound of your voice and will often show a noticeable response when they hear you.

Talking gently or singing to your baby stimulates brain development and helps your baby learn about communication and also that you are a safe, dependable carer. This helps build trust.

Try to spend a few minutes, several times a day, holding your baby, preferably face to face, copying their noises and expressions, or singing nursery rhymes.

Babies also have ways of 'talking' to you using body movements and sounds. Lots of wriggly arm and leg movements with excited noises is your baby's way of saying he or she likes what's happening. Turning away, arching his back or putting his hand to his face are your baby's way of saying '*I've had enough of that for now thanks*'. Watch your baby closely and you will start to notice these baby ways of 'talking'.

2 Trying out ways to calm your baby

Babies use crying as one way of communicating. It's specifically designed to distress us so that we'll respond as soon as possible! Sometimes they're saying '*I'm hungry*', '*I'm too hot*' or '*I've got a wet nappy*'. But just like adults, all babies have times when they feel tired, irritable, bored, frightened or just need to have a little cry to feel better again. This is when they need you to help them become calm again and manage these tricky feelings.

You could try:

- swaying
- singing gently

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- rocking
- cuddling
- gentle bouncing
- stroking
- dimming the lights
- baby massage
- using a toy to distract them.

Babies often use objects to calm themselves, like blankets, soft toys or sucking their own fingers. These activities are important parts of your baby's emotional world so try not to prevent them.

Avoid scratch mittens – they can stop a baby using their hands to explore their own face and mouth and also touching you – an important part of their emotional development. Only use mittens when your baby's hands might get cold outside.

3 Faces are fun!

Babies are especially interested in human faces. Looking at responsive faces helps stimulate social and emotional centres in their brain. Playing face-to-face activities with you and others also helps them learn where sounds come from and how people use different facial expressions to communicate feelings.

You could try:

- peekaboo
- lap games like 'Row, row, row the boat'
- nursery rhymes
- blowing bubbles.

There are also some practical ways to increase your face-to-face time with your baby, for example, choosing a pram, buggy or baby sling which lets your baby look directly at your face.

4 Copying each other

Babies love to copy you, and they really love you to copy them! When you watch closely you will see your baby trying to copy your mouth and face movements. They often need 10 or 15 seconds to copy you, so be sure to wait for a while to give them chance. You can also copy their actions and their sounds, which helps them to watch you closely, building concentration and promoting the beginnings of turn-taking.

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5 Become a sports commentator!

Babies are listening from day one. At first they have no idea what your words mean, but this will come in time. Babies learn a great deal from the tone, pitch and quality of your voice so keep talking to them! Chatting along is just fine.

Babies also listen to you as a way of understanding how to interpret their own feelings and sensations. You can help by giving them a running commentary like a sports announcer. It might feel a bit silly but your baby will love it! You could say *'Hey, you're looking at daddy to see what he's doing!'* *'You're getting very excited looking at that toy!'* It's a bit like imagining you are doing the voices to the film *Look Who's Talking* – this is a way of putting your baby's experience into words as if he or she could talk.

6 Learning about feelings

Babies have very strong emotional experiences and can seem to be full of sadness, rage or despair at times. From day one, they need you to help them learn about feelings and how to cope with them.

One of the first steps is for you to give words to your baby's feelings.

This can be trickier than it sounds! It's difficult to know exactly how a baby is feeling, but using phrases like *'that's a happy face!'* or *'you look like that's upset you a bit'* do help even the tiniest baby to learn that you are trying your best to understand and help.

7 Looking at books together

Babies like looking at books from a really early age. This is a great parent and baby activity for many reasons – it stimulates brain development in areas related to visual understanding, learning sounds, and facial expressions.

Try to find a way to look at books where you can see each other's faces.

8 Rhymes, rhythms and repetition

Simple rhythms and tunes will really help your baby to learn about sounds and words – that's why we naturally raise our voices and use a sing song tone when we speak to a young child! Babies need to hear rhymes and songs over and over again because it stimulates their brain pathways to strengthen and grow.

Older babies start to get clingy

Interacting with your baby in these ways will help you form a healthy, strong relationship and will stimulate the baby's brain in all the right places. At around 8 to 10 months or so, babies have a tendency to become more clingy for a while. They may seem nervous of strangers and cry more if you leave

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the room. They may refuse to sleep on their own or cry more for a certain adult. Parents often say their baby tries to follow them around more at this stage.

This is a key time for your baby to learn about trust; he or she needs very short separations from you in order to learn that you do always come back!

Try to gently encourage your baby's first steps into independence by helping him or her cope with the strong feelings that arise when you are apart. For example, let your baby know you'll be right back after he or she has had a nap or a short stay with Nanna. Sometimes babies like to keep a special toy or one of your belongings with them while you're away. It will take several times of being apart before your baby starts to learn that they can cope with their feelings while you are apart. Once this happens their confidence will blossom.

This is often a difficult time for parents too, getting used to their own feelings of separation from their new baby. So make sure you ask others to support you while you and your baby are learning to cope with separation.

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Let's play!

This leaflet is designed to help you understand why play is so important for children and includes suggestions for fun activities, which we hope you and your children will enjoy doing together.

All children need to play

All children are different, but every child is born with a natural desire to play and explore. Play is like a child's job – it is how they learn about and understand the world around them.

Play is an ideal opportunity for children to learn to focus their attention, imitate actions and sounds, take turns, anticipate what comes next, recognise when something is hidden that it still exists, understand new words, say new words and pretend.

Children need to believe that their efforts are worthwhile and considered important enough to be taken seriously and to be given the time to be understood and listened to. Play really is serious business.

What is play?

Babies start playing and communicating from the minute they are born. When a baby watches an adult's face or listens to an adult's voice, he or she is starting to learn about taking turns, having fun and being playful with another person. This develops into exchanging smiles and giggles, looking at things together and exploring toys and objects.

Young children don't need lots of expensive toys – the packaging of the toys often make the most interesting playthings: a cardboard box can become a car, a spaceship and all manner of interesting things. The most important factors in play are your time and your joint imaginations. As a parent, you can help by watching your child play, waiting to see what catches his or her attention, and helping him or her to explore those things in their own unique way.

Children can lead the way!

When children play, they like to lead the way.

The first step for you is to recognise what your child is interested in and to follow their lead. Following your child's lead, however, is not a passive process of just watching, but depends on your ability to follow and encourage your child's way of expressing themselves. It is important to try and pick up on your child's cues of wanting you to join in, wanting to change their focus of attention or wanting to stop playing a particular game. This isn't always easy and it can be a case of trial and error – your child will soon let you know whether you are wanted as an active play partner, or watcher, at any particular time.

Let's play!

Children's play can tell us a lot about how they are thinking and feeling. For children who are too young to 'talk' in words, their play will be like their part of a conversation. Early on in your relationship with your baby, your attention and sensitivity to what they are trying to communicate is very important. Even if you are not sure what they are trying to say, trying to understand will show your baby that you are interested in them and trying to make a connection. Children tend to be very generous in their efforts to help us to understand them and so don't worry if you feel confused at first, you will get lots more chances.

Mirroring your baby's facial expressions, and imitation, can seem like just a bit of fun but at the same time this is helping your baby to learn about himself and his feelings. The more secure your child feels, the more he'll be able to explore and experiment with new things in a creative way.

Stimulation is important for your child and there are so many fascinating toys around for children to play with. Even though your child will be able to learn certain things from playing with toys, if you join in too that will make playtime a much more meaningful experience and will also encourage much needed social skills for when they go to nursery or playgroup.

Children learn best when they lead the way

All parents want to teach their children new skills like counting, learning shapes, colours and words. The best way to do this is to for you to point out the things your child is already interested in and playing with, and then say the words for them. For example '*That's the blue square you've put in*', '*You've got 1, 2, 3 little ducks*' or '*There goes the big ball*'. It is well known that the skills used in play are the basics for a child learning to communicate through language, so playing with your child is also teaching him language skills.

It can be surprisingly difficult to let your child take the lead in play. You might want to play too, or make suggestions, or ask questions so that your child learns things. Actually, your child enjoys play best when you describe what they are already doing, rather than asking too many questions or making suggestions.

Sometimes your child will do things that aren't quite correct, like putting a water cup on their head, painting a face in green, or playing a board game upside down. You might be concerned that this could lead them into bad habits or stop them from learning about how to do things right. But don't worry, what might seem to you to be an incorrect use of a particular toy might actually be a clever and creative idea from your child exploring their imagination. Even better, your child will have great fun if you join in being silly.

Let's play!

The best kinds of play are sometimes the messiest!

It can be really hard to let children make a mess, but what might look to you like a huge mess may actually be a child's most creative moment! There are a number of reasons why messy play is so helpful for children's development. They get to experiment and explore in exciting ways, helping them to learn lots of new things about the world. Messy play also helps children to understand that mess can be sorted out and made 'OK' again with a little bit of help from other people. This is the start of your child learning about coping skills. Children who have been allowed to explore messy play and have been helped to learn how to tidy up start to understand that they are able to cope with messy feelings too. As they get older, when they come across difficult situations, they are able to tolerate these difficulties and think about ways to sort it out. So try not to get cross if your child makes a mess, and try to have fun with them helping you clear up afterwards.

Young children explore objects by putting them in their mouths and this is an important part of their learning. Young children see food as a great play opportunity because squishing, mashing and mixing their food is such a great way to learn about textures, colours and touch. If you are worried about the mess, get a plastic sheet or mat to put underneath their chair during mealtimes. They will grow out of it eventually!

Play helps children learn about emotions

Children who have experienced positive play experiences with their parents and carers, in which they have been able to take the lead, tend to develop more self-confidence and are more able to trust other people. This is because play helps children learn that they can have a positive impact on their surroundings and that adults will not intrude upon or control their imagination.

Parents are important partners in a child's world of play

Sometimes children don't want to play with their parents, and this can make the parent feel hurt or rejected. If this happens, it can be tempting to start avoiding play times with your child, but this will often just make matters worse. You might try just sitting near your child watching him or her play, without making too many comments at first. Remember, your child values your positive attention and words more than your suggestions or directions at this stage. If your child asks you to join in, try to follow their instructions about what to do – your child will love this sense of being in charge for once!

Let's play!

Some parents find it hard to play

It is not unusual for parents to find playing with their children a bit hard at times. This might be because they get bored at their child's need for constant repetition, or might feel it is their responsibility to come up with all the ideas during play. Sometimes parents feel silly, or don't know what to do. There are times when parents might worry about allowing their child to be silly or to play 'incorrectly' with things. But with a few simple toys or objects and a bit of attention from you, most children will get to work imagining and pretending and having fun.

Sometimes playing with your child may bring back memories from your own childhood, positive and negative. Occasionally these memories can get in the way of you and your child enjoying your play together. If this happens, you might find it helpful to talk it over with someone you feel comfortable with, for example your midwife, GP or health visitor, or a friend or family member.

Play tips

Here are some ideas for play with your baby in the first year.

Birth to six months

During these early months, your baby is learning about him or herself, about other people, and how the world sounds, looks, feels and smells. He or she is still new to the world and needs you and one or two favourite adults to help make sense of what's happening.

During the first six months, babies enjoy:

- ▣ You! You are your baby's favourite plaything – your face to look at and touch, your eyes, your voice, your singing.
- ▣ Brightly coloured, noisy objects like mobiles or rattles.
- ▣ Playing on the floor looking at and reaching for toys – this will help them learn to reach, roll over, kick their legs and move their arms.
- ▣ A wide variety of objects that feel different – hard, soft, squashy, silky.