



Home • Resources & Services

 PARENTING RESOURCE

Stages of Play From Birth to 6 Months: A Full-Body Experience!

 En español | Feb 26, 2015

Learn how infants and toddlers develop play skills from birth to 3, and what toys and activities are appropriate for their age.



Have you noticed if you put your finger in your newborn's palm, she will grasp your finger tightly? This is an important reflex—an action that babies are born with and do automatically. It looks like she's playing with you, doesn't it! Beginning at about 3 months, however, these reflexes begin to disappear. Now, babies start moving their bodies with purpose. They become noticeably more interested in the world around them. They begin to explore toys and people through their senses, and they learn what objects and people are and do through this sensory play. Find out how.

Feeling Connected

Your baby's very first playmates and play dates are with you and others who care for him. These early interactions help you and your baby feel more connected and "tuned in" to each other. For example, your baby may gaze at you, turn to look at you when you start singing a lullaby, or quiet at the sound of your voice. Babies also begin to show when they need a break from interactions, by turning away, closing their eyes, back-arching, fussing or making fussy sounds, hiccupping, crying, or falling asleep. When you see these signals, take a break. You'll know your baby is ready to connect again when his expression is calm and clear-eyed, when he meets your gaze, moves his arms or legs, turns toward you, makes sounds—or wakes up!

Looking and Noticing

Babies' vision is improving during this period. They can see objects further away and can also see colors, though they still prefer objects with strong color contrast (such as black, white, and red).

Toys to Explore:

- YOU
- Colorful (or high contrast) rattles and other objects

Helping Your Baby Play and Learn:

- Slowly move a colorful object in front of your baby's eyes from about 10–12 inches away. See if your little one can follow this object with his gaze as you move it left, right, up, and down, and in a slow circle. In this game, your baby is learning to track objects using his eyes. Soon he will be tracking you as you move around the room.
- Hold up a rattle in each hand. Shake one and watch if your baby focuses on it. Give her a few seconds, then shake the other rattle. Wait for her to focus on that one. Shifting gaze between two objects means babies can focus their attention (and vision) on objects they find interesting.

Grasping Begins

Your baby is now able to look at an object and move her hand in that direction to grab it. This is how hand-eye coordination develops. Soon your baby will be transferring toys or other small objects from one hand to the other (sometimes pausing to mouth them for a bit).

Toys to Explore:

- YOUR fingers, nose, hair, etc.
- Brightly colored rattles or other toys that are easy to grasp
- Toys that make gentle noises when shaken or swiped at

Helping Your Baby Play and Learn:

- Offer your baby two rattles within reaching distance. Let him reach for and grasp the one he likes best.
- Offer your baby two objects to hold. Once she is holding one, offer her a second one. At first, she will drop what she is holding to grab a second object. Over time, she will learn to hold two things at once.

Into the Mouth!

Babies are curious about everything—and mouthing toys (and almost anything else!) is an important way that babies explore their world. The mouth is a highly developed nerve center so mouthing tells babies a lot about an object—what texture it is, what it might do, how large it is, what it tastes like, and more. Mouthing objects can also help with teething pain, which can begin as early as 4 months. Babies will continue to mouth objects into their toddler years.

Toys to Explore:

- Baby-safe rattles, teethers, board or fabric books, and other toys with different textures and shapes

Helping Your Baby Play and Learn:

- Offer your baby safe objects to mouth. Watch as he gazes at the object that interests him, reaches for it, and then mouths it to figure out what it is!
- Be sure to clean toys regularly to keep your little one healthy.

It's Tummy-Time!

Giving your child a chance to spend time on her tummy is important for her development. It may not look like anything's happening, but it's helping her develop important muscles in her neck and trunk. When starting tummy-time, you will see your baby first lift her head up from the floor for a few seconds. Over time, she will begin to push up on her forearms. Next, she will start to push up on her hands and be able to stay in this position for longer periods of time. As she gets stronger, your baby will begin to pivot in a circle on her belly to reach toys. Exploring in new ways like this builds your baby's thinking skills.

Toys to Explore:

- YOU. Lie on your belly facing your baby so that he can gaze at and "talk" to you.
- Baby-safe mirrors, rattles, or other toys to place in front of your baby
- Baby-safe (board, fabric or plastic) books to play with

Helping Your Baby Play and Learn:

- Give your baby many chances to be on her tummy across the day for as long as she can tolerate it, even if it's just for a few minutes. Offer her a child-safe mirror, toy, book, or your face to look at while on her tummy. If she starts to fuss, pick her up or roll her to her back. Try again a little later.
- Every time you change your baby's diaper, make a habit of rolling him over briefly to give him a minute of supervised tummy time. Then roll him back and pick him up. This lets him experience what it feels like to roll back and forth.
- While on her back, gently lift your baby's feet up over her body toward her mouth. Soon, she might even begin putting her toes in her mouth! Rocking their feet up over their bodies helps babies get enough momentum to roll to their sides and later, their bellies.