



## **The importance of play**

### **What is play?**

Play is the single most important activity for the under fives; it is the 'work' of a child. It is how they learn about themselves, the world around them, and their place in it. Play encourages them to be flexible as they adapt to challenges they encounter. Through play, a child develops their physical, learning and social skills.

### **Tummy time**

All babies need some time playing on their tummies every day, so long as they are supervised. 'Tummy time' helps them learn about movement and develop the skills to roll over, sit and crawl. It allows babies to move about freely, unconstrained by a car seat or buggy. Tummy time also develops their visual skills by allowing them to look at the world at eye level (rather than seeing only the ceiling!).

A baby can be placed on their tummy from birth. It's best to start off with a few minutes of tummy time twice a day and build up from there as they get older. If they find this difficult, to begin with you can lay them across your legs or on your chest. Being face-to-face with a baby or placing a mirror or brightly coloured toy in front of them will also help.

Please remember, you should always supervise a baby when they are on their tummy and always lay a baby down to sleep on their back.

### **Explorative play**

Children explore the world through play. Through exploratory play they learn about the world and the effect they can have on the environment. This type of play starts from very early in a child's life and is one of the first types of play they experience.

Exploratory play involves the child using all their senses. These include proprioception (body awareness) and vestibular (balance) as well as the more familiar touch, taste, sight, smell and hearing. Children will examine objects by looking, touching (with hands and mouths), listening and moving it to learn about how they can influence the world around them. This type of play can include sand, water and messy play.

Messy play is a great way to give your child lots of different sensations and it helps them to develop hand and finger coordination. You could try:

- playing in water or sand and making bubbles at bath time
- hiding toys to find in sand, a box of lentils, jelly or shredded paper
- painting and making marks with finger paints
- helping with cooking and baking, especially mixing by hand
- making and kneading play dough (see recipe below)
- playing in 'Gloop' (a mixture of corn flour and water).

## **Recipe for uncooked play dough**

### Ingredients

- 3 cups of flour
- 1/4 cup of salt
- 1 tablespoon of cooking oil
- 1 cup of water
- Food colouring (liquid is best)
- Optional - flavouring, such as peppermint or vanilla to create a scent.

### Method

1. Mix flour and salt together in a large bowl
2. Add water, oil and food colouring (and flavouring if using)
3. Mix it all together - You will have to knead it with your hands at the end
4. If mixture is too stiff, add more water; if it is too sticky, add more flour
5. Store dough in airtight container.

## **Early manipulative play**

Manipulative play in the early stages is about learning to use your hands. Fine motor skills develop through a number of different stages from sensory awareness to in-hand manipulation and tool-use. These skills are essential for the development of other activities of daily living. Below are some play activities to help your child develop these essential skills.

### Reach, grasp, release

Reach, grasp and release are fundamental fine motor skills. It is important to develop these skills early as they are building blocks to complex fine motor skills and participation in activities of daily living which develop later.

### Finger isolation

Finger isolation is an important stage in the development of grasp. It is the ability to move certain fingers apart from the rest of the hand/fingers.

When children begin using their hands, all fingers move together at the same time. As they grow and develop, they gain the ability to move individual fingers. It helps with being able to fasten and unfasten buttons, hold and control a pencil for drawing and writing, cut with scissors, type on a keyboard, play a musical instrument, tie shoelaces, and many other daily living skills

### Pincer grip

Being able to pick up small items between your thumb and index finger is an important stage in the development of hand function.

A pincer grasp is used to hold a pencil, thread a button through a hole and pick up coins.

### Bilateral skills

An important stage in the development of fine motor skills is the development of bilateral hand use

### Construction

Construction play involves manipulating one or more pieces of play materials to create something new. This may involve a variety of methods – stacking, sticking, putting together, taking things apart, sorting or moulding, to name a few.

Construction play develops all types of skills and behaviours.

- The motor skills necessary to create and manipulate the items.
- Imagination skills.
- Planning and ideation skills; the ability to try out and test ideas.
- Perseverance when things don't work
- Taking turns and collaborating when playing with others.

[Add link for Foundation Skills > Fine Motor](#)

### Playing with technology

There are benefits to using technology both for play and learning. Using technology can help with creativity, problem solving, visual thinking and can make learning fun. Using the right kind of technology/games/activities can support the development of your child's learning and skills. This includes fine motor skills, letter/number/shape/colour recognition eye-hand co-ordination, reading, writing, planning and problem solving.

### Arts and crafts

Taking part in art and craft activities can help a child in many ways. Arts and crafts activities can help to develop your child's imagination and creativity, their planning and organisation skills and fine motor skills

### **Energetic play**

Children learn about how the body works and moves through active and energetic play. They learn to run, jump, throw & catch and kick. It can include mastering ball games, playground equipment, going on a scooter, riding a bike etc.

Active and Energetic play develops into sporting, fitness and exercise activities used for leisure and pleasure for young people and adults e.g. football, rugby, tennis, swimming, dance and martial arts etc.

### **Social play**

Social play begins early with smiling and cooing, imitation and peek a boo. Children then learn to share toys during play with others and they continue to develop social skills that involve turn taking and following the rules. As children grow and develop their play moves from solitary to parallel play (where children play alongside but not with each other) then onto social play (where children share and interact directly).

For young people a significant amount of the leisure time involves spending time with friends in activities they enjoy doing together. They might not perceive this as 'play' however it is still classed as social interaction.

### **Pretend play**

Through pretend play children learn to express themselves and practice adult and cultural roles. Children start by pretending to do everyday activities, they then participate and play with figures/dolls/teddies. They then link pretend play into action sequences and finally join in pretend games with other children.

### **Play in different positions**

Experiencing a range of different body positions during play will help a child to develop their muscles and stability. Activities do not always need to be done at a table and you could try:

- lying on tummy, propped up on elbows
- on all fours – elbows and knees
- standing
- high kneeling at a table
- half kneeling
- lying on one side.

### **Encourage independence and give praise**

As children get older they will want to do more for themselves and become more independent. Encourage this by giving support and praise and give them time to try doing things for themselves.

### **Some tips when encouraging play**

- Help a child to feel safe trying new things and reassure them it is okay not to get it right the first time.
- Give lots of praise and be specific, for example “*Thank you for waiting quietly while I was talking on the phone*”. Try to give more praise than criticism. Praise doesn’t need to be in words - hugs, smiles, a wink or pat on the back can mean just as much.
- Tell children what they have done well and that you are proud of them. And give praise for trying new things, persevering and for being helpful and friendly so that praise is not always linked to achievement.

