

## Power of Play: Building Skills While Having Fun

**P**lay is children's work. From day one, children are eager and determined to understand how the world works, which they do through play. Play is how children learn to communicate, solve problems, and get along with others. Watch your child at play and you will see the kind of concentration, passion, and creativity that artists and scientists bring to their work. And when you join in, you can expand your child's learning while also building a strong bond.

### WHAT YOU CAN DO:

- **Safety first.** Remember, your little explorer will need you to keep his play areas safe. Make sure toys don't have parts that fit all the way in his mouth. Get down on his level to see what he can reach. This is especially important as he learns to move. It will mean a lot less "no's," which makes everyone happier.
- **Watch and wait.** See what your child is trying to do. Provide just enough support for her to achieve her goal or take the next step toward a new goal. You might bring an object your newborn is staring at closer so she can explore it with her hands. Or, you may encourage your toddler to try a different space where the puzzle piece might fit when she is getting frustrated.
- **Follow the leader.** Some children love lots of bells and whistles; others find a lot of noise overwhelming and prefer to explore with their eyes. Some crave lots of movement, rolling, crawling, or jumping. Others are most interested in using their hands to figure out how a toy or object works. Follow his lead, and you'll discover what kinds of activities are right for him.
- **Play back-and-forth games.** Coo and talk to your baby. You can imitate her sounds and wait for her to respond. Encourage her to copy you, too—like showing her that pushing the button makes the toy dog bark.
- **Play running, jumping, and moving games.** Oldies but goodies like "Wheels on the Bus" and "Duck, Duck, Goose" encourage children to move, sing, listen, take turns, and cooperate. Visits to the park, playground, or out in the back yard offer chances to run, climb, and play with other children. Try creating an obstacle course indoors on a rainy day.
- **Problem-solve through play.** Toddlers love to find out how things fit together. That's why they have so much fun playing with blocks of different sizes or trying to fit shapes into a shape box. Boxes or cups that fit together or plastic containers of different sizes will also help toddlers practice concepts like big, little, in, out, as well as learn about colors, shapes, and sizes.
- **Make music together.** Give babies instruments to explore and sing along. Play fun musical games like, "Statue," "Freeze," and "Hokey-Pokey" that offer opportunities to help toddlers listen and follow directions. Toddlers are also beginning to imitate words and melodies. They love to sing songs and have you read books with rhyming words. Words are easier to learn when they rhyme or are put to music. See if your toddler knows the next word in the song by pausing before you sing it. Dance to the music. This is a wonderful way to exercise those arms and legs and to experience the joy of movement. Offer musical instruments so she can make her own music, too.
- **Encourage friendships.** Invite another toddler over to play. Take a trip to the neighborhood park or a cousin's home. These are great opportunities to learn about playing with others and are opportunities to help your child share and resolve conflicts. She can also learn new skills by watching other children.
- **Act it out.** Encourage fantasy play by providing dress-up and other props. Use items like hats, scarves, backpacks, bowls and containers, music makers, and whatever else you and your child can find. Join the fun. When you get involved, you can help him expand on his ideas and also learn about his thoughts and feelings as he acts them out through play.