

Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Playing and Learning with Your New Baby

Life with a newborn is challenging, rewarding and exhausting. Over the first few months you'll master the baby care basics (feeding, changing, bathing, sleeping) and settle into a daily routine. But no matter how much reading and preparation you did beforehand, life with a newborn is full of surprises.

Although it can be hard to adjust to the changing and often unpredictable lifestyle that a baby demands, savor the experience. After all, that first year flies by, never to be re-captured. Once you've recovered your energy, try to relax, have fun and cherish the time you have with your baby.

Learning Through Play

Playing offers a way for babies to learn and a chance for parents to spend quality time bonding with their child. Through play activities, babies develop hand-eye coordination and motor skills. Playtime also helps your baby learn to express him or herself and interact with others.

Play activities don't need to involve structured learning activities. There are many little games and rituals you can create to suit your baby's personality and learning style at each stage of their development.

Activities in the Early Months

Even at one month old, your baby can participate in simple activities. By this point, he or she will look at your face and stare at objects. Although they can't pick things up, babies delight in seeing bright colors, mirrors and patterns. Play can start simply with a gentle touch, opening the baby's hand and placing a rattle in it.

By the second and third month, babies begin to make eye contact and recognize your voice. This is the perfect opportunity to:

- Start a "making faces" game, and enjoy the smiles, gurgles and wriggles
- Sing to your baby or read nursery rhymes
- Hang a wind chime or musical mobile in your baby's room

Beginning to Play

At four or five months, your baby learns to reach and grasp objects. This means you can begin to offer age-appropriate toys to reach for, especially those that make sounds. Since everything goes into the baby's mouth at this age, be sure that toys are always clean, chewable, safe and free of small parts that can be swallowed. Other activities to consider include:

- Blowing bubbles in the air at bath time
- Ringing a bell or squeezing a squeaky toy
- Making different sounds and watching the baby mimic you
- Playing peekaboo

Once your baby is older than six months, and crawls or walks, their play world expands. Trips to the park take on new meaning and there are many in-home activities to enjoy such as:

- Playing in a kitchen band—use pot lids for cymbals or a plastic spoon to hit a pot drum.

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- Ball games—the baby can crawl after the ball, or you can sit down on the floor and roll the ball to one another.
- Stacking blocks or creating shapes with large rubber puzzle pieces.

Make the Most of Baby's Playtime

Babies don't wait for scheduled playtime. For them, living is playing and playing is living. Promote a playing- and learning-friendly environment by:

- Creating a safe environment and time for your baby to explore it.
- Encouraging play without over-planning it. Babies don't need structured activities; they enjoy learning and playing through shared interaction with you and their siblings.
- Doing the same activity over and over again. Variety isn't necessary with children. They enjoy repetition and it helps them learn.
- Finding opportunities to incorporate play into daily routines, such as bath time, diaper changing and bedtime. Everyday experiences feed a child's mind.
- Encouraging discovery and avoiding "No," or "Be careful," too often. This can make them fearful of their world.

If you'd like help with playtime, there are many resources and outside activities to consider. Several videos offer ideas for age-appropriate play exercises for newborns, babies and toddlers. There are also organized activities you can join such as gymboree classes, or moms-and-tots classes at recreation centres.

Playing helps children learn to communicate, building their self-esteem and confidence. By playing with babies regularly and encouraging them to discover and find out new things, parents help their children develop a positive attitude toward learning. Encourage your children to have fun exploring and they'll learn to love learning.