

# How-to Play and Learn By Age Group



## Infants Birth to One



- **You are your baby's favorite toy!** Play is a wonderful way to build your relationship with your child. Simple interactions such as peek-a-boo, clapping your hands and responding to their cues are fun ways to play.
- As you explore together, **notice** what your infant is looking at and **talk about what you see and do together** (colors, lights, toys, friends.) Offer them interesting objects to look at and touch and follow their lead in deciding what to play with!
- Allow them to experience things **at their own pace**. If they are trying something new, you can show them how to do it and then let them work on it. Repetition is important when they are learning new things!
- **Read their signals** for when they are hungry, tired, or simply done playing for now and respond to their needs
- **Redirect them from any behavior** you don't want them to repeat (throwing hard toys). Offer something they CAN do (throw a soft ball in a basket.) Remember that children at this age cannot remember rules.
- **Participate in Circle Time together!** This helps them learn how to engage in a group activity and follow directions.

## Ages One—Two



- Toddlers are natural scientists & want to learn how things work (stacking, dumping, building.) **Let them take the lead** in choosing what to play with and then watch to see what they do. **Engage in play** with your child and **talk about what you do and see.**
- If they are having trouble figuring something out, encourage them and **offer help** if they get too frustrated. Respond to any distress with encouragement and soothing.
- Young toddlers will enjoy playing near their peers, but may not yet play together. Playing near a peer will give them an idea of what it means to have a friend and be a friend. When learning to share, you can **practice passing things back and forth** saying “your turn, my turn.”
- If they are **having a hard time** (hitting, taking toys) - stop the behavior and say “No hitting, hitting hurts.” Help them to calm down. Name their feelings “You are angry. It’s ok to be angry, but you cannot hit.” Show them how they can express this either with words or maybe stomping their feet. Remember, at this age they lack the ability to remember rules or control their reactions.
- **Participate in Circle Time together!** This helps them learn how to engage in a group activity and follow directions.

## Ages Two-Three



- **Let your child take the lead in choosing what to play with and engage in play *with* them.** Support language development by **talking** about what you are seeing and doing.
- Two-year-olds start to **use their imaginations** in play! They may start to pretend with dolls or toy food. You can build on their activity by asking questions “Do you want a piece of my cake?”
- Two year olds engage in both spectator play (watching) and parallel play (playing alongside) but **they may not yet play with others.** Remember that they are **developing self-control** and do not have the full ability to stop themselves from doing something that’s not allowed. Here are some ideas:
  - **Stay calm.** The calmer you are, the calmer they will be.
  - **Offer more appropriate choices.** *It’s not okay to throw blocks. Let’s throw these foam balls into a basket instead.*
  - **Offer ways to manage strong emotions.** They can take a break or jump up and down. Some children calm down more quickly when they can be by themselves.
  - **Talk it thru.** While they are learning you can help them by calmly talking through what happened. *“You were really angry and hit your friend. It’s okay to feel angry, but hitting is not okay. Hitting hurts.”*
  - **Brainstorm other options.** *“Let’s share so they can play too!”*
- **Participate in Circle Time together!** This helps them learn how to engage in a group activity and follow directions.

## Ages Three-Four



- **Let your child take the lead** in choosing what to play with today! **Engage in play with them.** During play, watch for ways to **build on their interests.**  
“I see you have a square block—can you find another one?”
- Three year olds are **curious about their world** and will be asking lots of “why” questions! Answer these questions and continue back-and-forth conversations. This will help them build their understanding of their world and social interactions.
- If your child is **frustrated by an activity**, talk about how it might be hard. Ask them if there’s another way to do it. Make a suggestion. Give them time to figure it out. If wanted, show them how to do it and then give them a chance to try it. Tell them what you noticed they did to figure out a problem.
- Three year olds will interact with others during play, but may not do the same things (**associate play.**) These moments are opportunities to learn how to be good friends, including taking turns. **Model greeting** friends by saying “hello” and sharing your name. Continue to remind your child about the need to **take turns.** If they are having a hard time, remind them that they can use their words (“I would like a turn please”) Praise them for using words. If they are struggling and need to take a break outside of the play area, encourage that.
- **Participate in Circle Time together!** This helps them learn how to engage in a group activity and follow directions.

## Ages Four-Five



- Let your **child take the lead** in choosing what to play with today! **Engage in play with them** and support their development by **talking** about what you are seeing and doing together.
- Encourage them in **trying new things!** You can show them how to do something and then give them a chance to try it.
- **Model being friendly and respectful** to your child and to others. Children learn from us how to interact with others.
- Older preschoolers like to **play with others** and are interested both in the activity and in the other children playing. Let your child solve problems when playing with friends, but **be nearby** to help out if needed.
- During conflicts, encourage your child to **talk about** what he or she wants and to plan ways to help everyone else get what they want. Allow them to **take a supported break** as needed if their feelings are big in the moment. **Remind them** that no matter how we feel we shouldn't hit or take someone else's toys.
- **Participate in Circle Time together!** This helps them learn how to engage in a group activity and follow directions.