

TOYS FOR BABIES AND TODDLERS

Play is how children learn and develop both physically and mentally. If play is a child's work, then they must also have the **tools** for their trade. **Toys** are the tools that help a child to learn through the enjoyment of play.

Babies develop so quickly in the first 18 months of life that a toy which is suitable for a child at 12 months may have been too advanced for a child at 9 months. Most pre-school toys are well designed and will provide a baby with stimulation and learning opportunities. Therefore, if a child doesn't seem to like a particular toy, put it away and bring it out again three months later. It may well be that the feature that was preventing the toy from being enjoyed by a young baby, is now appealing and will provide a slightly older child with entertainment and opportunities for development.

Click on the side navigation to learn more about the specific age ranges of your children and the toys they should be playing with.

Toys for babies

The number and variety of toys available for babies has exploded over recent years. With such choice on offer, it is worth taking a look at what babies gain from playing with toys and whether some types of toys aid babies' development more than others. As babies mature so quickly, it is important to look closely at the skills that toys require and encourage. The age ranges given here are norms and it is important to understand that, within certain limits, children develop different skills at different times and whilst some development is linear, many children are ahead of the game in some areas and a little behind their peers in others and that this is 'normal'.

When choosing toys for babies it is more beneficial to honestly acknowledge a child's actual abilities and not try and make him/her develop more quickly by providing toys for which that child is too young. When that happens, a baby will quickly get bored with a toy and reject it (often returning to it a few months later and playing with it repeatedly).

The first 3 months.

Newborn babies are unable to 'play' with toys. They have insufficient hand-eye coordination to move their hands to deliberately pick up objects, but they will grasp things which are put in their hands. During the first few weeks of life, babies' vision is still developing and research has shown that babies will look for longer at contrasting colours than at the more traditional pastel 'baby' colours. However, softer colours have a calming effect so pastel colours for cuddly toys used to comfort a baby are better than bright colours which are more appropriate for playtime toys. Babies' eyesight will develop naturally and there is no developmental benefit to sight of providing specific visual stimuli. However, toys which are visually attractive to a baby may be played with more, and play in itself will aid development.

Toys such as rattles, mobiles, mirrors, and soft toys are most appropriate for very new born babies, as they learn to move their head to sounds and focus their eyes on moving objects.

3-6 Months

Babies are starting to be more aware of their environment and, although they are still largely unable to control the movement of their limbs, they will enjoy toys such as baby gyms which have objects dangling down within reach of the babies' flailing arms and legs. The movement or noise which results from the baby hitting or kicking (albeit unintentionally) will entertain the baby and aid development of skills such as concentration and an understanding of cause and effect, as well as the beginnings of an understanding of himself /herself as a person.

Music is a powerful tool in aiding development and can help lay the foundations for language development. Classical music is believed to be particularly beneficial, but anything with a rhythm will help. Up-beat music can be great to stimulate a baby and softer music will have a calming effect.

As babies start grabbing things and putting them in their mouths, their motor development goes through a spurt. Anything which a baby can hold with her whole hand or which can be safely put in her mouth (lips and tongue are used to explore shape and texture more than hands in young babies) will encourage development (and will help sooth early teethers).

Toys such as rattles and other noisy toys, toys with lights and music, pram toys, teethers and activity centres are appropriate for this age group,

NB: babies will start to interact more with their first toys such as the play gym, so don't get rid of 'first toys' until you are sure your child has grown out of them.

6-9 months.

As babies become able to sit up, they are able to see the toys they drop and make attempts to retrieve them. Most babies will be teething during this period and textured toys which can act as teethers are very popular. If babies are not sitting up, toys which encourage muscle development in the back are beneficial. Some baby gyms can be converted into sitting play gyms. Door bouncers. and standing play activity centres aid sitting and the development of leg muscles.

Whilst babies at this age are still too young to play with other children, social development is a key indicator of future success, (both at school/work and in terms of mental health) and it is never too early to start socialising. Toys which encourage turn-taking (e.g. balls rolling back and forward) and cooperation (e.g. musical toys) will facilitate early social development, as will toys which encourage other people to interact with the baby (books, songs, puppets etc).

Toys such as musical instruments, activity centres, bath toys, shape sorters, and puppets are appropriate for this age group.

NB. Toys which can be fixed to a buggy, high chair or baby gym will prevent the frustration that children feel when they drop a toy.

9-12 months

As children start to move around their environment, toys with wheels (push along toys such as brick trolleys) will provide children with an opportunity to practice walking, as well as modelling adult behaviour (pushing a buggy) which is very valuable for social development. Also, small toys with wheels as well as balls and other toys which have a tendency to move away from a child are beneficial in aiding development of movement. As a baby moves around his environment, he is able to experience the world in his own way and will afford himself a range of experiences that he simply couldn't get before he was able to move. Sometimes a baby on the move is a problem for parents and activity stations can be great for parents to keep their baby in one place for a while, but make sure that the baby isn't getting bored with the same toys on it.

Babies of this age like to put things in and out of containers, so a tub of bricks in a plastic box is likely to be very appealing and the repetitive action is great for the development of neural pathways.

Toys such as shape sorters, stacking toys/bricks, musical instruments, picture books, wheeled toys and bath toys are all appropriate for this age group.

12-18mths.

Most children are mobile by 18 months, although some do not walk until they are over 2 years. Toys which encourage children to explore their environment continue to be very valuable, both for physical and cognitive development.

Language acquisition is a major feature of babies at this age and toys can help children's vocabulary and communication skills. Electronic toys which speak can aid vocabulary development, but language is best learnt by modelling other people so toys which encourage talking or singing are likely to be most beneficial.

Children at this age are naturally active and toys which encourage movement and physical activity will help maintain fitness and aid muscle development.

As babies enter their second year, they often go through a 'clingy' phase as their attachment to their primary carer is strengthened. Toys which enable children to copy their parents will be very popular and will enhance attachment which in turn will help a baby have the confidence to explore their environment more thoroughly.

Toys such as dolls, crayons/pencils/paints etc, songs and music, books (especially, lift the flap books), swings and climbing equipment, building blocks, puppets and toy versions of adult object (phones/computers/cars etc) are all appropriate for this age range.

The toy recommendations above are not exclusive and parents shouldn't feel under pressure to provide their children with every toy on the market. However, by understanding what a toy provides for a child in terms of development, it becomes easier to choose a varied range of toys which will encourage a child's whole-person development.