



**Family and
Childcare Trust**

Creating a family friendly UK



**Learning and play -
giving your child
the best start in life**



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Background

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The Early Learning Partnerships Project was a government-funded project that was coordinated by the Family and Parenting Institute (now Family and Childcare Trust). It looked at ways of encouraging early learning for young children in the home.

A range of services were provided to parents, through the project, to help them discover the importance of singing, reading and playing (among other things) with their one- to three-year-old children and to see how doing these things together can help their children's ability to learn.

A number of the parents involved in the project were asked to provide feedback about what they had learnt and from this learning, what information they would like to pass on to other parents. This booklet is based on what those parents told us. The most important message that they wanted to give to other parents was that you really can be your child's first teacher and give them a flying start in life.

Why play matters

03

The day-to-day pressures on you as a parent can sometimes mean that any spare time you have is taken up with the practical stuff, such as shopping, cooking, cleaning and washing. As a result, playing with your children can really take a back seat.

But finding time each day to play with your young child, even if it's just a few minutes, strengthens your relationship with them, and also gives them more opportunities to learn about the world, providing the basic starting blocks for their future life at school.

Through play, your child will learn to:

- develop their hand-eye coordination;
- walk, run, jump and balance;
- take turns with other members of your family and other children;
- explore their emotions and feelings; and
- develop curiosity and interest in what's around them.

The parents we spoke to said that they found that it's not just your child that benefits - play can be relaxing and enjoyable for adults and is a great way for you to find out what your child likes doing.



Playing together can help you to recognise and understand your child's feelings, concerns and also the things that they are really good at.

This doesn't mean that you have to spend time planning your play – the things that you do every day at mealtimes, while you're out and about and at bedtime, like talking, listening, singing and reading, all add to your child's learning about the world and their environment.

This is especially true for babies and toddlers – even though they can't talk yet, they get a lot out of watching, listening and joining in when they can. The way they begin to talk is shaped by how they are spoken to.

“ It took me a while to get into the idea that I could just sit down and play – it was hard not to think about the washing or cleaning – but now that I can see how much he enjoys it, I'm beginning to really get stuck in!



Your child's development

05

Every child develops at their own pace, but there are some milestones that you can look out for, which will also give you opportunities to introduce new play ideas as your child grows.

Each child's development can vary greatly. If your child is not walking by 18 months, or can't talk in single words by the time they are 2, you could ask for some advice from your health visitor or GP.

An important part of every child's development is getting used to learning new things and becoming curious.

Research shows that children who play with and are talked to by their parents when very young, learn much better and do better at school.

But don't forget, some children may take slightly longer than others to do these things. It's not a competition; your child will develop at their own pace.

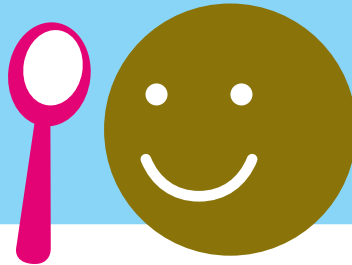
At 10 to 12 months, your baby will probably:

- Play with an object with both hands when sitting up on their own.
- Turn the pages of a board or thick plastic book.
- Use taste and touch to explore everything within their reach.
- Begin to move themselves across the room by crawling, shuffling or walking.
- Say "mama" or "dada"/"papa" to call you.



At 13 to 18 months, your toddler is likely to:

- Walk alone with heels on the floor.
- Respond to their name.
- Feed themselves finger food and begin to use a spoon.
- Be able to scribble with a large crayon.
- Follow a simple request like, "give me the ball".



From 18 months, your toddler may start to:

- Use lots of new words and sentences.
- Run and skip.



Getting started

07



All the time you spend with your child is an opportunity to play together. You don't have to set aside lots of time – just joining in with what your child is doing is a great start and will show them that you are interested in playing with them.

If you can find some quiet time, try doing a puzzle or reading a book. Even though your child might not understand all the words, they are still learning and will enjoy being read to. Watch out for the things that your child really loves doing and spend a bit of time each day joining in.

Some children love to run and jump around, giving them the confidence to move about and not feel restricted. Others prefer imaginative games with dressing up clothes (these could be some of your old clothes – they don't have to be special outfits), and you can join in too.

Different types of play

08

“ Once I realised how much she loved painting with her hands, I sorted out one of my old work shirts and bought a plastic decorator’s sheet from the DIY shop. Then she can enjoy herself and I’m not fussing around her.



This booklet doesn't cover every type of play - your child's imagination will give you lots of different ideas - but it offers a starting point, with simple ideas for you and your child.

You don't need to buy expensive new toys or equipment. There are lots of ideas here that show how you can use things that you have around your home, or you can go to drop ins or toddler groups and use the equipment there.

The most important thing is that you join in with some of your child's play - they will love having you around.

This doesn't mean that you need to let your home become a place where 'anything goes' – this is controlled mess! Think about anything that your child can get their hands into and experiment with, such as water, sand, food, mud, glue, glitter and paint.

If you can, it is a good idea to buy a plastic sheet and keep all messy play on this, in one area of your home. If you can't get a plastic sheet, you could use large rubbish bags or newspaper. If you really can't face the mess, or it's impractical for you to do it in your home, especially if you don't have much space, or you have other children or pets, there may be a local parent and toddler group that provides these sorts of activities.

If you have a garden, you might want to restrict messy play to outside. A water fight on a hot day is a great way to cool off!

Don't forget playing in the bath. From about seven to nine months, your baby will begin to be able to sit up on their own and will enjoy the splashing freedom of bath time.

A plastic cup and jug can provide young children with endless fun, pouring water from one to the other, and older children enjoy taking a few plastic toys into the water.

You can create your own play dough using the following recipe. It's simple to make, can be used in lots of types of play and is made from ingredients that you probably already have in your kitchen. Although it's not meant for eating, you will know what is in your play dough if your child experiments with eating it – it's very salty and they will probably spit it out.

Remember

Never leave a baby or young child in the bath unattended, even for a minute.



Play dough recipe

You will need:

- 1 cup of plain flour
- 1 cup of water
- 1 tablespoon of cooking oil
- 2 teaspoons of cream of tartar
- ½ cup of salt
- some food colouring

How to make it:

1. Place all the ingredients in a saucepan over a low heat.
2. Keep stirring the mixture until it thickens to form a firm dough.
3. Leave to cool. Make sure it has cooled properly before giving it to your child – the centre could still be hot.
4. Store in the fridge in a plastic container with a lid – it will last for about two weeks.

You can experiment with different colours and try adding other things, like glitter. Your child could help with measuring out the ingredients and stirring the dough, but remember to take it off the heat first.

If you...

... make some simple play dough, your child will improve the muscles and control in their hands, preparing them for writing and drawing in the future.



You can encourage your child to explore their imagination by giving them some dressing-up clothes. You don't have to buy expensive fancy dress outfits: sort out a few of your own clothes and add in a few hats, scarves and bags from charity shops – the more colourful, the better.

Try making a paper crown and decorating it to use in dressing-up games – see the following instructions.

If you...

... encourage your child to play with different types of toys, they will be able to explore all parts of their personality through their natural curiosity.

Paper crown instructions

You will need:

- stiff card
- sticky tape
- pens or crayons
- glue, glitter, paper shapes, sequins, bits of material to decorate

How to make it:

1. Measure a strip of card to fit around your child's head. You may need to stick two pieces together to get the right size.

2. Fasten the card with sticky tape to make a basic crown shape.
3. Cut a zig zag pattern along the top of the crown.
4. Your child can now decorate the crown with whatever you have available.

You could also make a crown to fit your head and ask your child to decorate it for you – they could do the same for other members of the family.

Boys and girls both enjoy dressing up. It's a good idea to try not to restrict what boys or girls can do and to offer a range of clothes, as well as puppets, dolls and figures that they can use.

Pretend tea parties and picnics are a great way for children to learn about sharing, taking turns and looking after others – even if it is just cuddly toy guests! You could also try experimenting with real food by doing some simple baking or cooking together.

There are a couple of recipes in this booklet to get you started. Your child will enjoy doing a 'grown up' job and even making a sandwich will give them a great sense of achievement.



Fruit faces recipe

You will need:

A range of cut up fruit to make different parts of a face:

- eyes: grapes, slices of kiwi or raisins
- nose: strawberries, piece of banana or a cherry tomato
- mouth: slice of melon, cut up apple or orange

You could choose your child's favourite fruits or try something they haven't tasted before.

See who can make the silliest or most delicious face! Older children (over three years) may be able to use a plastic knife to cut up a banana or other soft fruit.

“ On a Saturday, we have a do-it-yourself lunch with everyone making their own sandwiches – the older kids have a competition to see who can make the strangest combination and the younger ones enjoy making something all by themselves.



If you...

... do some simple baking or cooking with your child, they will be able to follow simple instructions, improve their coordination by stirring and cutting, and take pride in their achievement.



Butterfly cakes recipe

You will need:

- 125g self-raising flour
- 125g butter (take it out of the fridge to let it soften before you start)
- 125g caster sugar
- 1 teaspoon baking powder
- 2 eggs
- your favourite jam
- 2 bun tins filled with paper cake cases

How to make it

1. Set the oven to 190°C/375°F/ gas mark 5.
2. Sieve the flour and baking powder into a mixing bowl.

3. Beat the eggs and add to the bowl with the sugar and butter.
4. Beat the mixture with a wooden spoon or use an electric whisk – you want a smooth batter that drops easily off the spoon.
5. Spoon the mixture into paper cake cases.
6. Bake for 20 minutes, or until the cakes are firm and golden coloured.
7. Once the cakes have cooled, cut the top off each cake and cut this piece in half.
8. Put some jam on the top of the cake and put the two pieces of cut cake in the jam, like wings.



This aspect of play can be hard to do at home if you have limited space or other children around, but climbing, jumping, sliding, swinging, balancing, throwing and catching form a really important part of your child's development.

All children need a space to let off steam and use up their energy. A run around at your local park or playground can mean that your child is then more able to listen to you and do what you ask. You can also use this time as a way of keeping fit by getting involved in playing chase, hide-and-seek, or kicking a football!

From about 18 months to 2-years-old, your child will start to learn how to catch and kick a ball –the larger the ball, the easier it will be for them to kick and catch, but make sure it's not too heavy.

At this age, they will probably enjoy being pushed on a baby swing or want to try out a small slide. It's great to encourage their sense of adventure, but make sure they don't attempt to use playground equipment that is too big for them – it may not be safe, or they might get scared and be put off exploring.

“ I've noticed that since we've been going to the park on the weekend, I've felt less out of breath and more able to keep up with them!



It is natural for parents to sing lullabies and soothing songs to their babies, but it's often hard to carry this on when your baby becomes a toddler. Both singing and dancing give your child a great way to express themselves, have fun, and learn words and actions.

Singing with your child can be a good way to relieve your stress and share an activity with them - many toddler groups hold music sessions or include some singing in their sessions. There are also often sing and rhyme time sessions held at local libraries.

Children also enjoy playing instruments. At this age, anything that your child can bang, shake or blow into is great fun! Instructions for making a simple shaker with your child are included on the next page.

“ Our local children’s centre runs a free singing and movement group, which we started going to when my son was about 18 months. He really enjoyed playing the instruments and learning new songs to sing to his mum!



Shaker instructions

You will need:

- 1 empty, clean yogurt pot
- 1 piece of paper
- some rice or dried beans
- a rubber band
- pens and stickers to decorate your shaker

How to make it:

1. Cut out a circle of paper large enough to fold over the sides of the top of the pot.
2. Put some rice or dried beans into the pot - not too much or you won't get a good sound.
3. Put the paper circle over the top of the pot and secure with a rubber band.
4. Decorate the lid of the shaker with stickers or drawings.

If you...

... make a shaker with your child, they can express themselves by playing along to their favourite songs, and entertain you and the rest of the family!



Sharing picture and storybooks with your child will give them an excellent start on the journey to being able to read. Encourage your child to point out different things in the pictures and, as they get older, see if they can guess what might happen next in the story.

If you...

... write a story with your child, with them drawing the pictures, you can develop their language skills and explore storytelling skills (having a beginning, middle and an end), which will set them up for starting school.

Your child may want to 'read' much-loved books that they know very well – try not to correct them if they are not word perfect, but praise their efforts and help them to recognise letters in the words.

Public libraries are very keen to welcome families and have children's sections with books, CDs and DVDs to borrow. Many also have story time sessions for parents and toddlers. Joining your library is free and can give your child the chance to explore and feel confident with more books than any family could have at home.

“ We found that our library gave out stickers and posters to encourage children to take out books – my daughter loved this and now always points out the library when we go past.



Drawing, painting, scribbling, cutting and sticking are all brilliant ways for your child to express themselves, and improve coordination and the basics of the skills needed for writing.

Parent and toddler sessions often provide painting and arts and crafts equipment, and can be a good place for your child to explore, especially if you have limited space at home.



If you...

... give your child chunky crayons and scrap paper, they will develop early writing skills (holding a pencil, pressing hard enough, drawing lines, circles) and be able to create something to be proud of.

This type of play helps your child to develop their problem solving skills and learn about taking turns. It is also a way for them to learn, in a safe and loving environment, about the pleasure of winning and the pain of losing!

Toy libraries offer puzzles and simple board games, as well as other toys and equipment, for you to share with your child. Your local children's centre will know if there is one in your area - they may even run one. Your local Family Information Service (see next page) will also have details. Keep an eye out for puzzles and games in charity shops - check all the pieces are there before buying.

If you...

... share a puzzle with your child, you can help them to develop their problem-solving skills and take pride in their achievements.



Useful organisations and websites

Find out about local services and support

Contact your local Family Information Service (FIS) who can advise you about childcare facilities and other family services and activities, such as toy libraries, children's centres and parent and toddler groups. Find your local FIS by visiting: **www.familyandchildcaretrust.org/findyourfis** or contact your local council for the number.

If you are worried about your child's health

Speak to your health visitor or GP for advice. You can also contact NHS Direct by dialing 111 from any landline or mobile (in some areas of the country you need to dial 0845 4647). You can also visit their website, **www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk**, for information.

If you want to talk to someone about parenthood and your child

Family Lives provide support on a range of parenting and family issues and have a helpline available 24 hours a day on 0808 800 2222, or visit their website, **www.familylives.org.uk**, where you can chat online.

Home-Start UK provides support, friendship and practical help to families with children aged under five in their own home. Visit their website, **www.home-start.org.uk**, to find local support.

Contact a Family offers advice to families with a disabled child. Contact them on 0808 808 3555 or visit their website, **www.cafamily.org.uk**, for information and details of local support and opportunities to link up with other families.

Finding things to do and make with your child

Bookstart encourages a love of books for children from an early age. They have information on their website, www.bookstart.org.uk, about good books to share with your children, local events, games to play online and details of the free books your child could receive before they start school.

Show Me is a website that has lots of ideas for activities that you can do with your child. There are games and fun things to make and ideas for places to go. Visit: www.show.me.uk for details.

CBeebies' website, www.bbc.co.uk/cbeebies, has fun ideas for making things and activities that you can do with your child.

More about home learning and play

Family and Childcare Trust has a section for parents on their website that includes information about how you can help your child learn and develop at home. Visit: www.familyandchildcaretrust.org/parentinformation



The Family and Childcare Trust is the charity created from a merger of Daycare Trust and the Family and Parenting Institute. Together we bring over 40 years of experience in campaigning and research into family life and childcare.

The Family and Childcare Trust works to make the UK a better place for families. Our vision is of a society where government, business and communities do all they can to support every family to thrive. Through our research, campaigning and practical support we are creating a more family friendly UK.

Want to find out more?

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December 2013

ISBN 978-1-907305-31-3

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company number: 3753345 VAT registered:
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Original text for this publication by Sophie
Linnington, amended in 2013 by Family and
Childcare Trust. With thanks to the parents
who participated in the Early Learning
Partnerships Project.