Make the Most of Playtime

Does This Sound Familiar?

Eight-month-old Jamia loves the game of peek-a- boo she and her father play. Jamia's father, Tomas, hides his face behind the couch then pops up and with a big smile says, "Here's Daddy!" Tomas and Jamia repeat the interaction over and over. Each time Tomas pops up from behind the couch, Jamia expresses sheer glee. After a number of repetitions, Tomas becomes tired of the game and is ready to move on to things he needs to do. Once Tomas stops playing and starts to fold laundry, Jamia screams and shrieks, stretching and waving her arms out to her dad as if to say, "Don't stop!" or "More! More!"

Jackson (age 14 months) throws his sippy cup in the trash. His mother, Danette, gently picks it out, washes it off, and hands it back to him. Only seconds later, Jackson throws his sippy cup in the trash again, giving his mother a wide smile. Danette, a bit distracted and frustrated, takes the sippy cup out again, washes it off, and gives it back to him. This time, she scolds Jackson. She tells him the sippy cup doesn't go in the trash and to stop playing in the trash. Before Danette can distract Jackson with another game or remove the trash can to another location, he throws the sippy cup in the trash again. He looks to his mother with another wide smile, appearing proud and eager for her reaction.

The Focus

Babies and toddlers love to play. As a parent, it can feel overwhelming at times. You might feel like your young child thinks everything is a game. Often young children want to repeat their games over and over. They also want to test the boundaries to learn what is appropriate and what is not. For busy parents, this can test your patience. Sometimes it might seem as though your child wants to "play" exactly at the time when you have other things that must be done.

Development of Play Skills for Infants and Toddlers

Babies Birth to 4 Months	• Smile (usually around 6 weeks of age) and begin to coo (make sounds like “oooooooo” or “aaaaaa”) (usually around 4 months) • Prefer human faces over objects or toys • Turn toward familiar voices and faces • Follow objects with their eyes and recognize familiar faces and objects • Begin to explore their hands by bringing them to their face or putting them in their mouth
Babies 4-7 Months	• Enjoy social games with a caregiver such as peek-a-boo and patty cake • Bring toys to their mouth • Can use their fingers and thumb to pick up objects • Enjoy looking at themselves in a baby-safe mirror • Laugh and babble (saying things like “ba-ba-ba-ba”) • Distinguish feelings by listening to the tone of your voice and the voices of other loved ones. (Babies can tell when you are sad, upset, or happy just by the tone of your voice.)
Babies 8-12 Months	• Might begin to make recognizable sounds (like “Ma” or “Da”) and repeat or copy sounds/word they hear you say, like “Hi!” or “Bye bye!” • Communicate nonverbally by pointing, gesturing, pulling up, or crawling • Play games such as peek-a-boo and patty cake • Use some objects correctly to imitate actions, like holding a toy phone to their ear or holding a cup to their mouth • Explore objects by shaking or banging them • Might become shy around strangers • Might cry when Mom or Dad or a primary caregiver leaves
Toddlers 13-24 Months	• Enjoy playing with objects such as wooden spoons, cardboard boxes, and empty plastic food containers. Toddlers also enjoy toys like board books, balls, stackable cups or blocks, dolls, simple puzzles, etc. • Have fun filling containers up with water, sand, or toys and then dumping them out • Enjoy watching other children play. Your child might carefully look on or smile as other children play, but might not want to join the group • Usually plays alone or next to other children • Might offer toys to caregivers or other children, but might want them right back • Might choose to play close to other children using the same kind of toy or materials, but not necessarily interact with them • Will struggle with sharing and turn taking
Toddlers 25-36 Months	• Might play with other children but in an occasional, brief, or limited way. For example, a child might play “monsters” or run around chasing other children for a brief period • Older toddlers might begin to cooperate with other toddlers in a shared play activity. For example, children might work together to build a block tower. Or, they might work together to paint a picture together, complete a puzzle, or take on roles and act out a story. One child might pretend to be the “baby,” while another is a “mom.” • Begin to use their imaginations in their play. For example, toddlers might pretend to give a doll a bottle, pretend to do household chores like cooking or cleaning, or pretend that the shoebox is a garage for toy cars. • Still play alone frequently. • Will struggle with sharing and turn taking.

Playing with your child in the first three years of life helps the two of you build a warm and loving relationship. Playing together also supports the development of essential social skills (like sharing and turn taking), language skills (like labeling objects, making requests, commenting), and thinking skills (like problem-solving).

For babies and toddlers, play is their “work.” It is through play and repetition that babies and toddlers try out and master new skills. Through play, they learn what can happen as a result of an action, explore their imagination and creativity, learn to communicate, and learn about relationships with other people. Any activity can be playful to young children, whether it’s a game of peek-a-boo or helping you wipe the table with a sponge. And all types of play help children learn and practice new skills.

As a parent, you are your child's very first and favorite playmate. From the very beginning of his/her life, he/she is playing with you, whether watching your face at meal time or listening to your voice as you sing during a diaper change. Your baby needs you to help him/her learn to play and develop social skills to connect and build friendships with others. As your child grows, he/she will use the skills learned with you and other caregivers to have fun, enjoy, and play with other children. Your child will also learn what is appropriate to play with and what is not. For example, he/she might learn that it is okay to play with a sippy cup but it is not okay to put it in the trash.

Playtime is special. Playing together with your child is not only fun, but a critical time to support your baby or toddler’s healthy development. Making time to play with your child each day is not always easy. However, setting aside a brief period every day to play together goes a long way in building a loving relationship between you and your child. Making time for play, especially active play, can also help in reducing your child’s challenging behavior.

So what can you do to make the most of your child's playtime? Check out the tips below.

Follow Your Child‘s Lead

Provide an object, toy, or activity for your baby or toddler and then see what he/she does with it. When your child plays, it's okay if it's not the "right" way...let him/her show you a "new way." For example, when you hand your child a plastic cup, instead of pretending to drink from it, he/she might put it on his/her head as a “party hat”. Support your child’s creativity and join in the birthday play.

Go Slowly

It's great to show your child how a toy works, but try to hold off on "doing it for him/her" every time. You can begin something, such as stacking one block on another, and then encourage your child to give it a try. Providing just enough help to keep frustration at bay motivates your child to learn new skills.

Read Your Child‘s Signals

Your little one might not be able to tell you with words when he/she's had enough or when he/she's frustrated. But your child has other ways—like using sounds, facial expressions, and gestures. Reading these signals can also tell you what activities your child prefers. Reading the signals that come before a tantrum help you know when to jump in or change to a new activity.

Look at Your Play Space

Is the area where you play child-friendly and child-safe? Is there too much noise or other distractions? Is the area safe to explore? Is this a good place for the activity you've chosen, such as running, throwing balls, or painting? Checking out your space beforehand can prevent a tantrum, an accident, or a broken lamp.

Play It Again, Sam

While doing things over and over again is not necessarily thrilling for Mom and Dad, it is for young children. They are practicing in order to master a challenge. And when your child can do it “all by myself!” he/she is rewarded with a powerful sense of his/her own skills and abilities—the confidence that he/she is a smart and successful being. The more children have a chance to practice and master new skills, the more likely they are to take on new challenges and learn new things. So when you’re tempted to hide that toy because you don’t think you can stand playing with it one more time, remember how important repetition is to your child’s development.

Look For Ways to Adapt Play Activities to Meet Your Child's Needs

All children learn through play, and any play activity can be adapted to meet a child's unique needs. The suggestions below can help parents of children with special needs as well as other parents think about how to make playtime enjoyable and appropriate to their child's skills, preferences, and abilities.

- **Think about the environment.** How do variables like sound or light affect your child? What is the background noise like in your play area? Is there a television or radio on? Are there many other kids around? If your child seems distressed during playtime, and you've tried everything else, move to a quieter, less stimulating area to play.
- **How does your child respond to new things**? Some infants and toddlers, particularly if they have a special need, are easily overstimulated, while others enjoy a lot of activity. Try starting playtime slowly, with one toy or object, and gradually add others. See what kind of reactions you get. Are there smiles when a stuffed bear is touched and hugged? Does your child seem startled by the loud noises coming from the toy fire engine?
- **How does your child react to different textures, smells, and tastes?** For example, some objects might be particularly enjoyable for your little one to touch and hold. Others might "feel funny" to them. Read your child's signals and change the materials you are using accordingly.
- **Involve peers.** It is important for children to establish relationships with other children their age. Encourage siblings to play together. Arrange times to play with other children or family members. Check out opportunities to play with other kids at the park or during free public library story hours. Having fun with peers is an important way for children to learn social skills like sharing, problem solving, and understanding others' feelings—and also helps prepare children for the school setting later on.

Ideas for How to Play With Your Child

Sometimes it is difficult to figure out how to play with a very young child, especially if he/she is too young to play with toys or other children. Remember that your smile and attention are your baby's favorite "toys." Watch for your child's cues that he/she is ready to play. Play when he/she is calm, alert and content. Let him/her cuddle and rest when he/she is tired, fussy, or hungry. Below are just a few ideas to spark your own playtime adventures.

For Babies Under 6 Months

- Imitate the sounds your baby makes and try to have a "conversation" with your baby as you coo or babble back and forth to each other.
- Sing your favorite songs or lullabies to your baby.
- Talk to your baby about what you are doing. You might say, "I'm starting to cook dinner. First I wash my hands, etc." or "I'm going to change your diaper now. First we take off your pants."
- Talk to your baby about his/her surroundings, for example, "Look at your brother—he is laughing and having so much fun!" or "Look at those bright lights."
- Read to your baby. Point out bright colored pictures with contrasting bright colors.
- Let your baby touch objects with different textures. Hold a toy within reach so he/she can swat it with his/her hands or feet.

For Babies 6 to 12 Months

- Start a bedtime routine that includes time to interact with your baby and read or describe pictures from books.
- Use bath time as a time to gently splash, pour, and explore the water.
- Play peek-a-boo by covering your face and then removing your hands while you say, “Surprise!” or “Peek-a-boo!” and make a surprised facial expression.
- Hide your child’s favorite toy under a blanket and ask him/her where the toy went. Encourage your child to look for it and/or help him/her find it. You can ask, “Where did your bear go? Is it on the couch? Is it behind the pillow? Oh, here it is under the blanket!”
- Play hide and seek. “Hide” yourself (leave lots of you showing!), and if your child is crawling, encourage him/her to come and find you.

- Imitate your child’s sounds. Encourage a dialogue by taking turns listening and copying each other’s sounds.
- Use containers to fill with objects like toys or sand, and dump them out. You might use a shoebox with soft foam blocks or other baby-safe small toys.

For Toddlers 12-24 Months

- Sing special songs while changing a diaper or getting ready for bed.
- Keep reading and talking together. When looking at a book, ask your child questions about the pictures like, “Where is the doggy?” Show your excitement by acknowledging when your child points to the object: “Yes, you know where the doggy is!”
- Hide behind a door, the couch, or the high chair, then pop up and say, “Surprise!” If your child enjoys this game, change the location where you pop up. For example, if you usually pop up from under the high chair, try popping up from under the table. This switch will delight him/her!
- Use play objects to act out pretend actions. For example, use a toy phone to say, “Ring ring ring. It’s the phone. Hello. Oh, you are calling for Teddy. Teddy, the phone is for you.” Use a toy car to move across the floor saying, “Vroom, vroom, go car go!”
- Help your child stack blocks and then share his/her excitement when he/she knocks it down.
- Explore the outdoors by taking walks, visiting a park, or helping your child run up or down grassy hills.

For Toddlers 24-36 Months

- Continue to read and talk often to your child. When looking at books together, give your child time to look at the pictures before reading the words. Begin to ask questions about the book such as, “Why did he do that?”, “What happens next?”, and “Where did she go?”
- Dance and jump around to music and encourage your child to join you.
- Support your child’s imagination by providing dress-up clothes like scarves, hats, pocketbooks, or your old shoes; and props such as plastic kitchen bowls and plates, or toy musical instruments.
- Encourage your child’s creativity by playing with crayons, markers, play dough, finger paint, paints, etc.
- Use play objects that look like the “real” thing: child-sized brooms and dust pans, pots and pans, toy cash registers, etc.

What can you do when your child’s play is inappropriate or dangerous (e.g., throwing the sippy cup in the trash, pulling at the lamp, etc.)?

- Try to give your child an acceptable way to meet his/her goal. For example, show him/her how to throw the ball into a laundry basket instead of into the trash.
- Use words to validate your child’s desires: “You want to pull that lamp. You want to see what will happen. You are playing a game. You want me to come close and play with you.”
- Show your child what he/she can do: “You can put it in this basket”; “You can put the socks in the hamper”; “You can push this block tower down.”
- Distract or redirect your child to another toy or game with you: “Look at this toy.” “Do you see how this toy moves?”

- When you tell your child, “No” or “No touch, it is dangerous,” direct him/her to what he/she can do: “No touch, look with your eyes.”
- Remove the object, if possible, to make the play area more child-friendly.
- Remove the child from the area or activity: “Let’s play over here instead.”
- Use humor and join the game: “You just want me to come chase you. Now I’m going to tickle you.”

What happens when my baby or toddler has difficulty moving on from play time? What if, like Jamia, she doesn’t want to stop?

- Tell your child when a transition is coming: “one more time,” “last time.”
- Give your child a visual reminder of the transition. Set a kitchen timer or egg timer for “two more minutes” or “five more minutes.”
- Explain what is happening: “I have to stop playing now. I have to make dinner.”
- Provide an alternative activity: “I can’t play anymore, but you can sit at the table while I cook and color with crayons.”
- Provide a choice: “You can do a puzzle or play with cars.”
- Use words to validate your child’s feelings: “You want to play longer.” “Again? You want to do it again.” “You feel sad that it is time to leave the park.”
- If your child becomes upset, validate his/her feelings and try to provide words of comfort: “I know you are mad because I have to change your diaper now. You want to keep playing. We’ll play again after your diaper change.”

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