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How Kids Learn to Play: 6 Stages of Play Development

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Play is all about having fun! Any activity, organized or unstructured, your child finds fun and enjoyable is considered play. But [play is much more than just a fun activity](#) for your child! As a child grows they go through different stages of play development.



While playing, children learn and develop important skills they will continue to use

throughout their lifetime.

Problem solving, creativity, and willingness to take risks are just a few of the skills developed through play.

Is your child under 2 years old? [Enter your baby's birthday to get weekly activities to help meet developmental milestones.](#)

Related Articles



Freedom in Play: Testing Boundaries During Play Can be a Good Thing for Your Child



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Children who use their imagination and 'play pretend' in safe environments are able to learn about their emotions, what interests them, and how to adapt to situations. When children play with each other, they are given the opportunity to learn how to interact with others and behave in various social situations. [Learn more about your child's social-emotional development.](#)

Be sure to give your child plenty of time and space to play. There are 6 stages of play during early childhood, all of which are important for your child's development. All of the stages of play involve exploring, being creative, and having fun. This list explains how children's play changes by age as they grow and develop social skills.

Unoccupied Play ([Birth-3 Months](#))

At this stage baby is just making a lot of movements with their arms, legs, hands, feet, etc. They are learning about and discovering how their body moves.

Solitary Play (Birth-2 Years)

This is the stage when a child plays alone. They are not interested in playing with others quite yet.

Spectator/Onlooker Behavior (2 Years)

During this stage a child begins to watch other children playing but does not play with them.

Parallel Play (2+ Years)

When a child plays alongside or near others but does not play with them this stage is referred to as parallel play.



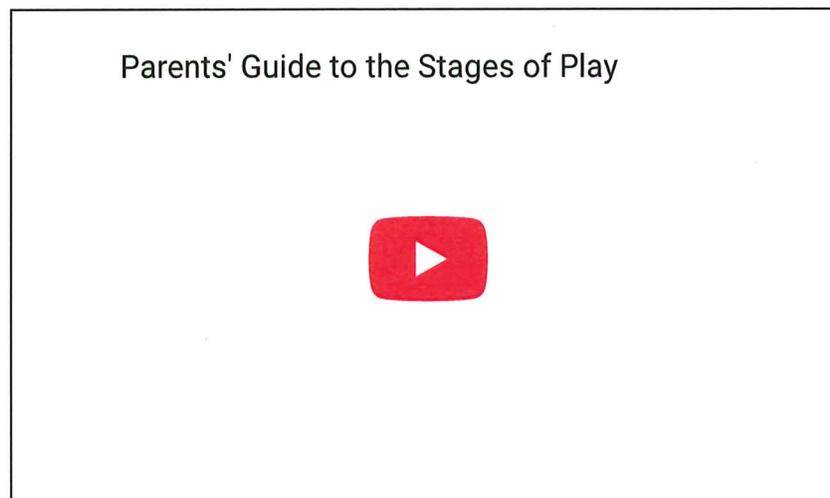
Associate Play ([3-4 Years](#))

When a child starts to interact with others during play, but there is not a large amount of interaction at this stage. A child might be doing an activity related to the kids around him, but might not actually be interacting with another child. For example, kids might all be playing on the same piece of [playground equipment](#) but all doing different things like climbing, swinging, etc.

Cooperative Play ([4+ Years](#))

When a child plays together with others and has interest in both the activity and other children involved in playing they are participating in cooperative play.

Watch to see what the six stages of play can look like:



As your child starts playing with family members and friends, make sure to [teach them about sharing](#) and [winning and losing](#).

The 6 Stages of Play		Pathways.org
Unoccupied Play	0-3 months	When baby is making movements with their arms, legs, hands, feet, etc. They are learning about and discovering how their body moves.
Solitary Play	0-2 years	When a child plays alone and are not interested in playing with others quite yet.
Spectator/ Onlooker Behavior	2 years	When a child watches and observes other children playing but will not play with them.
Parallel Play	2+ years	When a child plays alongside or near to others but does not play with them.
Associate Play	3-4 years	When a child starts to interact with others during play, but there is not much cooperation required. For example, kids playing on the playground but doing different things.
Cooperative Play	4+ years	When a child plays with others and has interest in both the activity and other children involved in playing.

Play starts when we are babies, but it does not stop there! Including [play in your child's daily routine](#) and giving them time to play is important for their development at every age. These stages are general guidelines for what to expect of your child's play skills, but remember every child is different and if you have concerns bring them up with your healthcare provider.

Your child makes a lot of [changes as they grow](#). Learn more about how play can change as your little one does.

- [How to Play with Blocks at Every Age](#)
- [Stages of Peek-a-boo](#)

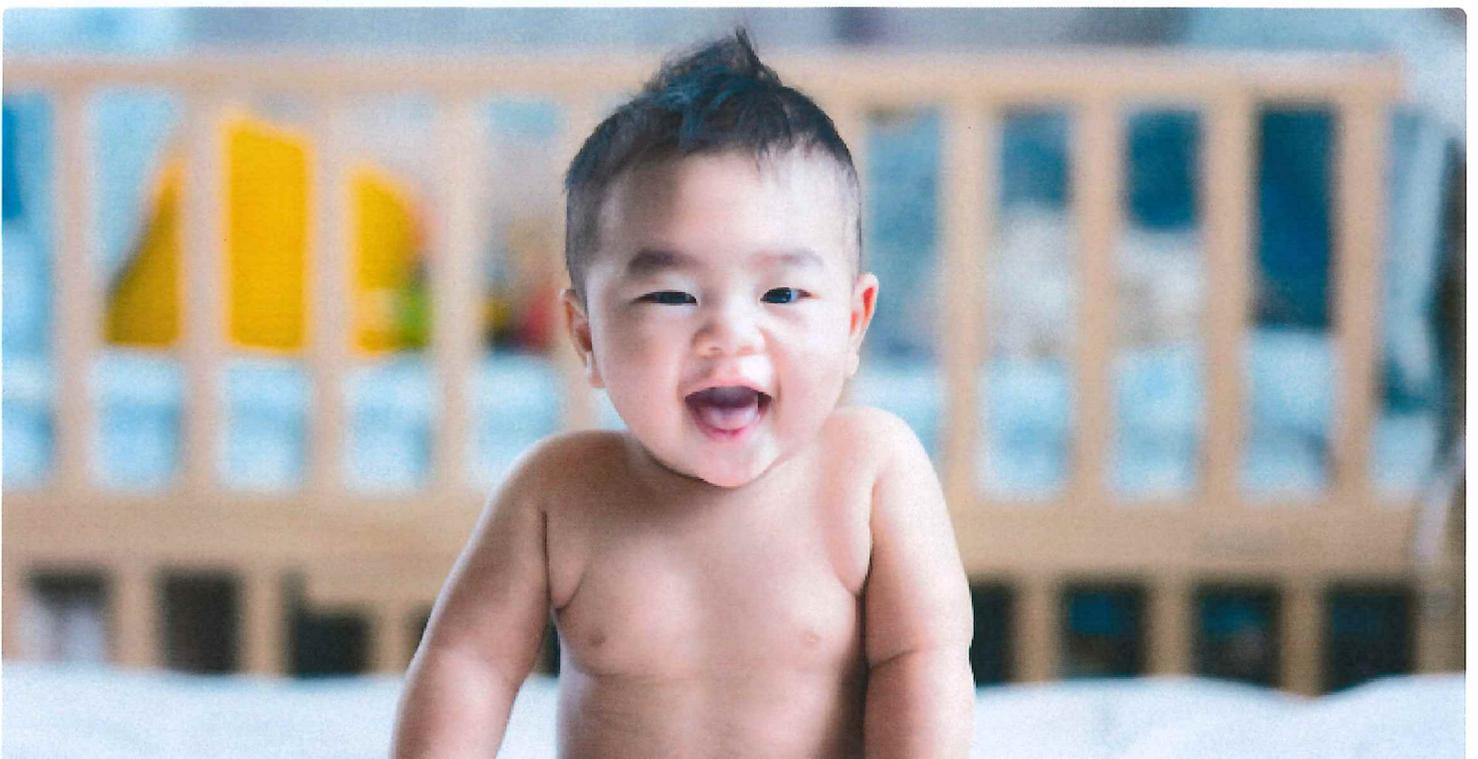
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Follow their milestones here!

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- [7-9 month milestones](#)
- [10-12 month milestones](#)
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Sources

Parten MB Social Participation among Preschool Children. *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*. 1932; 27 (3): 243-269.

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friends@pathways.org
 355 E Erie St., Chicago, IL
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355 E Erie St.,
Chicago, IL 60611

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Your Child's Development From Birth to 3 Years

Last Updated: April 29, 2022
[Child Development Series](#)

HealthLinkBC File Number: 92b

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Your child's experiences in the early months and years of life affect their health and well-being for the rest of their life. Your caring, nurturing, and safe parenting help ensure your child's healthy development.

Understanding child development can help you know what to expect and what you can do to help your child grow in a healthy way. In the early years of life, your child's behavior communicates their needs and how they are changing and growing. Listening to your child's unique cues can help you support them through their years of very rapid growth and development. During periods of exciting development or changes, your child may wake up more frequently at night.

The stages of child development described here are guidelines only, not a set of rules. Every child develops at their own pace. If you have any concerns about your child's development, talk to your health care provider.

From birth to 3 months, your baby:

- Recognizes parents' voices, right from birth
- Discovers their own voice
- Enjoys eye contact, smiles at people and studies faces
- Cries as a way of communicating needs
- Coos and gurgles happily when given attention
- Startles at noise and responds to sounds in time
- Stretches or moves arms and legs
- Lifts head when lying on tummy
- Holds head up to search for sounds and movement
- Rolls over to one side
- Discovers feet and hands and holds objects
- Follows moving objects with their eyes

From 3 to 6 months, your baby:

- Lifts head about 90 degrees
- Sits with some support
- Stands up with help
- Rolls over from front to side and then in all directions
- Reaches for and lets go of objects
- Responds to their name
- Enjoys social interaction
- Shows interest in colours
- Recognizes faces and shows a preference for familiar people
- Laughs and squeals when happy
- By 6 months understands that an object still exists even if they can't see it

- Recognizes their name
- Responds to some words, such as 'Mommy' or 'Daddy'
- Says or repeats sounds, or babbles
- Mimics simple actions of other children or people
- Shows strong feelings and emotions about likes and dislikes and shows happiness or sadness
- Sits steadily without help for longer periods
- Drinks water from a lidless cup
- Stands firmly with help or when held
- Can move or shuffle on belly and then crawl
- Takes first steps and walks alone, between 8 and 18 months of age
- Enjoys crawling and walking
- Loves getting a lot of attention from their caregiver
- Gets scared around strangers and cries when parents leave
- Throws toys or objects on purpose
- Plays social games, such as 'peekaboo' or 'patty cake'

From 12 to 18 months, your child:

- Has a lot of energy and wants to explore everything
- Can feed themselves using fingers or a spoon
- May climb out of the crib
- Walks alone and walks upstairs 1 step at a time
- Speaks in short phrases, such as "mama go?" or "all done"
- Understands basic sentences and says 1 word sentences. For example, says "more" for "I want more"
- Names pictures in a book
- Follows simple directions
- Understands much more than they can say
- Enjoys receiving attention
- Plays best by themselves and is unlikely to share toys
- Cooperates or resists limits parents set
- Gets frustrated easily
- Cries less but may whimper or whine more
- Uses the word 'no' correctly or shakes head
- May have a special toy or blanket
- Has a short memory and does actions again even if you tell them not to. May do the opposite of what you tell them to do

From 18 to 36 months, your child:

- Uses 2 or 3-word sentences
- Asks for help using words or actions
- Can count and use new words
- Understands shapes and sizes
- Shows a range of emotions
- Learns to recognize and to others' feelings
- Wants approval and needs praise

- Gradually uses 1 hand more than the other
- Can walk up and down stairs
- Can learn to ride a tricycle
- Can run, climb, kick, and throw a ball
- Dances to music
- Tells stories, sings songs, and plays
- Tries to do more independently
- Helps with simple household chores, such as taking laundry out of the dryer
- Has trouble sharing and says 'no' or 'mine'
- Becomes familiar with and enjoys routines
- Recognizes and names familiar people
- Shows interest in a new person, thing, or sound
- Enjoys playing alone and near other children
- By 36 months, enjoys pretend play with others
- May start to identify with a specific gender
- Shows an increased attention span
- Solves problems by trial and error
- Participates in group activities
- Shows affection openly, such as hugging
- Uses social language, such as please and thank you
- Copies adult behaviours
- Gets frustrated sometimes because they want to do more than they are able to do
- May start becoming anxious about real and imaginary dangers or uncomfortable situations

For More Information

For more information about child health and development, see the following resources:

- [HealthLinkBC File #92a Your Child and Play](#)
- [HealthLinkBC File #92c Your Child's Feelings](#)
- [HealthLinkBC File #92d Toilet Learning](#)
- [HealthLinkBC File #92e Time for Bed](#)

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See Toddler's First Steps at:

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