

Ma te tākaro ka ako

Play is learning!

Every time your child plays, their senses, emotions, language and imagination combine in a rich mix of learning experiences.

When they repeat these play experiences, the networks of connecting pathways in their brains develop and grow stronger.



Play stages

The way children play changes as they grow, develop new skills and experience new things. Here's how you can support them in learning through play at every stage.

Sensorimotor

From birth babies begin to explore their world using their senses. This stage of play involves using their bodies to learn by looking, reaching, batting, smiling, cooing and babbling, mouthing and later banging, crawling, climbing.

- Provide lots of safe colours, textures, shapes and sounds for them to explore – these don't need to be expensive – try a basket of fabric scraps or a plastic jar with dried beans.
- Everything will go in their mouth at this stage, so check for choking hazards and sharp edges or bits that could break off.

Symbolic or pretend play

Around 18 months you may start to see your child using objects to represent other things they've seen or experienced, e.g. holding a block to their ear as if talking on the phone, and next 'driving' it along the floor as a vehicle, pretending to cook and eat food, rocking a soft toy or maybe even scolding it complete with finger wagging!

- Continue checking for possible dangers such as sharp edges or choking hazards, as exploration may still involve a little sensory exploring.

Constructive play

This is when kids start to get creative, using things like playdough, blocks, glue, paper and crayons to make something new.

- Provide a variety of materials to encourage creativity
- Reduce stress of mess with aprons, plastic sheets and newspaper
- Praise their effort, not the result - the process is more important than what they've created

Playing with others

In the early stages, kids tend to play independently of others. This stage will be followed by parallel play alongside others before their social and emotional development is sufficient for them to enjoy co-operative play with others.

- Playing with others develops valuable relationship skills. Let kids take the lead while keeping an eye out for conflict and lending a hand if needed, so they can learn about taking turns and sharing.



Play tips for parents and caregivers

- **Play your way** – mums and dads will play with their kids in different ways – a variety of styles is important for your child's development
- **Get involved but don't take over** – try saying things like "I wonder what would happen if..." or 'You seem to be having a problem with ... what can we do?'
- **Describe what's happening** – this helps develop language skills, through children hearing words that match what they're looking at and may be thinking about.
- **Let them lead** – let kids choose what to play and have them control the pace
- **Be patient** – be ready to repeat their favourite activities often, it might be boring for big people but repetition helps strengthen their brain connections, supporting learning.
- **Play to their moods** – children don't need to be stimulated every minute of the day – get active with them when they're fresh and full of energy, and try quiet activities or songs when they are tired or grumpy.
- **Make chores into play** – with imagination everyday activities like shopping and housework can be fun.
- **No right way to play** – toys and other materials can be played with in endless ways. Unless there is an obvious safety concern, try not to jump in or interfere. Problem solving skills are developed through exploring differences and looking for opportunities.
- **Set clear consistent boundaries** – eg for noisy or 'outside' toys



Resolving problems

If kids aren't treating toys respectfully:

Give a warning and clearly explain what you want to happen eg "please be gentle with that book". If they ignore the warning, and continue immediately remove while explaining why.

For toys with lots of little bits that the bigger kids love but pose a hazard for babies (or a barefoot adult):

- Try spreading them out on a sheet/blanket on the floor - this sets a visible boundary and makes clean up quicker – just gather up and pour back into the container.
- Playpens can be found in second hand shops or recycling centres - great to put the big kids in while giving the possible 'choker' more freedom.

To solve arguments over sharing toys, try:

- tossing a coin for who goes first
- setting the oven timer/alarm clock for set period – then swapping over
- practicing sharing through activities that require taking turns (like cards or board games)
- investing 15 minutes of your time at the start of an activity to help establish guidelines about game rules, turn taking or time frames – starting them off well can help them play happily for longer.

By giving them your time, loving attention, patience and a sense of fun, you're modelling skills for a lifetime of happy play and learning.

