

# Making Play a Priority

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Dip T EC; BEd Stud; Early Childhood Specialist Publisher

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For decades researchers have been aware of the remarkable development of a child's brain during the first five years of life. Recent advances in neuroscience have helped consolidate earlier findings, bringing new understanding to the field of early childhood brain development. We now know that the human brain develops more rapidly between birth and age five than during any other period in a person's life. It is becoming increasingly clear that the experiences of early childhood play a key role in determining the capabilities of the brain.

Repeated experiences are essential for children's brains to become highly developed. Synaptic connections become stronger and more efficient through repeated use. Critical brain development occurs in the first years of life and this is also a time when the brain is incredibly open to learning. Parents can provide their children with unlimited productive learning experiences through play. Every play opportunity will help to shape a child's brain in some way. If play is not valued and prioritised, the child's development may be impeded.

## Birth to 18 months

From birth until 18 months of age the areas of greatest growth in the brain are the sensorimotor, visual cortex and later the frontal lobes. Babies learn about the world through sight, sound, touch, taste and smell. The most beneficial toys at this stage are usually boldly patterned cloth books, brightly coloured mobiles, rattles and mirrors. Babies quickly graduate to grasping and holding toys, which they can manipulate. Objects with different textures, sounds and toys they can roll and retrieve, teach children dexterity and the concept of cause and effect.

Once babies learn to sit up and crawl they're ready to experiment with nesting cups, stacking rings and large blocks. These toys help develop fine motor skills and teach relationships among objects. Board books, particularly those with pictures of familiar objects allow children to practice object recognition and basic ideas of language.

## 18 months - 3 years

The toddler brain is twice as active as the adult brain. During this time the areas of language, social-emotional response and motor skills all experience a dramatic increase. Recommended toy choices at this age include ride-on toys, low climbing toys, large balls, toys they can push and pull, sandpits and wading pools. Regular visits to a local park will also be beneficial to this age group who constantly want to run, jump, climb and swing.

Take apart toys, simple puzzles, musical instruments and blocks reinforce toddlers' eye-hand coordination, understanding of spatial orientation and cause and effect. Playdough and painting provide children with great tactile and creative opportunities. Books also assist their growing vocabulary and understanding about the world.



### 3-6 years

The speed of processing, memory and problem solving is increasing during this stage; this is the fastest growth period for the frontal lobe networks. Imagination and interaction with others, feature during this stage. Consequently dress-ups, kitchen tools, toy telephones, vehicles, dolls, medical sets, tool kits, toy animals and blocks will all be utilised in various scenarios by this age group. Language and social skills are practiced through children's make-believe play.



Art materials including playdough, crayons, markers, paints and collage materials are essential for this age group as they further develop their fine motor skills and begin scribbling and drawing, which is a precursor to writing. Musical instruments and music are also beneficial, promoting rhythm, musicality and coordinating movement.

As with all age groups books are vital as children develop early literacy skills. Basic board games, counting games, measuring, matching and sorting activities are also beneficial as children begin to develop numeracy skills. Children continue to develop their motor skills during this stage and ready to tackle bicycles, skipping ropes and more difficult playground structures.

### Conclusion

Early brain development research indicates that from birth on, children are ready and eager to learn and grow. Evidence indicates that quality play experiences in early childhood have dramatic positive impacts on children's later school success. Parents and caregivers of young children are sometimes unaware of how much their children will learn before they enter school. It is essential that parents are informed on the importance of the early years and provided with support and resources to enable them to provide a wide range of interesting and developmentally appropriate play experiences for their children.

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