



Time to Play

Playing is a favorite activity for babies and toddlers—and it's their best way to learn. They play with their bodies, with objects and materials, with other people, and with sounds and words. Through play, they learn to do things, to make things happen, to tell stories, and to learn how the world works. Playing with babies and toddlers is also your best way to get to know each child and to support and enhance their learning.

- **Respect children's play.** Give them the time and space they need. Recognize that sometimes they will play for brief moments, flitting from one activity to another. At other times they will play with focus and may need protection from interruptions.
- **Do simple things with children that you both enjoy.** Make faces, wiggle, jump around, pretend, sing, or be silly. Play clapping, tickling, hiding, and chasing games or get down on the floor—and play!
- **Make play part of routines and chores, and make talking part of play.** Chitchat, humor, conversation, thinking aloud, imagination, and encouragement make play more fun and help build your relationship.
- **Get on a child's wavelength**—then s-t-r-e-t-c-h the learning. You can imitate a baby's sounds such as *ba-ba-ba* or actions such as rolling a ball. Then expand the action and try something new (say *ba-ba-ba-DA* or bounce a ball) and see what he does.
- **Ask families about their children's favorite toys and games,** and find ways to make them part of your program. Invite families to share photos, dress-up clothes, and materials to use in children's pretend play. These objects will help children feel connected to their families and favorite places as they play. Encourage use of home languages in their play.
- **Choose toys that invite exploration and inventive play.** Watch how children use them. Put out duplicates of popular toys so that children can imitate and cooperate with each other but don't need to share.
- **Be intentional about how you arrange toys and materials.** Some children get overwhelmed with too many choices, so be aware of how many toys you offer at one time. Make the displays inviting and be sure children can get things themselves.
- **Create interesting play spaces** where children can play actively or with focus, alone or together. When children have mastered the possibilities in a space, add something new to hold their interest. Involve older toddlers in decisions about what to add or change.
- **Help children play together,** and then step back and watch. Stay close by so you can step in if a child needs help or protection in resolving a conflict or if the play gets frustrating for one toddler. Hang around for a few extra minutes after intervening in case the children need more support.