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Play With Your Baby

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After decades of teaching preschool-age children, I am always happy to be reminded that infants are not only for changing, feeding and rocking but they are for playing with, too. Recently, my new granddaughter has filled the role of playmate for me and she is teaching me new ways to play. Although babies cannot run, jump or ride trike, they can imitate, anticipate, imagine, experiment, smile, wiggle, bounce, spit, make gurgling sounds, and more. We grown-ups got to great extremes to elicit even a fleeting smile from an infant. This leads to mutual giggling, chuckling, and even outright laughing- the beginning of play.

It's never too early to begin playing with your infant. At first, you might not be rewarded by much response, but babies learn to play just as they learn to crawl and talk. Playing strengthens the parent-child relationship, instills a sense of trust, supports your baby's normal brain development and enhances your baby's motor skills. Scientific research has proven that even the youngest infants can remember, reason and understand their world. Your infant is not simply a passive vessel; he arrived with more brainpower than previously imagined and is ready to engage in play.

Here's How You Play

How do you actually play with a baby? At the earliest level, all you need is your face. Your newborn might stare intently at you and try hard to imitate your facial expressions. She will probably be fascinated by the sight of your tongue going in and out of your mouth, your eyes winking, or funny sounds you make and she will attempt to mimic you. Play peek-a-boo by briefly hiding your face behind your hands or a book. As she grows older, expand your play to other parts of your body and hers. Play "This Little Piggy" with her toes, give horsie rides on your leg, blow on her tummy or back, or lift her up as if to fly. Do everything gently and slowly until you know how your baby likes to play. Some babies are fearless; others are more cautious.

Babies are learning to use their five senses, so play should include sensory activities. Expose your infant to various kinds of music. Explore classical, jazz, show tunes, Latin, folk, blues, klezmer- any music you enjoy. Sing to your infant and dance with him, hold him and move to the beat. When he's old enough, provide rattles with a variety of sounds, including bells. Make bathing a time for sensory play by splashing and making bubbles in the water. Take walks in different kinds of weather so he can feel wind, sun, rain and snow for brief periods of time (properly dressed and protected, of course). Let him experience various textures on blankets, clothes and toys. Use bright colors as a focal point in your infant's environment, too. When your baby is ready for toys, find a few you can play with together as well as those that promote independent play. Together, you can stack nesting cups, put shapes into shape sorters and taken them out, put puppets on your hands, shake rattles to music, and play pee-a-boo in a mirror. There are many styles of safe mirrors made for babies so they can react to their own faces. There are also numerous board books make for infants that promote cuddling time. Infants love to look at other infants, so find books that feature a variety of faces. Look for toys that offer "cause and effect;" the baby initiates an action and the toy reacts. Cause and effect toys teach your baby that she can control her environment and make things happen. A good toy will allow your baby to use it in many ways, not just one.

As your baby begins to stand, "cruise" and walk, pay great attention to safety issues. Clear the decks so he can feel free to explore. While playpens, swings, high chairs and other restraining devices may be convenient for parents, they should be used prudently, if at all. Babies need to get up and go; this is when playing with your baby can combine fun and safety. You might have work or chores to do, but remember, the time you have to play with your baby is fleeting. Set aside some of that time for play; you and your baby will be glad you did!