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Wee Beginner (0 – 18 months): Playing to Learn

Playing is what kids do best, and it's a good thing, too, considering play is instrumental in your child's development. Toys should be fun, but also contribute to intellectual, sensory and behavioural growth.

0 to 6 months

Does a baby really need toys? Yes! Look for items that entertain the eyes, ears and hands.

- **Go with simplicity.** Babies don't need complicated toys that will be frustrating. Look for simple items.
- **Get colourful.** Newborns enjoy colours, especially ones that have high contrast.
- **Add music.** Music is soothing, especially for the youngest of kids. Search out items with fun playtime music, as well as calming bedtime tunes.
- **Offer hand-helds.** Grasping items is an early motor skill that needs nurturing. Have plenty of teething rings, cloth books and rattles to play with.

6 to 12 months

Watch out! Your baby is going to be on the move. Look for toys that encourage activity.

- **Appeal to touch.** Little ones love different textures and shapes. Invest in crinkle books, rattles and toys with buttons to push.
- **Get active.** Toys that encourage rolling, crawling and (yikes!) walking are a great idea.
- **Build it up.** To develop fine motor skills, find items that are stackable, like blocks, nesting cups and stacking rings.
- **Wheel around.** For some reason, kids love wheels. Provide cars, trucks and pull-toys. It gets kids active and starts to spark imagination. Note: avoid mini-cars. They are too small for this age.

12 to 18 months

It's all about the rewards. At this age, kids love cause and effect items. Look for toys that provide a goal.

- **Sort it out.** Shape sorting toys are always a big hit. Look for puzzle-style shape sorters, or toys that ask children to identify shapes and push correct buttons.
- **Be safe.** With more independent play comes the need to be extra careful with toys. Make sure there are no small pieces or sharp edges. Keep an eye on your toy box for broken toys.
- **Get wet.** Water is really entertaining for little ones. Simply washing their hands can be a source of excitement. Build on this by offering fun bath toys that squirt, pour, float and sink.





Wee Explorer (18 months – 3 years): How to Get Toddlers Helping in the Kitchen

A pair of two-year-olds infiltrated my kitchen slowly, winning me over with their shy smiles. My twin girls, Hailey and Robin, pulled their chairs to the counter to watch me prepare dinner, plump fists grabbing any wayward piece of cheese or potato peel.

Another day, they reached for the spoon as I stirred pancake batter, wanting to do it themselves. Now, anytime I set foot in the kitchen, my two little sous-chefs are hot on my tail, climbing up to help pour, stir, knead and, of course, sample.

Dinner preparation takes a little longer this way, but when I involve my girls, they develop far more than their palate. Early childhood educator and toddler development expert Saima Sheikh says it is about more than just pouring and stirring. "It's not just the act of food preparation in isolation," says Saima, an instructor at Toronto's Humber College.

There is silent learning achieved watching molasses poured slowly into batter, grabbing a handful of dried rice and throwing it into the pot, or rolling dough across the countertop. The deliberate manipulation of little fingers as they press the edge of pastry dough into a pie plate develops tactile learning. Reciting the words for new ingredients as you add them to the bowl is an impromptu vocabulary lesson. Toddlers learn about their world first through touch and observation; inviting them to help prepare dinner provides rich sensory experiences.

When I first began letting my girls help me bake, I noticed they were drawn to cracking eggs, kneading dough and pressing cookies – all things they could do with their hands. They would try to sneak a sample and run off to play while I finished up.

Invite your toddler to become a participant, not just a recipient of meals and snacks. This tells them you value what they bring to the table. It shows them they are capable, and that their efforts are met with the most primal of rewards: food.

Cooking has motivated Christine Paré's two-year-old son Sacha to become more adventurous with what he eats. "He was a picky eater to begin with, and I thought if he knew where food comes from and how it was made, he might be more inclined to eat it," says Christine, of Moncton, N.B. When they top pizza together, he often snacks on pieces of pepper, broccoli and tomato. Before, he would turn his nose up at those foods when on his plate, she says.





How to Get Toddlers Helping in the Kitchen (Continued)

Kathryn Cuthbertson of Courtice, Ont., found that when she put away expectations, cooking with her kids Reid, 5 and Everett, 2, became a great metaphor for enjoying the moment.

"I'm not the most patient person, so involving the kids has really challenged me to slow down, enjoy the process, not worry about imperfection and mess, and make it a fun activity," says Kathryn.

She turns up the music, hands a spatula to her son and lets the breadcrumbs fall where they may. There is a joyful rhythm in a stirring spoon or in a whisk beating eggs. Encouraging our little epicures to appreciate home cooking can start as soon as they can see the countertop.

How to get cooking

Saima Sheikh, an early childhood educator and instructor at Humber College in Toronto, advises parents to keep expectations low, and start with something simple.

- "Hold your hand over theirs as they turn a whisk. Showing them how to move their hand, is a slow way to start expanding their attention span," she says.
- Allow your little gourmand to step in and help with small parts of the meal to engage them meaningfully. Most toddlers don't tolerate standing still long enough for an entire dish to be prepared.
- Tearing lettuce for a salad, for example, lasts only a few minutes. When the toddler sees that salad on the table, they learn to connect cause and effect. Not to mention the pride that erupts when they share their work with family.
- Prepare your workspace by removing any sharp, hot or otherwise dangerous items.
- Ensure the chair or stool they stand on is sturdy, and allows them to see what is happening on the counter. If possible, move some of the meal prep to a lower surface, such as the kitchen table.
- Be mindful of spices and peppers that can irritate eyes and skin upon contact.
- Hold your hand over theirs to show them how to grasp utensils (whisk, spatula, or spoon).
- Make up songs as you go: it helps develop language, and just makes the process more fun!



<http://www.parentscanada.com/toddler/how-to-get-toddlers-helping-in-the-kitchen>



Wee Builder (3-4 years): How Play Can Help Your Preschooler Develop

Recently when my three-year-old son started spitting at me, I turned to my favourite parenting strategy: I played with him.

Because he's very active, we played lots of high-energy, physical games together, with lots of cuddling too. By the end of a full-on week, just as my enthusiasm for my grand plan was waning, we started to see some progress.

"At three and four, kids don't have the cognitive or speech abilities to have the self-awareness to know what they're feeling and to articulate in detail to a parent. Very often you will see issues and struggles acted out through play, and that's where they come to their most creative and helpful solutions," says Angela MacKay, a Halifax-based child psychologist.

Playing through troublesome issues and transitions, such as potty training woes, starting preschool, or aggression, gives kids a chance to experiment in a safe way. "Play is literally like a trial run of life," says Angela.

Angela recommends that parents explore three different types of play:

- child-centred
- parent-directed
- therapeutic stories

"One of the reasons I like these types of play is that they're very general and you can apply it to anything. Create space for the child to play. Any situation that arises can be addressed through that."

Given the time and space, children often naturally use play to work through their feelings and find solutions, so Angela suggests starting with child-centred play. Support your child by being an interested witness:

- **Stay with the metaphor.** If your child is using a dragon to play herself, ask the dragon questions directly instead of asking your child. "Children do that as a way of dealing with issues not directly but at a safe distance," says Angela.
- **Narrate their play.** Talking to your child about their play – the dragon is hiding from the witch – helps to validate what they are experiencing.
- **Try 'wondering with'.** This is a way for parents to offer suggestions – I wonder what would happen if the dragon asked his friend to take turns? – While the child stays in control. This gives them a chance to run with the idea, or it might inspire a new one.





How Play Can Help Your Preschooler Develop (continued)

With parent-directed play, parents lead the way, using toys to act out different scenarios that your child might soon experience (spending the night at Grandma's) or has already experienced (Eva hit Sam with a toy car). The key, Angela explains, is for parents to mirror what everyone involved is feeling and thinking, and then model the solutions or behaviours they'd like their child to adopt.

"Even though it's parent-directed it's still child-informed," says Angela, so parents need to be mindful of how their child is reacting. "Play is fun, so if it's stressful, then it's not play! The healing power of play comes with the fun."

The third approach Angela recommends is therapeutic stories. These can be existing books with playful language and colourful pictures (such as the Llama Llama books by Anna Dewdney) or stories you make up yourself ('once upon a time there was a little boy called Billy and he went to preschool and this happened...').

By reading books or telling stories that your child can identify with, you help your child to process their experiences in a safe way.

These three approaches are useful when there are specific situations you want to help your child with, but play is important all of the time, helping your child learn and strengthening your relationship with them.

"Play in general can be proactive. When certain situations arise and there's stuff going on, it can be used more specifically and in more targeted ways to help a child," says Angela.

While my son may still spit occasionally, it's gotten a lot better. Playing may not have been a miracle cure, but it sure helped us through a difficult time. Bonus: we had fun together. "Because that's what play is – fun with your child," says Angela.

<http://www.parentscanada.com/preschool/how-play-can-help-your-preschooler-develop>





Wee Learner (4 – 5 years): How to Pick Your Battles

The answer to this question may be more obvious than you might imagine as long as you understand how to *prioritize* your child's behaviour and then *prioritize* your time..

Step 1. Make a list of your child's most notable behaviours following a simple outline from most to least dangerous:

1. Dangerous behaviour in which a person could get really hurt – running in the street, hitting or biting others.
2. Dangerous behaviour in which things could get broken – throwing toys or household objects where something is going to be broken;
3. Socially dangerous behaviour in which others will not want to be around your child – angry, argumentative language or actions;
4. Personally dangerous behaviour in which your child is not learning how to take care of themselves – not following reasonable directions from his or her parents which prevents a child from learning the skills of daily life;
5. Annoying behaviour that can be a nuisance – repetitive, clingy or whiny behaviours.

Step 2. Go back to your paper and pencil and consider your child's trouble behaviours in terms of:

- How often and when do these behaviours occur – 15 minutes in the morning or for two hours after school?
- How much control over your own time do you have, while these behaviours are going on – are you trying to get breakfast made for everyone, while you have to get yourself dressed and out?
- Can you *cause* these behaviours to occur at a time when you have nothing else to worry about except supervising your child's behaviour – you pick the time (when you can closely supervise and teach) when your two children will have access to a game that they are likely to argue over?

You will find that thinking about time management will be the key to zeroing in on a few selected behaviours to work on with your kids.

<http://www.parentscanada.com/toddler/how-to-pick-your-battles>





Wee Expert (5 – 6 years): Facing Fears of The Dark

When I was eight or nine, bedtime was tough. I vividly remember lying perfectly still under the covers and taking care not to let an arm or even a toe creep out from under the blankets. I didn't know what would happen if a limb escaped the sheets, but I knew it wouldn't be good.

Halifax psychologist Ann Marie Joyce says that a fear of the dark is an instinct we're all born with. It keeps us safe when we're walking down empty streets late at night and stops us from bashing our shins on the coffee table in the dark.

But for kids, the dark can be terrifying. The anxiety normally kicks in between the ages of two and four. "It starts when they begin to see things in the dark," says Ann Marie. "They can't see anything, so they populate their world with monsters and ghosts."

Since these fears are linked to the development of imagination, they change as children grow. Preschool children are more likely to worry about monsters, then they start school and imagine ghosts, and when they're a little older still, they begin thinking about burglars.

Before Bed

Although there are nights when it seems like the bedtime routine will never end, Ann Marie says there are a lot of things we can do to help:

- Stick to a consistent, calming routine.
- Avoid stimuli such as TV shows and video games. Research suggests that exposure to lights from television and computer screens can interfere with sleep.
- Replace the screen time with calming activities such as reading, relaxation exercises or a bath.

After Lights Out

After the bedtime routine has wound down, it's time to turn out the lights. Since children cherish that special quiet time with Mom or Dad, they often stall, and a fear of the dark can make a great excuse. Trust your instincts; you'll recognize real fear from their body language and facial expressions. If you think they're stalling, start providing a half an hour of special time earlier in the evening.





Facing Fears of The Dark (continued)

If they're genuinely afraid, Ann Marie recommends focusing on the positive. Tell your children that they're brave, but don't provide excessive reassurance. Trying to convince them that monsters aren't real or that burglars won't break in doesn't much help, but making sure they know you'll protect them will usually go a long way.

Most importantly, stay calm. It's easy to get upset when your kids are upset, so let the more relaxed parent deal with the situation. And remember, there's an end in sight – fear of the dark usually ends around age 12. Even I grew out of my fear of lurking nocturnal monsters.

But I still don't sleep with my closet door open.

Quick Tips for a Fear-Free Room

Halifax psychologist Ann Marie Joyce says making a few small changes to a child's room can make a big difference. Check out these three easy ideas for a better bedtime:

- **Add a little light:** And we really do mean little. While a nightlight is a great idea, avoid turning on a hallway or overhead fixture. Too much light interferes with sleep.
- **Less is more:** The less cluttered the room is, the better. Each item in your child's room has the potential to become something much scarier when the lights go out, so limit the possibilities by helping them keep their room tidy.
- **Keep the noise down:** An unexpected noise can trigger a whole new set of fears. If your child's room is in a noisier area of the house, consider setting up a fan or a white noise generator.

<http://www.parentscanada.com/school/facing-fears-of-the-dark>





Wee Mentor (6+ years): Is Your Child Ready for a Sleepover?

The first overnight stay can be scary for even the most outgoing child. Here's how to determine if your little one is ready

The first time six-year-old Ava was invited to a sleepover at a pal's house, her mom, Ashleigh Kelman, was convinced Ava wouldn't last the night. "She's the shy, quiet type, so I warned the hosting mom early on that she would likely end up wanting to come home. The night came and went, and I didn't get a call. I couldn't believe it. I was happy Ava proved me wrong," says the Winnipeg mom of three.

But for six-year-old Euan of Mount Pearl, N.L., sleeping away from home is not even on his radar. "He's a bit anxious and doesn't really like being away from me, so we haven't pushed the idea much," says his mom, Jacqueline Nolan. "His idea of a sleepover is staying on the bottom bunk in his older brother's room, and for now, that works."

Sleeping away from home can be an experience fraught with emotion for both kids and parents, but it can also be a ton of fun, says parenting expert, author and mom of two Alyson Schafer, who provides these tips for a successful sleepover.

What is the right age for a sleepover?

"In my mind, every child should discover the joy and sense of self-satisfaction that comes from sleepovers by age six," says Schafer. Because a sleepover is about pushing the boundaries of early independence, it's nice to have a child experience her first slumber away from home with people she knows well. Gauge your child's willingness to fly the coop for a night by arranging a trial run with family members or a close family friend. Nolan's older son, Donil, had his first sleepover at his aunt's house, which helped reduce any nervousness. Conversely, you could also invite a good friend of your child's to stay over. "This works because it gives them a bit of insight as to what a sleepover is like without them actually leaving home to experience it," says Schafer.

Who and how many?

Does your child prefer one-on-one playdates or group events? Is she an early-to-bed type while her pal is a night owl? Do you feel you know the parents of the other child well? The answers to these types of questions will help dictate which of your child's friends to invite over, or whether your child will enjoy going to a multi-kid slumber party. If you're hosting, try to keep numbers even to prevent any odd-man-out feelings among friends.





Is Your Child Ready for a Sleepover (continued)

What to do if they want to come home

Worried your offspring will ask to be picked up in the middle of the night? Schafer suggests a “show must go on” attitude about sleepovers. “If they go in knowing leaving is possible, they may build up their reaction to help reach their goal. If they know leaving is not possible, they’ll use the same energy to be creative about how to make the best of the situation,” says Schafer. Another good prep step: talk about respecting different routines, set expectations for behaviour and discuss strategies for the night. “We had various rooms available during sleepovers, and kids often bailed from a room, but not from the house,” notes Schafer. Sometimes all it takes is a call or text with Mom or Dad to settle nerves. However, if your child is desperate about coming home, talk to the host parent to understand the situation fully and decide if a pickup is required. “Every parent should decide what is best for their child, situation to situation,” she says.

When you’re the host

When signing up to act as host, stay calm and employ the everything-in-moderation rule. Start by making sure you have contact information for the visiting child’s parents on hand, as well as allergy information or any dietary restrictions. Also discuss their preference about what to do if their child wants to go home before the night is through. Next, plan a night of fun, but don’t go overboard. “You can do things like let your child choose the dinner menu, snack and morning breakfast, and where—and in what—they’d like to sleep,” Schafer says, but be strategic so there’s control over when excitement will peak and wind down. And have a set time for “lights out.”

Plan the Exit

Whether you’re hosting a gaggle of kids or one lone BFF, when morning dawns following a sleepover, keep things low-key but organized. Arrange for a pickup time that isn’t too early so you don’t have to wake the kids. When they do get up, keep breakfast simple. “Kids at this age have likely reached their limit, so it’s best to minimize excitement and get them ready to go home.”

<http://www.canadianfamily.ca/kids/is-your-child-ready-for-a-sleepover/>

