



## Stages of Play: Birth to 6 Months

### Babies Use Their Bodies and Senses to Play

If you put your finger in your newborn's palm, she will grasp your finger tightly. This is an important *reflex*—an action that babies are born with and do automatically. Beginning at about 3 months, however, these reflexes begin to disappear. Now, babies start moving their bodies with purpose. They become interested in exploring toys through their senses, and they learn what objects are and do through this sensory play. Here's how.

#### **Feeling Connected**

The very first type of “play” your baby does is with you and the other people who care for him. These early interactions can help you and your baby feel more connected and in tune with one another. For example, your baby may gaze at you, turn to look at you when you start singing a lullaby, or quiet at the sound of your voice. Babies also begin to tell you when they need a break from interactions, by turning away, closing their eyes, back-arching, crying or falling asleep.

#### **Looking and Noticing**

Babies' vision is improving during this period. They can see objects further away and are also able to see colors, though they still prefer objects with strong color contrast (such as black, white and red).

##### ***Toys to Explore:***

- YOU
- Colorful (or high contrast) rattles and other objects.

##### ***What You Can Do to Help Your Baby Learn:***

- Slowly move a colorful object in front of your baby's field of vision from about 10-12 inches away. See if your little one can follow this object with his gaze as you move it left, right, up, and down, and in a slow circle. In this game, your baby is learning to track objects using his eyes. Soon he will be tracking *you* as you move around the room.
- Hold up a rattle in each hand. Shake one and watch if your baby focuses on it. Give her a few seconds and then shake the other rattle. Wait for her to focus on that one. Shifting gaze between two objects means that babies can focus their attention (and their vision) to objects they find interesting.

#### **Grasping Begins**

Your baby is now able to look at an object and move her hand in that direction in order to grab it. This is how hand-eye coordination develops. Soon your baby will be transferring toys or other small objects from one hand to the other (sometimes pausing to mouth them for a bit).

##### ***Toys to Explore:***

- Your fingers, nose, hair, etc.
- Brightly colored rattles or other toys that are easy to grasp
- Toys that make gentle noises when shaken or swiped at

##### ***What You Can Do to Help Your Baby Learn:***

- Offer your baby two rattles within reaching distance. Let him reach for and grasp the one he likes best.
- Offer your baby two objects to hold. Once he is holding one rattle or block, offer him a second one. At first, he will drop what he is holding to grab a second object. Over time, he will learn to hold two things at once.

### **Mouthing Helps Baby Explore**

Mouthing toys (and almost anything else) is an important way that babies explore the world around them. The mouth is a highly developed nerve center so mouthing tells babies a lot about an object—what texture it is, what it might do, how large it is, what it tastes like, and more. Mouthing objects can also help with teething pain, which can begin as early as 4 months.

#### ***Toys to Explore:***

- Baby-safe rattles, teethers, board or fabric books, and other toys with different textures and shapes

#### ***What You Can Do to Help Your Baby Learn:***

- Offer your baby safe objects to mouth. Watch the process of how he gazes at the object that interests him, reaches for it, and then mouths it to figure out what it is! Babies are curious about exploring everything in their world.
- Be sure to clean toys regularly to keep your little one healthy.

### **Practicing Tummy-Time**

Giving your child a chance to spend time on his tummy is important for his development in several ways. First, it helps him develop important muscles in his neck and trunk. When starting tummy-time, you will see your baby first lift his head up from the floor for a few seconds. Over time, he will begin to push up on his forearms. Next, he will start to push up on his hands and be able to stay in this position for longer periods of time. As he gets stronger, your baby will begin to pivot in a circle on his belly to reach toys. Exploring in new ways like this builds your baby's thinking skills.

#### ***Toys to Explore:***

- YOU. Lie on your belly facing your baby so that he can gaze at and “talk” to you.
- Baby-safe mirrors, rattles or other toys to place in front of your baby
- Baby-safe (board, fabric or plastic) books to play with

#### ***What You Can Do to Help Your Baby Learn:***

- Give your baby many chances to be on his tummy across the day for as long as he can tolerate it. Offer him a child-safe mirror, toy, book, or your face to look at while on his tummy. If he starts to fuss, pick him up or roll him to his back. Try again a little later.
- Every time you change your baby's diaper, make a habit of rolling him over briefly to give him a minute of supervised tummy time. Then roll him back and pick him up. This lets him experience what it feels like to roll back and forth.
- While on his back, gently lift your baby's feet up over his body toward his mouth. Soon, he might even begin putting his toes in his mouth! Rocking their feet up over their bodies helps babies get enough momentum to roll to their sides and later, their bellies.

