

6 Games to Play with Babies (6 months)

Why is play important for babies? It helps develop sturdy brain architecture, the foundations of lifelong health, and the building blocks of resilience.

Playful interactions with adults also help babies develop **executive function skills**. Hiding, finger play, and conversation games, like the ones below, teach them to focus attention, use working memory, and practice basic self-control.

When you play with a baby, **follow their lead!** Play games they show an interest in and, whenever possible, let *them* determine how long to play and when to move on to something else.

1



Peekaboo!

Babies love hide-and-find games. This type of play challenges babies to remember who is hiding, and helps them practice basic skills of self-control! You can vary the game by having baby wait for you to reveal your face or letting baby control the timing.

2



“Trot Trot to Boston”

Put baby on your knees, facing you. As you chant the words, bounce them gently up and down. You can be silly by saying the words very quickly or very slowly: “Trot trot to Boston, Trot trot to Lynn. Watch out little [baby’s name] or you might fall in!”

3



“Pat-a-Cake”

Sing “Pat-a-cake, pat-a-cake, baker’s man. Bake me a cake as fast as you can! Roll it, and pat it, and mark it with a [first letter of baby’s name], then put it in the oven for the baby and me!” Clap, roll, and pat baby’s hands gently as you sing. Increase the speed as you repeat!

4



Hiding Games

Hide a toy under a cloth, cup, or box and encourage baby to look for it. Once they can find it quickly, hide it, show baby that you moved it, and encourage them to find it again.

When baby finds the object, show excitement and say, “You found it!” Repeat the game as long as they seem interested. If baby turns away or fusses, try to figure out what their mood is telling you, or what they’re interested in next. The game can change!

5



Conversation Games

Six-month-old babies begin to make sounds like “ga,” “ma,” and “ba.” Sit with baby facing you on your lap and make silly sounds. Take a pause and wait to see if baby “talks back.” When they babble, squeal, or make a silly face, make the same sounds and face back.

Tell baby a story that is meaningful to you. You can tell them about the day they were born or an important event in your life. Along the way, stop and ask them questions. Even though you won’t get “real” answers, baby will add their own colorful details.

6



Fingerplays

Babies love songs and chants with simple hand motions. They can learn to copy motions and remember sequences, with practice. Some examples in English are *Eensy Weensy Spider* and *Where is Thumbkin?* Lots of other fun fingerplays can be found in many languages and cultures.



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5 Games to Play with Babies (9 months)

Why is play important for babies? It helps develop sturdy brain architecture, the foundations of lifelong health, and the building blocks of resilience.

Playful interactions with adults also help babies build **executive function skills**. Imitation, hiding, and conversation games, like the ones below, teach them to focus attention, use working memory, and practice basic self-control.

When you play with a baby, **follow their lead!** Play games they show an interest in and, whenever possible, let *them* determine how long to play and when to move on to something else.

1



“Dickory Dean”

Sit on the edge of a chair or couch and hold baby on your lap. Bounce baby up and down as you chant, “What’s the matter with Dickory Dean?” Then lift baby up high and say, “He jumped right into the washing machine!” Bring baby back down to your lap and swish them side to side while saying, “Chug, chug, chug, chug” two times. Then, bounce baby and chant, “Nothing’s the matter with Dickory Dean.” Now, slowly say, “He dove in dirty...” and drop baby down between your knees. Finally, exclaim, “And he jumped out clean!” and lift baby up high again. Babies will learn to remember the game and anticipate the thrill of the movements!

2



Baby See, Baby Do!

Make simple gestures in front of a baby—wave your hand, stick out your tongue, or blow a kiss. Babies love to copy adults by watching them, remembering what they do, waiting their turn, and then trying to imitate. Later, if the baby makes the gesture first, copy them back!

3



Where Is It?

Find a safe object that makes noise—like a set of keys that jingle or a toy that makes music. Make the sound to get baby interested, then hide the object behind your back or under a blanket. Encourage baby to look for it, saying, “Where are the keys?” When baby finds the object, be enthusiastic and say, “You found it!” Try different hiding spots or different objects and repeat the game until baby loses interest.

4



Boom!

Take turns dropping a small toy into a container. When the toy hits the bottom, say, “Boom!” This might make the baby laugh or clap in excitement. After a few times, drop the toy in the container, but don’t say anything. The baby might try to say, “Boom!” or make another noise. If they do, respond by saying it back. Next, encourage baby to drop the toys in the bucket and say “Boom!” with you.

5



Grocery Store Explore

At the market, point out and tell baby about the different foods you see. Or talk about what baby is pointing at or noticing. What type of food is it? What color is it? What does it taste or smell like? “I see red and green apples. I wonder if they taste sweet?” If baby makes sounds in response, listen attentively and keep the discussion going. Even though babies at this age can’t respond in words, they still learn language skills by listening to you.



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5 Games to Play with Toddlers (12 months)

Why is play important for babies and toddlers? It helps develop sturdy brain architecture, the foundations of lifelong health, and the building blocks of resilience.

Playful interactions with adults also help toddlers build **executive function skills**. Imitation, hiding, imaginative, and container play games, like the ones below, teach them to focus attention, use working memory, and practice basic self-control.

When you play with a baby, **follow their lead!** Play games they show an interest in and, whenever possible, let *them* determine how long to play and when to move on to something else.

1



Toddler See, Toddler Do!

Encourage a toddler to copy your actions while you play together. For example, place a few toy animals in a barnyard, some toy cars in a line, or stack some blocks and then knock them down. When baby does the same, give specific praise: “Wow! Look at that tower you built!” or “Nice work! The cars are lined up and ready to race!”

2



Explore on the Floor

It’s fun for babies to explore their surroundings, whether they are crawling, standing with support, or beginning to walk. Join a toddler for some playtime on their level, wherever that may be. Stretch out, sit down, or kneel on the floor near them and place pillows, couch cushions, or soft toys on the floor between you for “obstacles.” Now, encourage them to explore and come to you. Toddlers might climb over the cushions, stack them, carry them, or even pretend to lay down and go to sleep. It’s all play!

3



“It’s For You!”

One year olds are beginning to understand the concept of imaginary play. A simple way to encourage them is by holding a toy (or a banana, a shoe, or even just your hand) up to your ear and pretending to talk on the phone with a family member or friend. After your pretend call ends, make a ringing sound, but this time when you “answer” the phone, tell the toddler that it’s someone calling for them! Hold the “phone” up to their ear and prompt them to say “Hello” and chat away.

4



Dump and Fill

Toddlers love to put items into a container and dump them out over and over again. (You’ve probably seen a toddler empty out a laundry basket full of clean clothing or a bin full of toys that you just put away!) Encourage and redirect this fun activity by providing them with a variety of containers (such as empty mixing bowls, boxes, or baskets) and safe items to fill them up with, such as toys or socks.

5



Simple Hide and Seek

At this age, toddlers may enjoy hiding themselves and listening to you search loudly for them while they track your location mentally. Keep the game exciting by exaggerating your movements and words, looking in silly places, and narrating your search: “Where is baby? Is baby under the table? Nooo. Is baby on the ceiling? Noooo. Is baby behind the couch? Yes! I found you!”



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BRAIN-BUILDING THROUGH PLAY

5 Games to Play with Toddlers (18 months)

Why is play important for babies and toddlers? It helps develop sturdy brain architecture, the foundations of lifelong health, and the building blocks of resilience.

Playful interactions with adults also help toddlers build **executive function skills**. Pretend play, songs, and matching games, like the ones below, teach them to focus attention, use working memory, and practice basic self-control.

When you play with a baby, **follow their lead!** Play games they show an interest in and, whenever possible, let *them* determine how long to play and when to move on to something else.

1



Just Like You!

Toddlers at this age may begin to enjoy pretend play. They may act out the behaviors and routines they see adults or siblings doing. Join them! If a toddler pretends to stir food in a bowl, say, “What are you stirring? Are you making a cake? It smells delicious! Let’s put it in the oven!” Or, if they pretend to feed a baby doll, say, “You are taking such good care of baby! Is it time to burp them?” Help encourage pretend play by giving toddlers safe objects to use—like a broom, a dust cloth, a hair brush, pots and pans, etc.

2



Making Chores Fun

Toddlers love to help, and now is the time to encourage them by making chores playful. This is a form of role play! Simple activities like sweeping the floor, putting away toys or books, or putting clothes into a laundry basket are all great for practicing new skills. Make chores playful by listening to music, setting a timer and encouraging them to go as fast as they can, or turning a laundry basket into a basketball hoop and tossing the clothes in. At first, do chores together and give verbal instructions and reminders so the toddler gains confidence. With time, the child can do chores on their own—or alongside you while you tackle something else.

3



Finger Plays and Songs

Toddlers love songs and chants with hand motions, especially when the tempo varies or there is a surprise part. With practice, they can copy motions and remember sequences. Finger plays and active songs can be found in many languages and cultures. “Open, Shut Them,” “Head, Shoulders, Knees, and Toes,” and “The Wheels on the Bus” are some popular ones in English. You can find many examples of songs with their actions on YouTube.

4



Memory Game

Find three cups and three small objects that you can hide underneath, like a toy car, a small ball, or an animal figure. Show the child each toy, say its name (“This is a car”), and let them see you hide it under one of the cups. Then ask, “Where is the car?” and encourage them to lift up the cup they think it’s under. If they’re correct, praise and ask them to find the next object. If they are incorrect, encourage them to look under another cup. Vary the game by adding more (or fewer) cups and objects or by moving the cups around *after* hiding the objects.

5



Matching and Sorting Games

Toddlers are beginning to understand how to match and sort objects that look alike in color or shape. Ready-made sorter toys are great, but you can also make your own games. Place different colored pieces of paper on the floor, give the toddler some colored objects, and ask them to place the objects on the piece of paper with the same color. Or, give the child a small group of similar objects, like toy animals, except for two, such as play people. See if they can group the like objects together. Incorporate sorting to make clean-up playful, too: “Let’s put away all the blocks!”



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6 Games to Play with Toddlers (2-3 years)

Older toddlers are developing rapidly, especially in their **language and physical skills**. They may get frustrated when they don't quite have the words to express their needs and wants. Be patient when you can and support them with playful interactions and games like the ones below. Active songs; imitation, matching, sorting, and counting games; and puzzles all teach older toddlers to focus attention, use working memory, and practice basic self-control.

Let toddlers lead and **set the pace** of your play together as much as possible. Take your cues from them about when to start, stop, and switch to another activity.

1



Active Songs

Older toddlers love physical games, but they may need frequent reminders about how to play. Songs with movements provide important physical activity, and the lyrics reinforce when and how to move along. Active songs can be found in many languages and cultures. “I’m a Little Teapot” or “I’m Going on a Bear Hunt” are popular ones in English.

Songs that require children to start and stop or slow down and speed up, such as Freeze Dance/Musical Statues or Ring Around the Rosie, help build self-control.

2



Imitation Game: Follow the Leader

Choose someone to be the leader. (Tip: Start with an adult.) Other players line up behind the leader, who then moves around in any way they choose. They may run, jump, crawl, or walk on tip toes, for example. The other players must copy what the leader does, and the leader can change movements at any time. Players then take turns being the leader. You can play with as few as two or as many players as you want! These are great tests of working memory, attention, and self-control.

3



Matching & Sorting Games

Take turns with a toddler sorting objects by size, shape, or color. For example, while playing outside, you could sort rocks into piles of small, medium, and large sizes. When folding laundry, you could put all the red clothes together, blue clothes together, etc. Once the child has lots of practice, challenge them to sort in a silly way like putting their big toys in a small basket and their small toys in a big basket.

4



Counting Games

Older toddlers are beginning to learn about numbers. Support their learning by counting together. You can count blocks, stairs, berries, crackers—anything you use or see every day. Cheer or clap as children learn to reach bigger numbers, from three, to 10, to 20!

5



Puzzles

Older toddlers may enjoy playing with simple puzzles, which require attention to shapes and colors. As they work on a puzzle, ask them to think about what shape or color they need, where they might put a certain piece, or where they might put the piece if it doesn't fit. This helps them exercise reflection and planning skills.

6



Be the Narrator

Narrate a child's play to help them learn the words to describe their actions. This can be simple or you can use a silly voice to imitate a sportscaster, news anchor, or game show host. You can also ask questions, such as, "What will you do next?" or "I see you want to put the ball inside the jar. Is there another way to do that?"



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BRAIN-BUILDING THROUGH PLAY

5 Games & Activities for Children (4-7 years)

Children’s executive function, self-regulation, and physical skills develop rapidly during the years from four to seven. Every child develops at their own pace, so **choose games that align with their individual skill levels**. Games should be challenging, but not too frustrating.

Younger children in this age range may need help as they learn game rules. As kids get older, their independence grows as well. **You can support this development by stepping back from leading their play**. Your goal is for children to eventually manage their own games with their friends and peers, though your help may still be needed occasionally for sorting out disagreements.

1



Freeze Dance (or “Musical Statues”)

Children need lots of opportunities to be active. Playgrounds and parks are great for outdoor fun, but if you can’t get outside, a simple game of Freeze Dance can do the trick! Just play some music and have children dance along, then stop the music suddenly. As soon as the music stops, everyone needs to “freeze” in place and stand perfectly still until the music starts again. Keep the game challenging as children get older by asking them to freeze in a particular position, like standing on one foot.

2



Simon Says

Ask children to follow your instructions to move, but only when you say “Simon Says” before the action. For example, “Simon Says jump up and down!” Test their attention by randomly calling out instructions without saying “Simon Says” first (“Jump up and down!” or “Take two steps forward!”). Vary the speed of the game to keep it interesting, and let the kids take turns being “Simon” when they are comfortable with the game. Similar active games include “Red Light, Green Light,” “Duck, Duck, Goose,” and “What Time Is It, Mr. Fox?”

3



I Spy

Saying, “I spy with my little eye...” give a clue about an object that everyone playing can see. For example, if you see a school bus, say, “I spy with my little eye ... something yellow.” The child(ren) must look around and make guesses that match the clue (raincoat, flower, etc.), and the game continues until someone guesses correctly. Add more clues if needed (“it’s yellow and has wheels”). (Tip: Borrow *I Spy* books from your local library to keep the fun going!)

4



Opposites Bingo

Matching and sorting games are still fun at this age, but switch up the rules and increase the difficulty to keep kids interested. Here’s one idea: Make your own Bingo picture cards by drawing a grid on a piece of paper, then gluing photos from magazines onto the spaces. Kids can help with this, too! Use small objects like pennies for markers. But, instead of having kids mark a *match* on their card, they can mark the *opposite* of what is called out by the leader. For example, if the leader calls out “daytime,” children with a nighttime picture on their card would mark the spot.

5



“Continue the Story” Game

Children love to tell stories. Help them write down the words and encourage them to illustrate their stories and act them out. With a group of children, try this storytelling game: One child starts a story, then the other children each take turns adding something to it. This requires them to pay attention to each other, reflect on possible plot twists, and come up with additions to fit the changing story.



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