

Rural Response for Healthy Children

“Children at play are really children at work – learning cause and effect, developing skills, building their vocabulary, absorbing all the knowledge they will need to grow up and take on the world. As a parent, your role is to be their first playmate, and to be the one who provides the environment that is both safe to explore and offers endless opportunities for learning”. As a parent you are bombarded by the media with images of toys, books and other playthings children “need” in order to reach their full potential. Which toys should you invest in? Are there certain toys every child *should* be exposed to? What will best encourage your child’s gross and fine motor development? How can you encourage literacy and numeracy in your children without it feeling like work?

At each age and stage of development children are naturally more able and interested in learning and practicing various skills. Let’s look at how best to support and encourage children’s development while having fun at the same time.

Birth to 1 - Milestones

Very busy time of growth for baby. Babies love to touch, enjoy different textures, love water and bath time. Babies love to look. Make your own mobile from magazine pictures or family pictures from around the house. Place it above the crib, near their chair or change table.

- Rolls from tummy to back
- Begins to smile, coo, chuckle
- Starts to relate to people by imitating them, playing “pat a cake”, hand holding
- Crawls, pull ups and walks – 8-18 months
- Starts understanding “object permanence” – things exist even when you can’t see them

TOYS

Must be “mouth friendly” and nothing that would fit through the hole of a paper towel tube – choking hazard

- Lights, sounds, music, colours
- Toys that help develop grasping abilities, hand eye coordination
- Mirrors – help babies with sense of self
- Shape sorter – cause and effect
- Books with simple stories encourage familiarity of rhythm words make, encourage beginner speech
- May want what others have – don’t understand concept of sharing

Parental Role: Use simple toys. Babies learn at a rate 16 x slower than adults (ref: First Three Years). Be very expressive with your facial expressions – show surprise and happiness at what the toy does. Hold your baby in your lap as you play or sit so you are at eye level with him. Practice lots of finger plays “Head and Shoulders” – touch parts of baby’s body as you sing. It’s never too early to begin reading to your baby. Choose simple stories with big pictures. Books with various textured pages are good choices, as are cloth books that can double as bath toys.

Age 1 to 3 – Milestones

Children learn the most when they have the freedom to do their own research and move at their own speed. The best environment is one that encourages exploration and allows him to move freely and safely. Most play should be spontaneous and unstructured. At this age toddlers want to explore everything. They can be impatient, may hit, push or grab others but this is their way of discovering boundaries and behaviour.

- Short memory
- Try to run, walk backwards, sideways
- Play in a squat position
- Scribble/make dots on paper/in sand
- May want a special toy/blanket with them at all times

TOYS

Toy versions of grown up things (broom and dustpan, doll stroller, kitchen, workbench, tool sets)

- Climbing toys
- Dress up clothes and mirror
- Dolls, trucks, trains
- Play dough (edible) and other sensory items including sand and water,
- Toys and books that introduce letters, numbers, colours, shapes
- Simple books that are repetitive, rhyming (Dr Seuss)
- Beginner crayons, paper

Parental Role: Toddlers are very independent, and try to do most things themselves. Encourage this. Show your child how the toy works and then let him do it his way. Be his partner in play as he allows. Read to him–

he may request the same book over and over again and while boring for you, it's actually good for your child - they like the repetition and start to remember the words and the story. They are able to anticipate what will come next. Encourage new words by using your own words to name and explain everything you're doing.

Age 3 to 4 - Milestones

- Play make believe games with actions/words
- Share toys/books some of the time
- Listen to music or stories for 5-10 mins/time
- Tell what is happening in a picture when asked
- Snip paper with safety scissors
- Hold a pencil/crayon correctly
- Take turns and share with other children in small group settings
- Try to comfort someone who is upset

TOYS

- Toys/books/resources focusing on letters, numbers, colours, shapes
- Toys that encourage imaginative play: Love to play house, school, restaurant, etc. Puppet shows, costumes
- Simple Card Games (Go Fish, Memory, Old Maid)
- Craft kits, markers, crayons, paper, stickers, odds and ends
- Puzzles (30-60 pieces), word puzzles, books that teach opposites, rhyming concepts

Parental Role: Teach the rules of board games /card games and play along with your child. Follow your child's lead in play – at this age he is full of imagination and will delight in telling you what to do. If children are arguing over a toy, encourage them to solve their own problems as much as possible, but be present to mediate if necessary. Read to your child daily. If it's a well known story, leave some words out as you go and encourage your child to fill in the blanks. Ask them to point out various letters of the alphabet in the words of the story. Discuss what's happening in the pictures.

Age 5 to 6 - Milestones

- Talk about having a best friend
- Work alone at an activity for 30 mins
- Recognize letters and sounds they make
- Recognize some written words
- Know right from left on own body
- Pay attention and follow instructions in a group
- Play cooperatively with 2-3 children for 30 mins

TOYS

- Lego, blocks, building sets, imaginative play
- Toys that encourage reading, spelling, math skills
- Wide variety of books
- Things that take time to set up – castles, train sets – child is capable of more complicated thoughts, intricate and involved play
- Hair sets, nail sets, craft kits, Make your own_____, science discovery sets (microscope, binoculars, nets)
- Various sports sets

Parental Role: Be engaged and present when your child asks you to play with them. Ask them if you can play with them. Discover and learn new things together. Become familiar with what they are interested in. Model how to be a good winner, and a good loser. Discuss themes and concepts in books. Read back and forth with your child – introduce chapter books.

It can all be overwhelming – standing in the toy department in front of various shelves full of toys, trying to choose one for a child. You want to make good use of the money you spend. Wouldn't it be great if you could try it out for a couple of weeks and if your child didn't like it, you could return it? YOU CAN! You can borrow toys and resources from THE BUS. Check the back page of the RRHC Spring/Summer newsletter to see if THE BUS is in your area in the next two weeks, then plan to bring the kids "borrowing". They'll be happy, your wallet will be happy and you all benefit!

Information for this article came from the Nippissing Development Screens and the BC Council for Families - <http://www.bccf.bc.ca/hm/> Visit our website for more information about programs and services offered through Rural Response for Healthy Children.