

## Play and Language Development



West Midlands  
Speech & Language  
Therapy

Play is all about having fun! Any activity your child finds fun and enjoyable is considered play. But play is much more than just a fun activity for your child!

### Why is play important?

Play is one of the most important ways that children learn about the world. When children play with adults and other children, they learn how to interact and share with others, and to problem solve. They also learn how to communicate and use language effectively.

Playing enables children to test things out in a safe way, develop their imagination and learn about emotions.

### Play develops as children develop

**Babies (0-12 months)** - start with exploring, putting everything in their mouth, or throwing and banging toys. This is their way of experimenting and learning how different objects feel and taste. They enjoy people games such as tickling and peek-a-boo. After 6 months babies explorations become more intentional. They enjoy cause and effect toys (push button toys), sorting toys with holes of different shapes (ring stackers, shape boxes), big single shape puzzles.

**Toddlers (1-2 years)** - will initiate play themselves, often returning to their favourite game over and over. Toddlers are learning how objects are used together. This is why they enjoy filling-and-dumping water, sand, and blocks. Toddlers are also making connections between objects - like placing little people on a toy bus. Toddlers are learning about sizes as they stack rings. They're noticing similarities when they line up two toy cars that look the same.

**Older Toddlers (2-3 years)** - will engage in pretend play as their thinking skills develop. They may use objects, such as a doll and toy bottle. They will act out steps of a familiar routine—feeding, rocking, and putting a doll to sleep.

**Pre-schoolers – (3-4 years)** - enjoy dramatic play such as playing doctors or shop keepers. They use sequences of pretend play to role play and develop their own imaginative story lines. Children who use their imagination and 'play pretend' in safe environments can learn about their emotions, what interests them, and how to adapt to situations.

Play doesn't require expensive materials. Pots and pans, containers (old plastic bottles), a large cardboard box, a bowl of water or dried pasta or rice and a blanket for "peek-a-boo" or making a tent, are wonderful tools for play and language development. People are the best toys, and children will learn a lot of language when they share play activities with their parents and/or siblings.





## Top 10 activities for supporting communication

Toy or game	Why?	How?
<b>Imaginative play – dressing up, tea sets, car garage, Playmobile or Happyland</b>	Helps to expand your child's language beyond what they can immediately see and develops their creativity.	Comment on what your child is doing and saying rather than asking lots of questions. Join in with play and model how to do it.
<b>Messy Play – water play, chalk boards, sand, finger painting and play dough</b>	Helps to develop your child's awareness of different sensations, develop vocabulary and talk about actions.	Use action words and descriptive words to increase your child's vocabulary eg, pour, squash, pull, red, smooth.
<b>Inset Puzzles</b>	Helps your child to develop their early vocabulary.	Label the pieces as your child puts the piece in the puzzle. Give your child a choice "do you want the cat or the ball?"
<b>Musical Instruments – shakers, bells, pots and pans, drums</b>	Helps to develop sound awareness skills and attention and listening.	Play sound location games, matching sounds games. Talk about sounds being loud or quiet, long or short.
<b>Repetitive Books – Dear Zoo, The Gingerbread Man</b>	Repetition helps your child to understand and remember new words. Listening to stories supports attention and listening skills.	Children love to hear the same story over and over. They will join in with the bits they remember so books with repetitive lines are great.
<b>Simple Lotto Boards – themed picture boards include animals, transport, toys</b>	These games help your child to develop their vocabulary.	Talk about the pictures and label them. Talk about where you could find a particular object and how it looks.
<b>Colour/shape matching and counting games – marble run, click clack cars, Lego, Mr Potato Head,</b>	These games will help your child to learn important words/concepts that will be helpful to them in nursery and school.	Talk about colours, shapes and numbers. Try and match these with colours and shapes you can see around the home.
<b>Puppets – hand or finger</b>	Puppets help to develop your child's imagination and story-telling skills.	Make up stories or re-tell familiar stories and act them out using the puppets.

<b>Sequencing Toys – coloured bricks, threading beads</b>	Sequencing skills help your child to develop the concept of time and order.	Talk about the sequences and the order of colours, shapes or numbers. Introduce specific vocabulary eg 'first, next, last, before, after'.
<b>Board Games for turn-taking</b>	Turn-taking is an essential skill for communication. Board games help to develop this skill alongside attention and listening skills.	Reinforce whose turn it is. "my turn, your turn" Talk about whose turn is next.
<b>Rhyming lotto and rhyming books</b>	Rhyming skills help your child to learn skills they need for reading and developing literacy.	Point out the differences and similarities between words eg, 'cat and hat sound the same' what else rhymes with cat?

(Adapted from I CAN's Top 10 toys for the development of communication skills.)

