

Chwarae Cymru
Play Wales



Play in the first 1000 days

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The first 1000 days, the period during pregnancy and up to the child's second birthday, offers great potential for positive and lasting impact. Living, playing and learning are inseparable and vital during those formative years.

Introduction

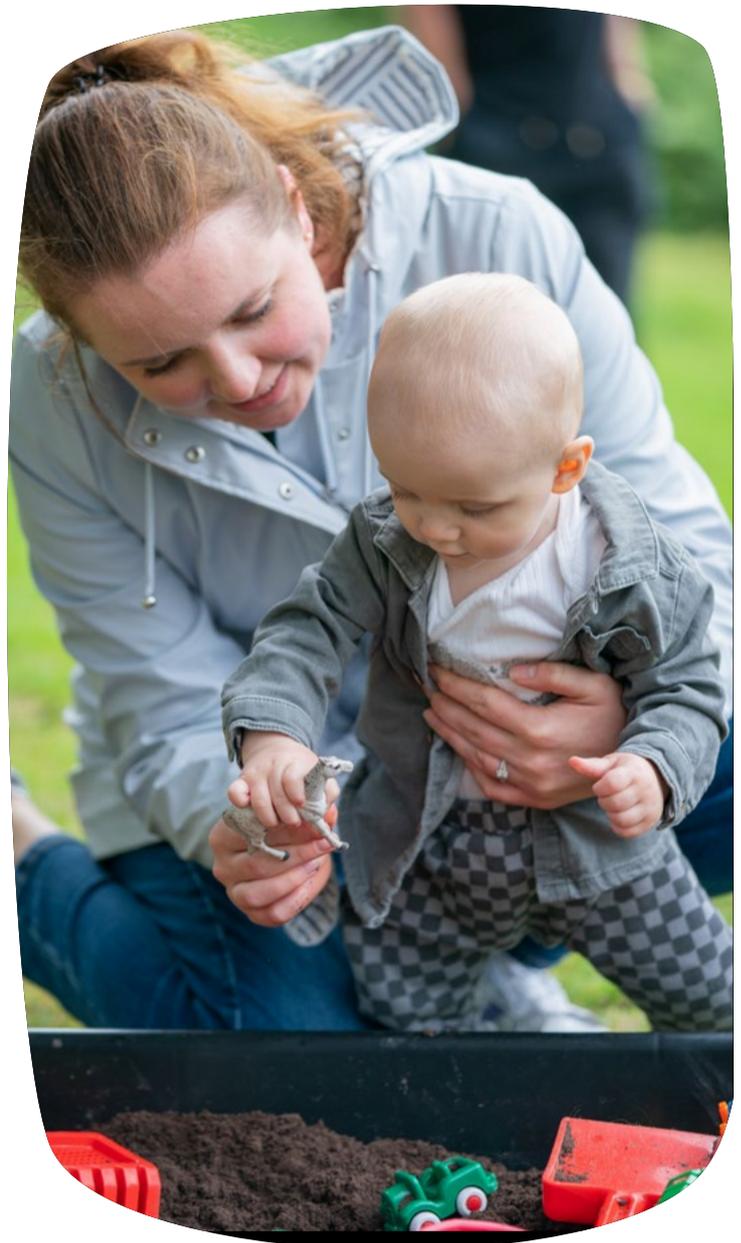
Children have a right to play, as recognised in Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). As an indication of the significance the United Nations places on children's play it has published a General Comment on Article 31. This document – General Comment no. 17 – identifies that play has the key characteristics of fun, uncertainty, challenge, flexibility and non-productivity.

Playing is central to children's physical, mental, social and emotional health and wellbeing. When they play, children contribute to their immediate wellbeing and to their own development.

There is a well-established body of solid evidence that shows the contribution that play, particularly unstructured play, can make to children's long-term and immediate wellbeing, to their physical health and to their mental health and resilience. Various studies¹ have concluded:

- **Play supports socialisation:** when they play, children interact with others, develop friendships and attachments with peers, deal with conflict, and learn respect and tolerance.
- **Play builds resilience:** playing boosts children's emotion regulation, confidence, creativity, problem-solving skills and perseverance, enabling them to cope with stress and challenges throughout life.
- **Play is crucial for good health and wellbeing:** being active through play helps children physically and emotionally, contributing to their health and happiness.

- **Play supports children to feel part of their neighbourhoods and wider communities:** playing allows children to learn about the world around them, make connections, and develop a sense of identity and belonging.
- **Play supports learning and development:** building the structures of the brain and skills such as critical thinking.



The power of play in the first 1000 days

Play is the foundation for development during the first 1000 days – an amazing time of growth and change.² Access to high quality play is one of the seven thematic building blocks discussed in *Best Start in Life: An Early Years Framework for Action*.³ This Framework for Action describes what is meant by the best start in life and sets a clear vision to achieve this. The seven thematic building blocks are a key component that detail the specific elements that matter most for babies, young children and their families, directly influencing their day to day lives and outcomes. When any of these building blocks are missing, inequalities in outcomes can arise.

From the earliest days, and even before birth, children engage in forms of play. The playful kicks a baby makes in the womb, the cooing and babbling sounds, and the simple introduction of peek-a-boo are all foundational elements of play. These activities are entertaining and fun – they are also the building blocks for more complex cognitive and social interaction, emotional, language and attunement skills.

As well as providing instant enjoyment for babies, toddlers and young children, playing is a fundamental aspect of a child's development. Through play, children learn, explore and make sense of the world around them. It promotes:

- **learning and brain development:** playing provides the interactions that build the brain's architecture during the first three years, a period of immense neural growth. By the age of three, 80% of a child's brain has been developed.
- **physical growth and development:** crawling, grasping and rolling develops muscles, coordination and motor skills.
- **social skills:** playing allows for interaction with caregivers and other children helping babies and toddlers to learn communication, empathy and cooperation.
- **emotional wellbeing:** through play, babies learn to express and manage emotions, building self-confidence and resilience.

The role of adults

General Comment no. 17 reminds us that play takes place when children are on their own, together with their peers or with supportive adults. The General Comment highlights that children's development can be supported by loving and caring adults as they relate to children through play. Participation with children in play provides adults with unique insights and understanding into the child's perspectives. The role of the adult is to be a sensitive facilitator, who can create a safe environment while following the child's lead to provide opportunities for exploration and learning through play.

During the first 1000 days, an adult brings a wealth of experience and can introduce children to traditional games and activities, providing a link to cultural heritage. An adult who can follow a child's lead from very early on, not only allows them to be in touch with themselves, enjoying activity and creating neural pathways, but also developing sensory integration. This is when a child can take in and use information through the senses and respond appropriately. This in turn supports wellbeing and allows a child to thrive.

Support for caregivers

General Comment no. 17 advises that guidance, support and facilitation should be provided to parents and caregivers to help them to understand the importance of play. Support could be in the form of practical guidance on how to:

- listen to children while playing
- create environments that facilitate children's play
- allow children to play freely
- play with children.

It could also address the importance of:

- encouraging creativity and dexterity
- balancing safety and discovery
- the developmental value of play.

Play and the sensory systems

Random movements of the arms, legs, hands and feet start during pregnancy in the womb. Providing babies with opportunities to explore and develop movement of the arms and legs is a crucial part of play.

Providing opportunities for tummy time and floor play allows for babies to build the strength in their neck, shoulders and arms, which are essential for future milestones like sitting and crawling. The floor also helps babies to learn about their environment and develop their sensory systems.

The sensory systems give young children information about the world, so how does play look through external stimuli?

Tactile (touch) – every physical interaction with a baby’s environment activates receptors in the skin, muscles and joints, providing information about the world, which in turn, develops their proprioceptive sense. The **proprioceptive** system provides information about the weight and resistance of objects, muscle relaxation, muscle contraction, stretch and other movements of the body. Babies begin to develop this sense by exploring their own body and spatial awareness:

- Starting with tummy time play is the key to a baby achieving milestones like rolling, crawling and eventually walking, enabling the child as they grow to explore cause and effect whilst empowering them to enhance physical dexterity and gain a sense of control.
- Tummy time can take place on an adult’s body and move onto the floor as neck and head muscles develop.

Vestibular – a child’s vestibular system is developed in the uterus by five months, and they spend the next four months exercising it, whilst they are being rocked to and from inside their mother’s womb. It provides information about movement, balance and our relationship to gravity.

For example:

- knee bounce rhymes are a fun way to develop a baby or child’s sense of balance and core strength, gradually increasing the speed of the bounce. This in turn helps the eyes to focus on a moving object.
- rocking, bouncing and swinging activities provide a moderate level of vestibular stimulation.

This in turn supports **auditory** (hearing) – children love to hear familiar sounds and recognise early on voices or music they heard in the womb.

- Making faces, talking and making sounds, and playing peekaboo games is all part of face-to-face play. Waiting for a response shows a baby that conversations are about taking turns, listening and responding to social cues.
- Singing songs, rhymes and stories is another way to develop auditory play.
- Singing, dancing and the introduction of actions with rhymes will provide co-ordination, listening skills, concentration and the learning of a new language. This type of interaction has so many benefits and is one of the most important things we can introduce from birth.

Vision (sight) provides the visual system with information about what we see, while **gustatory** (taste) provides information about what we taste and **olfactory** (smell) gives information about what we smell.

- Providing everyday objects for children to touch, taste and smell is vital in the stimulation of these senses.
- Introducing sensory baskets will encourage curiosity, thinking skills, motor development and independence. Being able to choose an object to play with can be a powerful tool for a baby and begin an interesting and creative journey for a child to experience choice and preferences.

The role of professionals in promoting play

Midwives, health visitors and early years practitioners are well placed to champion play on behalf of the children and families with whom they work. They are well trusted and respected by parents and can help young children by raising play on the agenda at every appropriate opportunity – with parents and carers, with decision makers and service and programme planners.

They will already have a rich and varied skill set that recognises that:

- parents play a vital part in their children’s development – they are their children’s first and most consistent play partners and educators
- every family is unique
- taking time to connect and engage with parents helps to build strong relationships that support children’s play and overall wellbeing.

Information for parents: All about play in the first 1000 days

How children play at different ages

All adults have a role to play in giving children a happy, healthy childhood through play.

Playing is fun. It is good for your child’s learning and for their healthy development, no matter how old they are. Having a good experience of play helps children develop skills they can use as they grow up and start to make their own way in the world.

In the early years of your child’s life, it is important for you to play together. This helps create a strong bond (or attachment) between you. It also helps your child develop their language and social skills. As your child gets older, they will want more independence, playing with their friends at more of a distance – from you and from home.

Playing throughout childhood

- **Even before baby is born** – gentle rocking, dancing, singing, talking provides information about movement, balance and our relationship to gravity.
- **Playing in the first six months** – in the early days, play helps stimulate your baby’s senses of sight, hearing, touch and their movement, too. Playing games like peek-a-boo (a fun, gentle way to introduce uncertainty), singing, giving your baby

things to hold and grab will help you and your baby bond. It will also let your baby know that you are fun and playful.

Looking at faces, listening to voices, reaching for toys, tummy time on an adult (moving onto the floor as neck and head muscles develop) helps with:

- bonding
- sensory development
- head and neck strength.

Playing for babies

From six to twelve months, games will continue to be popular with your baby. As they become more mobile, they will also want to crawl, roll and move around. They will use their whole bodies to learn about themselves, you and the other adults they are close to, and the world around them. This will involve their senses, such as sight, hearing and taste.

Peek-a-boo, banging objects, crawling, exploring textures develops skills, such as:

- cause and effect
- movement
- curiosity.

Playing for toddlers

Your toddler will be learning to talk, picking up new words all the time. They are also naturally curious, and their attention is grabbed by new and different things. They are continuing to find out more about their world using their senses, for example, tastes, smells and textures.

It is important for your toddler to play with natural materials like sticks, stones, leaves, earth, grass, mud and water. They will probably enjoy splashing, paddling and getting dirty.

Your toddler's movement will be improving and they will look for chances to balance, climb, and hide under things (like tables and chairs). It can be tempting to stop these things or to try and help – it is important not to interfere unless they are in danger. Allowing this kind of activity helps your toddler learn about their body and what it can (and can't yet) do.

Stacking blocks, simple puzzles, pretend play, dancing has benefits for:

- fine motor skills
- imagination
- early problem-solving.

Role play, drawing, singing, group games help toddlers gain skills in:

- language
- creativity
- social interaction.

As your child gets older: playing for three to five-year-olds

Young children continue to enjoy being outside. Your child will like exploring bushes, trees and long grass. They will enjoy playing with the elements – playing in the rain, digging in sand, running in the wind and watching a fire are all fun.

Your child will start to try and make things with building blocks, pieces of fabric and cardboard boxes. This will help them develop co-ordination and learn about size and shapes.

Part of the fun is being able to take things apart again. For a child of this age, doing something is more important than the end result. When they knock something down, they don't see this as 'ruining' what they have done, so it's important to look at it in the same way.



Age	Type of play	Benefits
During pregnancy	Encourage singing and talking by using different voices and tones. Read books and talk to the baby.	Provides information about movement, balance and our relationship to gravity
0 to 6 months	Looking at faces, listening to voices, reaching for toys, tummy time on an adult (moving onto the floor as neck and head muscles develop). Mirror play, encouraging the baby to look at themselves in mirrors. Movement to music, gently bounce or rock the baby to the rhythm of music.	Bonding, sensory development, head and neck strength
6 to 12 months	Peek-a-boo, banging objects, crawling, exploring textures. An introduction to sensory play, using things like sensory bottles and tummy time mats, bubble play to encourage bringing the hands together, crawling games and an introduction to ball play.	Cause and effect, movement and curiosity
12 to 24 months	Stacking blocks, simple puzzles, pretend play, dancing. Increase opportunities for movement by adding dance and physical games, sharing books and simple puzzles together. Introduce more physical play, including simple obstacle courses that present challenge and different ways of travelling, messy play, role play and musical instruments.	Fine motor skills, imagination and early problem-solving
24 to 36 months	Role play, drawing, singing, group games.	Language, creativity and social interaction

The information for parents resource can be downloaded, for sharing, on our *Playful Childhoods* website: www.playfulchildhoods.wales/all-about-play/parent-resources/how-children-play-at-different-ages

References

¹ See Russell, W., Barclay, M. and Tawil, B. (2024) *Playing and being well – A review of recent research into children’s play, social policy and practice, with a focus on Wales*, Cardiff: Play Wales.

² NHS Wales, The First 1000 Days programme – A Public Health Approach to Supporting Parents.

³ Public Health Wales (2025) *Best Start in Life: An Early Years Framework for Action*, Cardiff: Public Health Wales.



This information sheet has been endorsed
by Early Years Wales

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Play Wales is the national organisation for children's play, an independent charity supported by the Welsh Government to uphold children's right to play and to provide advice and guidance on play-related matters.