More Than Play

Everyday learning for little minds

A practical guide for families
and childcare providers | Birth to age 6



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Play is a way of learning

When a child builds, pretends, moves or explores, there is often more happening than we first notice. Play creates opportunities to practice language, thinking, movement and social-emotional skills. Warm, responsive adults can enrich that learning. [1, 3]

An example: the tower falls

A child stacks four blocks. The tower falls. They choose a wider block and try again. You might notice testing an idea, comparing shapes, persisting and asking for help. You do not need to interrupt with a quiz to make the moment educational.

A useful balance

Protect time for child-led play. You can also introduce materials or a gentle challenge with a learning goal. The child still needs meaningful choice and room to explore. [2]

> Try today: watch first. Name one thing the child is figuring out before deciding whether to join.

One thing I noticed a child learning through play:

Look for the learning

The examples below describe learning opportunities, not a checklist every child must complete. Follow interests and adapt to the child.

Building → thinking and spatial language

“The bridge needs to be longer.” Children can compare size, balance objects and revise a plan. Try: “What could support that side?”

Pretend play → communication and perspective

A pretend restaurant invites roles, requests and stories. Try: “What does your customer need?” A child can answer with words, gestures or a picture.

Sorting → noticing and reasoning

Children may group objects by color, shape or their own idea. Try: “Tell me about your groups.” Let more than one solution make sense.

Movement → coordination and flexible participation

A pretend animal walk can invite balance, rhythm and changing actions. Offer seated movements, hand motions or a different route so children can join in their own way.

Stories and drawing → meaning and expression

A child can retell a favorite part, make marks for a sign or invent an ending. Ask what their marks mean rather than correcting the picture.

Play changes as children grow

Use these as flexible starting points for birth through age six, not milestones or tests. Choose materials for developmental ability and supervise actively.

Babies | connect and explore

Offer face-to-face sounds, a familiar song or a large, baby-safe object within reach. Pause for a look, movement or sound before responding. Notice when the baby turns away or needs rest.

Toddlers | repeat and experiment

Try large stacking cups, sturdy containers or a doll and a large spoon. Let the child fill, empty, stack or pretend. Repeat familiar words such as in, out, more and finished.

Preschool and kindergarten | imagine and investigate

Offer blocks for a bridge, paper for a pretend shop or props for a story. Invite a prediction or a new role, then let children shape what happens next.

> Adapt for access: larger handles, fewer objects, a stable surface, a picture choice or home-language words. Joining does not have to look the same for every child.

Safety: use clean, intact, age-appropriate materials. Keep small parts, plastic bags, button batteries and strong magnets out of children’s reach. Check allergies and each child’s sensory and movement needs.

Guide without taking over

Child-led play

The child chooses what to do and how to do it. Your role may be to provide safe space, notice interests and respond when invited.

Guided play

An adult has a learning intention and supports exploration while children retain agency. For example, offer blocks and toy vehicles to explore bridges without prescribing one correct design. [2]

Use the cycle: notice, join, extend, step back

Notice: What interests the child?
Join: Ask, “Can I be the customer?”
Extend: Offer one comment or question.
Step back: Wait and let the child try.

Questions that open possibilities

“What do you notice?” · “What else could you try?” · “How could we make room?” · “What might happen next?”
You can also simply describe: “You tried two different pieces.”

> A question is an invitation, not a demand. Leave room for silence, gestures and answers in any language. Too many questions can interrupt play.

Five invitations with everyday materials

Choose one idea, not all five. These original examples are easiest to adapt for toddlers and older children; use the baby ideas on page 4 for infants.

1 | A box becomes something new

Offer a sturdy open box without staples, tape scraps or lids that could trap a child. Ask what it could become. Add paper signs if invited. Notice planning and symbolic thinking.

2 | A story basket

Choose a book and a few large, safe props. Let children retell or change the story. Notice sequence, gestures and new words.

3 | Build a road

Use large blocks and sturdy toy vehicles. Invite a route from one place to another. Notice position words, comparisons and changes to the plan.

4 | A pretend shop

Offer large containers, bags made for children and paper signs. Skip coins and small pieces. Let children choose roles. Notice requests, counting attempts and negotiation.

5 | Move to a rhythm

Clap a simple pattern and invite children to change it. Try seated or standing movements. Notice listening, imitation and creating a new pattern.

Games that build skills

These are flexible starting points, not age tests. Use large, safe materials and adapt to each child’s movement, communication and interests. The skills listed are opportunities to practice, not guaranteed outcomes.

1 | Peek-a-boo | babies and toddlers

Cover your own face with your hands, then reappear. Pause for the child’s response and follow their pace. Practice: attention, anticipation and back-and-forth interaction. No loose cloth is needed.

2 | Roll it together | when ready to sit and join

Sit nearby and roll a large, soft ball slowly between you. Let the child choose when to return it. Practice: coordination, tracking and simple turn-taking. Adapt: use a tray or a closer distance.

3 | Follow the leader | toddlers and older

Take turns choosing a clap, wave or safe movement for others to copy. Nobody is eliminated. Practice: imitation, attention and leading. Seated gestures count too.

4 | Match the pictures | preschool and older

Start with two pairs of large picture cards face up. Invite matching, naming or pointing. Turn them face down only if the child enjoys the challenge. Practice: noticing details, language and memory.

5 | Our story together | preschool and older

One person begins a story; others add a sentence, gesture or drawing. There is no correct ending. Practice: listening, sequencing, imagination and collaboration. Accept any home language.

A flexible five-day play invitation

This is an idea menu, not an assignment or a fixed schedule. Repeat favorites, skip an idea or follow a new interest. Keep the learning goal in mind without requiring a finished product.

Day 1 | Build together

Offer blocks or large cups. Wonder: “How could we make it stand?” Notice how the child tests a plan.

Day 2 | Tell a new story

Revisit a familiar book with a large prop. Wonder: “What happens next in your story?” Notice expression through words, actions or gestures.

Day 3 | Make a pattern

Offer claps, steps or large blocks. Join the child’s pattern before offering another possibility. Notice repeating and changing.

Day 4 | Create a pretend place

Offer a box and paper. Ask what the place needs. Notice roles, signs and cooperation; one child can also play independently.

Day 5 | Return to a favorite

Let the child choose. Notice what is the same and what changed. Repetition can offer another opportunity to explore an idea.

An interest I want to follow next:

Notice, record and plan

Write a few objective notes. This is a reflection tool, not a developmental assessment. Use initials or a code; keep children’s information private.

Date / child code or group / materials offered:

What I saw or heard (actions or exact words):

Possible learning I noticed:

What interested the child? What did I do?

One next invitation or adaptation:

Example: “Placed three blocks side by side and said ‘road.’” Possible learning: representing an idea and using language. Next invitation: offer a larger space or a vehicle, then observe.

A message to share with families

Today we played. Today we learned.

When children build, pretend, draw and move, they have chances to explore ideas and connect with others. The learning may be visible in a new word, a different strategy, a shared role or a question.

You do not need an expensive toy or a perfect activity. Choose a safe, familiar material and give your child room to decide what to do. Stay available, follow their interest and enjoy the exchange.

Try a small invitation at home

Offer a few large cups or a favorite book. Watch what your child chooses. Add one comment, then wait. Stop, adapt or continue according to your child’s interest and comfort.

A conversation starter

Instead of only “What did you do today?” try “What did you try?” or “What was your idea?” A child may show you rather than explain.

In our program, we noticed this learning during play:

One idea the family would like to share:

Keep learning and keep playing

Use this guide

Read pages 2-5 to notice learning and support children's choices. Choose an invitation on page 6, a game on page 7 or a five-day idea on page 8. Use page 9 to observe and plan. Print page 10 as a family conversation handout.

Sources for the core concepts

[1] American Academy of Pediatrics / HealthyChildren.org. The Power of Play: How Fun and Games Help Children Thrive (2023).
Read the AAP family article

[2] NAEYC. The Power of Playful Learning in the Early Childhood Setting (2022).
naeyc.org/resources/pubs/yc/summer2022/power-playful-learning

[3] NAEYC. Play resource collection.
naeyc.org/resources/topics/play

Sources reviewed October 16, 2026. The activities, examples and reflection pages are original Carveyteach educational tools, not validated assessments. The organizations cited do not endorse this resource.

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