Room to wonder.
People to grow with.

An age-by-age guide to imaginative, screen-light play for newborns, infants and toddlers — for parents, baby nurses and nannies to share.

Remember turning a box into a house, or finding a whole adventure in a few sticks and a backyard? Children still need that kind of freedom. The best toys are often the simplest, and the most important one is you: a warm, responsive grown-up who talks, sings, waits and plays back.

Each stage below offers five ideas that need little more than everyday objects. Follow your child's cues — stop when they look away, fuss or tire. Short, joyful moments matter more than long sessions.

Three habits for every age

Serve and return — Notice what your child does — a look, a sound, a reach — and respond. Then wait for their turn.

Fewer things, more time — A handful of open-ended objects beats a room full of flashing toys.

Screens with intention — The AAP advises avoiding digital media other than video chatting for children younger than 18 to 24 months, and choosing high-quality content watched together for older toddlers.

No toy or routine guarantees a developmental outcome, and every child grows at their own pace. Ask your pediatrician about milestones, safe sleep, sun exposure and any health questions.

STAGE 1

Newborns · 0–3 months

Connection is the play. Short, calm moments when baby is awake and alert.

Five play ideas

Face-to-face chats — Hold baby about 8–12 inches from your face, talk slowly and pause as if waiting for a reply. Coos and gazes count as turns.

High-contrast cards — Hand-drawn black-and-white stripes or circles on index cards, shown one at a time for a few seconds.

Tummy time on a chest — Baby rests tummy-down on a reclined adult's chest, then short supervised floor sessions while awake.

Lullabies and narration — Sing, hum or describe what you are doing: 'Now the warm cloth on your hand.' Rhythm and voice build early listening.

Gentle touch play — Slow bicycle legs, soft clapping of baby's hands, a light scarf stroked across the arm.

Safety: Tummy time is always awake and supervised. Babies sleep on their backs on a firm, flat surface with nothing else in the sleep space.

STAGE 2

Infants · 3–6 months

Reaching, grasping, rolling and the first belly laughs.

Five play ideas

Reach-and-grasp — Offer a soft rattle or wooden ring just within reach; let baby work for it before helping.

Mirror moments — An unbreakable baby mirror during tummy time — name what baby sees: 'There's your nose.'

Rolling invitations — Place a favorite object slightly to one side to encourage turning and rolling.

Texture basket — A few large, washable fabric squares — velvet, linen, knit — to touch and crumple.

Sound games — Shake a closed container out of sight and watch baby search for the sound.

Safety: Everything mouthable must be too large to fit through a toilet-paper tube and free of loose parts, cords and button batteries.

STAGE 3

Older infants · 6–12 months

Sitting, crawling, cause-and-effect and the delight of 'gone… and back!'

Five play ideas

Peekaboo and hide-the-toy — Cover a toy with a cloth and let baby uncover it — early practice with object permanence.

Kitchen-cupboard band — Wooden spoons, a pot, and a plastic bowl for banging, filling and dumping.

Ball rolling — Sit facing each other and roll a soft ball back and forth; celebrate every return.

Crawling course — Couch cushions and a low tunnel of chairs and a blanket, with a grown-up spotting closely.

Board-book time — Point and name pictures, make the animal sounds, let baby turn the thick pages.

Safety: Keep small objects, coins and magnets out of reach. Anchor furniture and use safety gates as crawling begins.

STAGE 4

Young toddlers · 12–24 months

Walking, first words, copying grown-ups and wanting to 'help.'

Five play ideas

Little helper play — A small cloth to 'wipe' the table, socks to sort, a basket to carry. Real tasks are real play.

Stacking and knocking — Simple wooden blocks or nesting cups — build, topple, laugh, repeat.

Pretend tea party — Cups, spoons and a stuffed bear. Model 'pouring' and 'sipping' and watch imitation bloom.

Nature walk treasure — Notice leaves, birds and textures together; collect a few large leaves or pinecones to explore with you.

Dance and freeze — Sing or clap a beat, then stop — practicing listening and body control.

Safety: Choose shaded outdoor time and pediatrician-guided sun protection. Check that natural objects are too large to swallow, and supervise closely.

STAGE 5

Toddlers · 2–3 years

Big imagination, big feelings, and endless 'why?'

Five play ideas

A box becomes anything — A large cardboard box is a house, boat or rocket. Add a blanket and crayons and step back.

Story starters — Begin 'Once there was a tiny bear who…' and let your child choose what happens next.

Backyard games — Simple tag, follow-the-leader, bubbles and 'Red light, green light.'

Open-ended building — Wooden blocks, cloths and clothespins for forts, roads and towers — no instructions.

Feelings puppets — Sock puppets that feel happy, sad or frustrated help children name and practice emotions.

Safety: Toys with small pieces are for age 3 and up. Supervise water play every moment, even in a shallow tub or bucket.

A NOTE FOR NANNIES AND BABY NURSES

Make play part of the handoff

Jot one or two play notes in the family's chosen log — paper or app — at each shift change: what made baby smile, which activity calmed them, what they reached for. It keeps parents and every caregiver on the same page and helps the next person build on yesterday's discoveries.

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