Baby-Led Play

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You are your child's very first and favorite playmate. At first, it's watching your face as you feed them or listening to your voice as you sing during a diaper change. When they get older, they can engage in new kinds of play. One way is when you step back and allow them to take the lead. This is known as baby- or child-led play. You are probably eager to teach your baby or toddler as much as possible so they are ready for school. However, free play is one of the best things your baby or toddler can do to learn about the world and build their brain. Here are some tips for making different kinds of baby-led play happen, and then making the most of it.

Tips for baby-led play:

- **Set up your play space.** Is the area child-friendly and babyproofed (see Babyproofing article)? Checking out your space ahead of time can prevent a tantrum, an accident, or a broken lamp.
- **Follow your child's lead.** This does not mean you can't provide objects, toys, or activities. Offer these things to your baby or toddler and then see what happens. When young children get to choose how to play, they feel smart, capable, and powerful. It doesn't have to be the "right" way to play. Let them show you their way.
- **Read their signals.** Your little one may not be able to tell you with words when they've had enough. They may use sounds, facial expressions, and gestures. Reading your child's body language or signals can help you respond to their needs.
- **Take things slow.** When playing, let a few seconds pass after you say something before speaking again. Babies and toddlers take longer to process language. A pause that gives them time to respond is an important part of letting them lead.

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- **Expect repetition from your baby.** Doing things over and over again is not exciting for adults, but it is for young children. They need a lot of practice to master challenges; it helps them learn.
- **Allow for some frustration.** Avoid helping right away. A little bit of frustration motivates your child to keep playing. When they overcome *some* difficulty, they gain a powerful sense of self-esteem. Of course, too much frustration can be overwhelming. The more they practice and master new skills, the more likely they are to take on new challenges. Then, the learning continues.
- **Go ahead and provide materials.** What happens if you offer different textures, smells, and tastes? Engage the senses. Your child may love some materials and others may feel "funny" to them. Read your child's signals and change what you offer to suit them.

Offer baby-led play regularly. It may be hard to resist using play time to teach or correct your child. You don't have to play this way all the time. If it's difficult, try a timer to help you focus and pay attention. Daily short sessions are best for young children. Challenge yourself to not speak or interrupt their play. Notice how often you find yourself wanting to "jump in." Watch what happens if you don't.

SCAN FOR MORE INFO

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