



# PLAY IN THE FIRST YEAR

At this young age, playing with your child may not look like the silly games you had imagined. Instead, it is all about time spent exploring the world together. Notice what holds their attention (maybe even that pesky stain on the carpet!) and follow their lead. Look for opportunities for back-and-forth exchanges by building off cues and imitating their sounds and gestures. This back-and-forth dance sets the foundation for years of learning and play.

## CONNECTION

In the first few months of your baby's life, you are on a journey to get to know this new, little person. The playful interactions you have with your baby help build this bond. What does play look like in these early months? Researchers have found that babies are capable of imitating facial expressions right away—within hours of birth! They might start imitating your sounds and coos, too. And it grows from there.

In this earliest form of play, adults are helping children learn about back-and-forth interactions, and the joy of connection. This is a wonderful and powerful way to support brain development and nurture emerging relationships.

## COMMUNICATION

As you play, you may find yourself talking to your baby in a higher-pitched, sing-song tone of voice. Believe it or not, research shows that this style of speech, called infant-directed speech, or "parentese", is key to building language skills. Parentese uses real words and correct grammar, but your speech is slower with more repetition and variations in pitch, as well as a sing-song tone of voice that babies love to listen to. These elements help babies learn to recognize the rhythms and patterns of language and make it easier for them to identify words and sentences, and learn from them. Try it and see – it's a magical thing for learning.



## EXPLORATION

In the first few months of life, babies' brains are hard at work fine-tuning their senses. This is the perfect time to explore new textures, smells, and sounds with your baby. In fact, research links this kind of exploratory, sensory play with cognitive development. Use what you have, a soft washcloth or the rough texture and interesting shape of an egg carton might be totally captivating for your baby. Notice how they respond and give them time to react and explore. This pause is key. By waiting to see what they do, you can follow their lead. They might put something in their mouth, stare at it, want to bring it closer to them, lean towards it, or hit or bat at it. This is all part of brain-building play between you and your child.