

Choosing Baby Toys

This article will help you find baby toys that encourage your baby to enjoy playing with toys and stimulate the next stage of discovery.

In the first year of life, your baby will travel through several stages of development and reach remarkable milestones. More than anything they need a loving, nurturing environment providing positive interaction with their parents and caregivers. This interaction doesn't have to involve expensive toys or state-of-the-art equipment, but babies do need a variety of stimulus to help them learn and discover.

Your Baby at 0 – 3 Months

When baby is first born they are unable to hold their head steady and any movements they make with their arms and legs are large and ungainly. It takes a few weeks before they can start to focus on an object, even for a few moments, and at about 4 weeks they will start making short, jerky efforts to track objects from side to side.

At around 6 weeks your baby will start to give you voluntary smiles, although they may have already shown signs of recognizing your voice. It will take a few weeks more, however, before they start really responding to familiar faces, voices, situations and routines.

By 3 months old, your baby's movements will become more fluid - they may be able to confidently track an object from side to side and up and down. They will be aware of their hands and feet and have great fun kicking vigorously or inspecting their hands as they hold them loosely in front of them.

Baby Toys that will help:

- Brightly coloured toys with contrasting colours will help gain baby's attention and focus. Hold the toy about 15 – 20cm away from baby's face and move it slowly from side to side. It doesn't matter much what the toy is, provided it's bright or strongly contrasting (e.g. black and white). Once baby has mastered the art of side to side, try moving the toy up and down.
- Small toys which can be easily grasped will help baby discover their hands. To start with grasping is simply a reflex, but the more they do it, the more aware they become. Small rattles and soft toys are a good place to start.
- Foot rattles (sock like booties with a rattle stitched to the front) are fun when baby is just starting to come aware of their feet. As they kick, their foot rattles, which gives them extra stimuli.
- Suspending toys above baby while they are lying on their back is a useful way to help them gain head control and will encourage them to hold their head in the centre, rather than to the side. Mobiles and baby gyms are great toys for this purpose - you can easily make your own by suspending toys from a broomstick between two chairs.
- Constantly talking, reading or singing to your baby will help them develop listening skills which are important for language development. You don't need any special toys or equipment for this to happen, but some children's music or story discs may help you on the days when conversation seems just too hard.

Your Baby at 3 – 6 Months

At about 4 months your baby will be able to hold a rattle or small toy and start to bring it to their mouth. While they may not have full co-ordination yet, they are definitely on their way. They will start to grab for toys with both hands and begin to intently explore them.

They will be learning to hold their head up while they are on their tummy and will be starting to roll from their front to their back – albeit accidentally at first. By about 6 months they will be able to hold their chest off the ground with their arms and the rolling will become more purposeful.

Giving baby time to play on their tummy is important for muscle and strength development.

Baby Toys that will help:

- Small toys that can be easily grasped will continue to encourage co-ordination and if they make a noise when they move all the better. Rattles, soft balls with bells inside and squeaky toys are all good places to start.
- Standing a mirror or suspending toys out in front of baby while they are on their tummy will encourage them to lift their head.

Your Baby at 6 – 8 Months

At about 6 months of age your baby has gained a whole lot more control of hands and feet. They will start to reach for toys being offered to them, deliberately bang or shake them and start passing them from hand to hand. When lying on their back they will grab hold of their feet and eventually manage to put one (or both!) of them in their mouth. When standing your baby will start to bounce and take a lot of their body weight when held upright.

Some time between 6 - 8 months your baby will start to sit by themselves. You can encourage the process by sitting them between your legs or propping them up with a pillow. Eventually they will take their own weight and begin supporting themselves by leaning forward onto their hands. Gradually baby will be able to sit upright without support.

Also during this time, baby may start to move around on their tummy as a pre-empt to crawling. Some babies will also start to get up on their hands and knees.

Baby Toys that will help

- Toys that can be placed in front of baby while they are sitting will encourage them to stay upright for longer. Drums to bang (bowls and wooden spoons), board books, wobbly toys (that wobble but don't fall over) and activity boards and gyms are all good for this stage of development.
- Simple musical instruments like drums, maracas, tambourines and bells are great for this age. Baby is really getting into the swing of banging and shaking and these toys give a satisfying result for their efforts.
- Any toy that rolls will encourage baby to move themselves across the floor - just like a kitten with a ball of string! Balls, tubes, or toys with big wheels will be knocked out of reach as baby pushes towards them. As the toy moves away, baby is encouraged to move again to try to grab it.
- Jolly Jumpers are a 'toy' which hang on a door frame or beam. Baby is placed in the jumper harness and can bounce unaided up, down and side to side. Jolly Jumpers are a great toy for developing strength and babies just love them! It is a great idea to hang the Jolly Jumper in the kitchen doorway - that way they can bounce happily whilst watching you prepare dinner!

Your Baby at 8 – 12 Months

By this stage your baby will be becoming more mobile and far more coordinated. They will be able to get themselves from lying to sitting on their own and will be crawling - in whatever form that might take! Most babies will be 'cruising' by 12 months, which means they can walk while they are leaning on furniture or being lead by the hand. Some babies will have taken their first steps by 12 months old.

Your baby will have developed a sense of curiosity and will be eager to explore objects in great depth. They will have become skilful at manipulating objects and will enjoy working simple mechanisms and solving problems. Activity toys that offer simple cause and effect actions will be a great hit.

Baby Toys that will help:

- Toys that can be stacked or nested one inside each other provide simple problems for baby to solve. Rings which can be stacked over a cone, shapes to fit into holes and toys that open and shut are also great for this stage of development.
- 'Cause and effect' toys provide plenty of stimuli for babies at this age. Not only will they enjoy the actual playing, but they will also enjoy exploring just how it does what it does. Look for toys that do something when baby does something. For example, balls that drop down a ramp when hit with a hammer, toys that spin, shake or play music when levers are pulled, or animals that pop up when buttons are pushed.
- A big cardboard box weighted with books or toys is a good way to encourage 'cruising'. The box should provide enough weight so that the box doesn't take off when baby pushes it, but not so much that it can't be pushed at all.
- This stage is a great time to introduce bath toys that pour, float, spin, squirt and bubble. Remember, even though baby can sit unaided, they must still be supervised at bath times.
- Simple board books with various textures are good to explore at this age also. Lift the flap books are fun, but paper versions can be easily torn. Look for lift the flap style books which are made from stiff board instead.

How Much Will Baby Toys Cost?

How long is a piece of string? Toys vary immensely in price depending on the type of toy, quality, brand, and even where you are buying it from. Emporium type stores have a limited range of baby toys at reasonable prices, but make sure you check them for safety. Educational toy stores usually have a brilliant range of toys and great advice, but you can often find similar products at department stores for a lesser cost.

Buying toys second hand is a great way to save money, but make sure you disinfect them well before passing them on to baby. Avoid soft toys which cannot be adequately washed and make sure you check the toys for any loose or broken parts.

Whether you are buying the toys new or second hand, make sure the toy is suitable for your child's stage of development. Toys with pieces smaller than a film canister should be avoided until your baby is 3 years old in case of swallowing.

Hiring toys is also a good way to save money, and toy libraries are now available in most towns and cities. BabySafe hires popular 'bigger' toys such as exersaucers, walkers, doorway jumpers and battery operated swings.

BabySafe also have a great range of fun and educational toys for sale, ranging from newborn to toddler. We stock the popular Leapfrog, Lamaze and K's kids range as well as a wide selection of more traditional wooden toys.