

# *Let's Play Together*

Pam Versfeld 2025

Taking time to talk to and play with your baby or toddler enhances their movement, thinking and non-verbal communication and language skills. This is especially important if your baby or toddler's development is delayed, they are slow reaching their milestones or one hand is not moving as well as the other.

It is good to put aside some dedicated play time, say 15-20 minutes a day.

But it is also good to include playful ways of interacting with your child as you go about your daily routines. This can be done when you are changing a nappy, at meal times, getting dressed and undressed, going for walk out of doors.

The **Lets Play Together** book is divided two sections:

In **social games** section emphasis is on the social interaction and communication between the baby and the play-companion.

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## *A word about Serve and Return*

*Taken from Chat GPT*

**Serve and return** describes how young children and caregivers interact to build brain connections, social skills, and emotional security.

The idea comes from the back-and-forth pattern of a game like tennis or ping pong:

1. **Serve** – The child does something to get attention or express interest — for example, making a sound, pointing, looking at something, or babbling.
2. **Return** – The adult notices and responds appropriately — by smiling, talking, copying the sound, naming the object, or offering comfort.

Each of these exchanges strengthens brain circuits that support communication, thinking, and emotional regulation. Repeated serve-and-return interactions help children learn that:

- Their actions have an effect on others.
- They can trust and rely on caregivers.
- They are understood and valued.

**Center for the Developing Child  
Harvard University**

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# *Social Games for Babies and Toddlers*

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## *Pretend-feeding*

Young children love to pretend-feed themselves, their dolls and their play-companions.

For this game you need 2 small spoons, a small bowl and a doll.

**To play this game** sit facing your child and pretend to feed the doll and yourself. "Mmm. This food is good. Would you like to feed the dolly too? I think the dolly is hungry."



## *Pretend talking on the phone*

Young children like to have pretend conversations on play phones. This can be a toy phone or a block or box about the same size as a phone. Draw numbers on the block to make it look more like a cell phone.

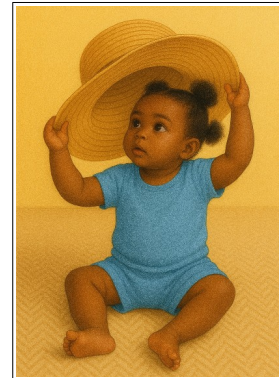
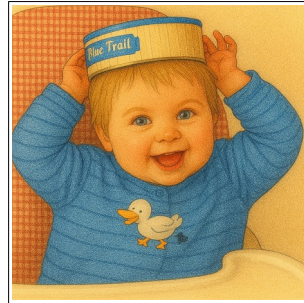
If your child starts a pretend phone conversation, you can respond by holding a pretend phone to your ear and reply.

From a very young age babies understand the turn taking rules of conversations.



## *Hats, clothes, lids and bowls on heads*

Another game that young children like to play is putting hats, clothes, and bowls on their own a play companion's head.

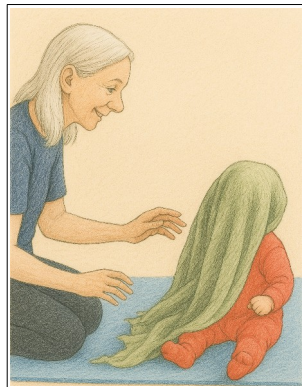


## *Peek-a-boo with a scarf*

For this game you need a scarf or a dish towel. Let your child sit on a mat on the floor facing you.

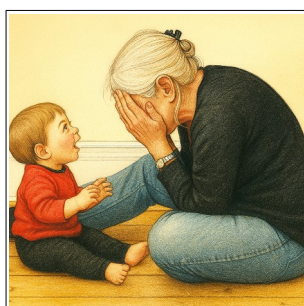
Drape the scarf over your own head, say peek-a-boo and pull it off. Put the scarf over your head a second time and encourage your child to pull it off.

Next drape the the scarf over your child's head and wait for them to pull it off. Remember to give your child time pull on the scarf.

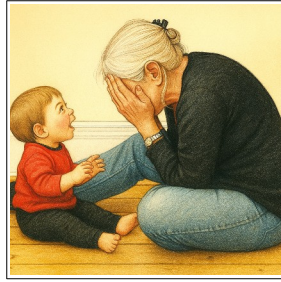


## *Peek-a-boo with hands*

You can also play peek-a-boo by covering your face with your hands. Wait a short while before you move your hands to uncover your face and say peek-a-boo.

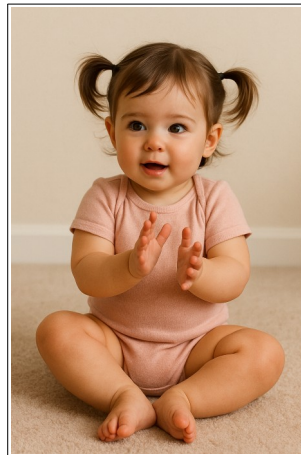


Cover your face again and wait for your child to reach up and move your hands.



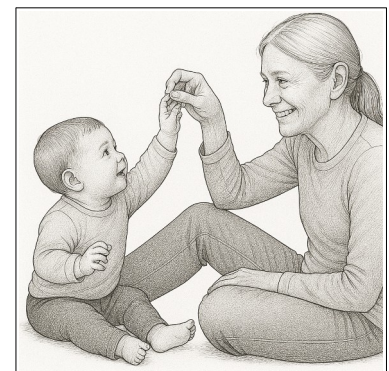
### *Do what I do*

Young children love copying a play companion's hand and arm movements. They also enjoy it when the play-companion copies their actions.



### *Babies also love to catch moving fingers*

The play companion holds her hands in front of the child, wiggles her fingers and waits for the child to catch them.



## *Drumming games*

In these games the baby and play-companion use their hands, a wooden block or a wooden spoon to drum to bang on "drum".

Cardboard boxes, upside bowls, cake tins and plastic tubs make good "drums".

Show your child how you use your hands or a wooden spoon to bang on the "drum".

Next it is your baby's turn.

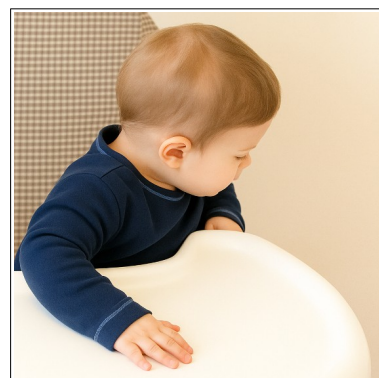
Let your child choose a drum and spoon, a block in the hand or their flat hands.

Take turns banging to encourage getting a good rhythm going.



## *Dropping a toy for play-companion to pick up many times*

Young children love to throw a toy from a feeding chair. They look down to see where it lands and what noise it makes. Then they wait for their play companion to pick it up so that they can drop it down again.



# Playing with Toys

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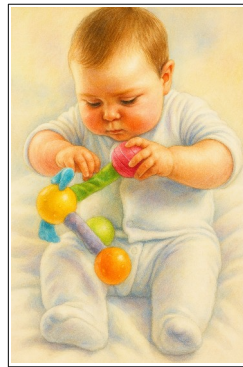
## *Inspecting small toys in detail*

Around about 8 months of age babies start to inspect small toys. When given an interesting new toy, the baby passes it from one hand to the other, shakes the toy, turns it over to look at the toy from all sides, mouths it and bangs it on a hard surface.

Your baby may drop a toy over the side of the high chair and turn to look where it lands, whether it bounces and the sound it makes when it hits the floor.

To get this game going let the baby sit on the floor or in a feeding chair with a tray and place a few interesting toys within easy reach.

Encourage the baby to pick up the toys one at a time and explore what they can do with each toy.



## *Bottle rattles*

For this game you will need 3-4 small plastic water bottles. Small plastic containers that are easy to hold can also make good rattles.

Put a handful of different small objects in each bottle and fasten the lid securely. Sprinkles, rice and dried beans or corn are good for this.

You may need to glue the lids on if your baby insists on taking them off.

Let your child sit on the floor or in a feeding chair. Put the rattles where they can be reached easily.

Pick up and shake one bottle **just a few times** and puts it down again. You can also tip the bottles up and down. Talk about what you are doing. "Listen to the sound the rattle makes when you shake it. This bottle makes a different noise. "

Encourage your child to pick up and shake one of the bottles. Allow time for your baby to respond and explore the way the different rattles can be shaken and tipped from side to side.



## *Building towers with yogurt tubs, jars and cereal boxes*

For this game you will need several tubs, jars and cereal boxes.

Very young children can usually knock down towers before they can build them. So start by building a tower and invite your child to help you build it

Encourage your baby to knock the tower down and then help you build it again. Remember to talk about what your doing.



## *Roll and spin the bottle*

For this game you need several plastic water bottles partly filled with water. Choose bottles with straight sides as they are easier to spin.

Let your baby sit on a mat on the floor. You reach forward to grasp the bottles and spin them one by one.

Encourage your child to reach out and stop the bottles spinning.

Older toddlers usually quickly learn to spin the bottles themselves.

Younger children are able to push the bottles so that they roll across the mat.



## *Posting games*

In this game I use a 1 liter ice cream tub to make a posting box.

I take off the lid and turn the tub upside down. Next I cut a hole in the base of the tub. I cut a square opening rather than circular one because it is easier to cut a neat hole with straight sides.

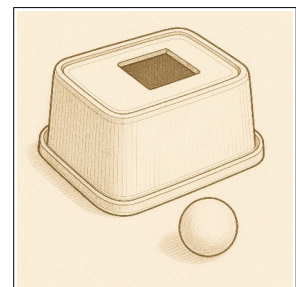
You will also need several ping-pong sized balls for posting. Smaller balls are not good because they are a choking hazard.

It is also a good idea to put the tub's lid away to stop your baby from getting engrossed in putting the lid on and taking it off again.

A plastic water bottle is good for posting clothes pegs.

To play this game yet your baby sit on the floor with the posting box and several balls within easy reach.

- Demonstrate how you post a ball through the hole.
- Talk about what you are doing.
- When all the balls are posted turn the tub over to find the balls.



Posting clothes pegs into a plastic water bottle is another good game.

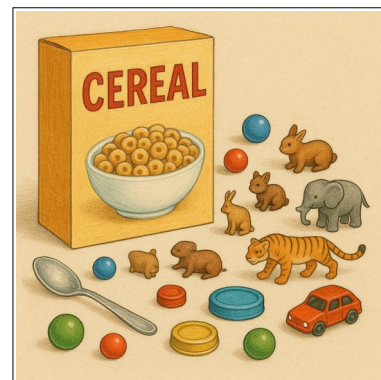
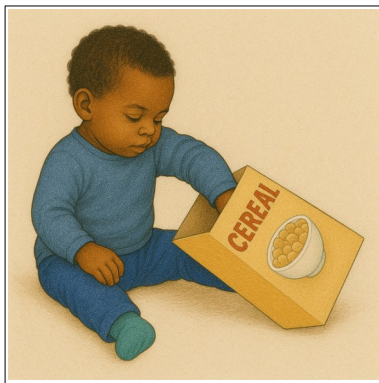
When all the pegs are posted turn to bottle upside down and shake the bottles so the the pegs fall out. Posting flat disks or peanut bottle lids **into a slit** is a tricky game because the lid or disc must be aligned with the slit in the posting box.



## Unpacking toys from a cereal box

In this game a selection of small toys are put into a cereal box and the child is encouraged to take the toys out one at a time. Then pack them back into the box

Look around the home for small objects to hide in the box.

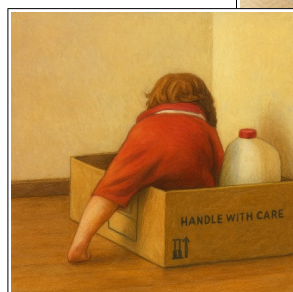


## Unpacking a basket of big plastic bottles

Toddlers love unpacking. For this game I keep several large plastic bottles partially filled with water in a cardboard box or basket.

Encourage your child to unpack the bottles and then pack them back again.

Your child may end up climbing into the box.



## *Play dough play*

You will need two pieces of play dough each the size of a ping pong ball and a toy knife for cutting the play dough. Let your toddler sit in a high chair with a tray. Sitting in a high chair keeps the child in place and stops the play dough from going everywhere. I like to sit facing the child.

I like to demonstrate different ways to play with the play dough.

- Roll the play do into a long “snake” .
- Then cut the roll into small pieces and flatten them.
- Shape the dough into a ball, pat it flat with your palm and use a finger to poke holes in the play dough.
- Make a long snake and then tear pieces off.



## *Unpacking a kitchen cupboard*

Small children love unpacking the contents of the kitchen cupboards: plastic containers, wooden spoons, bowls and pots and pans.

It is a good idea to keep one cupboard for kitchen utensils that your child can easily reach, unpack and play with.



## *Pack in and tip out*

Have a few containers at hand such as cereal boxes, jam jars, plastic jars or bowls.

You will also need some small toys to pack into the container such as small soft toys, small balls, small blocks.

The play-companion puts several toys into a container and then tips the container upside down so that the toys fall out.

The baby may at first take the toys out by hand. Tipping a container upside down to get toys out seems to be a tricky move for younger babies.

