



Growing and learning in the family



The first and most important learning in a child's life happens within the family. Children learn from the way people treat them and what they see, hear and experience from as soon as they are born. Between birth and five years, and especially to three years, children grow and learn at the fastest rate of their life. Parents and those who care for children have a great opportunity in these early years to help shape children's learning, long before they start school.

How do children learn?

Children are natural learners from birth. They learn by watching, listening and especially by doing.

All children go through similar stages of learning and development. There are differences between children at each stage and differences in the length of time it takes children to move from stage to stage.

Some important areas of learning

Self-esteem

Self-esteem is about who you are and how you feel about yourself. Feeling loved, safe, valued, wanted and respected leads to feeling good about yourself and being confident. When children feel confident they can try new things, explore their world, cope when things go wrong and feel they have a chance to succeed.

You can help build children's self-esteem by:

- showing them they are lovable and loved
- supporting them to try new things
- showing them you enjoy being with them
- helping them learn new skills and praising them when they try these out.

Children will thrive in an environment which is interesting and where they feel loved and safe.

Social and emotional development

Young children are beginning to learn about feelings and getting along with others long before they can do this very well. When children learn about feelings it is the start of learning to manage their own emotions and impulses. This is called 'self-regulation'.

You can help children learn by:

- naming feelings, eg saying 'it makes you feel sad/cross/happy when ...'
- explaining how others feel, eg 'Sam is feeling sad because his truck is broken'
- showing you care about others
- letting them help care for your home, eg collecting the mail, feeding animals
- not making them share possessions before they are able to manage this (about three to four years of age). To a younger child it just seems like taking their things.

The first and most important learning happens in the family.



Cultural understanding

Your children will learn from you to value and respect people from different cultures and all the things they can learn from them. You can help children's understanding by:

- talking about Australia's rich cultural heritage and what we can learn from the many cultures we have here today
- modelling acceptance and respect in your own treatment of others
- talking about your own family history and differences and showing you value these
- giving children opportunities to get to know children and adults from other cultures and experience different cultural events, festivals, foods and music.

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Children need to learn that being different is OK – we are all different in some way.
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Communication

Communication is one of the most important parts of our daily life. It means understanding what we see, hear and read and being able to give messages to others in ways they can understand. Children need words for thinking and learning.

- Talk with your children and listen to what they say.
- Have fun with words – say or sing rhymes, songs and jingles.
- Tell babies what you are doing and ask toddlers and preschoolers for their ideas.
- Read and tell children stories from a very young age – even babies benefit from listening to your voice.
- Encourage children to talk with other family members and friends. Online video chatting technology can help them talk with loved ones they can't meet face to face.

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One of the most important things you can do for your child is to talk with them and listen as they talk to you.
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Thinking

Thinking involves looking and listening, questioning, trying things out and making decisions. Children need time to try things over and over until they can work them out. Sometimes if they are getting frustrated they will need a little help from an adult.

You can help children to think by:

- talking about things as you do them, eg 'It's a long way so we'll go on the bus', or 'I'm taking my jumper off because it's hot'
- giving them things to sort and match, eg coloured pegs or socks
- doing puzzles
- providing toys that involve constructing things
- telling jokes and riddles
- asking them what they think about an issue.

Creativity

Creativity is a child's own special way of expressing ideas, thoughts and feelings. Young children are curious and full of ideas. Once they can move about, they like to explore and do things in different ways. By accepting their ideas and the things they try, you are encouraging them to explore, take risks and 'have a go'.

- Take them to entertainment for children – movies, face painting, children's concerts.
- Encourage them to sing and dance, to imagine and be creative.
- Provide boxes and dress-up clothes for pretend play.
- Provide paper, paints and playdough.
- Collect bits and pieces such as leaves, feathers, paper and fabric for making things and then display what they make.



Technology

Technology is all around us and helps make life easier, eg scissors, kettles, bike pumps, washing machines, cars, mobile phones, computers. You can help children think about technology when you:

- talk about the tools or devices you are using and how they help you
- talk about different ways of doing things
- make sure both boys and girls get the same chances to use things like hammers, brooms and computers
- talk about what you could do without technology, eg how to get to the shop without a car, how to get messages to family members
- encourage thinking about problems, eg what you could use to carry things from one place to another.

Health and physical development

The foundations for good health are laid down in the early years. Babies, toddlers and preschoolers are naturally active and they learn through their bodies long before they can talk.

- Give young children lots of opportunities for physical play – with some time outside every day if possible. Physical play helps them develop strength, balance and skills.
- Encourage them to use their hands – cutting, threading, pasting and drawing. This may mean getting messy while they enjoy the feel of different things.
- Make sure they get plenty of rest and healthy food.
- Have them immunised against diseases that could harm them.
- Teach them about safety around water and roads, but remember they are not yet old enough to protect themselves. They need supervision.
- Make sure your home (and any other home you take them to) is safe for young children.

The environment

Children enjoy playing in and exploring the natural world, eg backyard, park or beach. They also learn about the built-up world around them – roads, houses, shops and schools.

- Let children explore outside – make sure they are safe.
- Explore new places together, eg a new park or walking around a different block in your suburb.
- Talk to children about trees, weather, sky, moon, birds, fish and animals. Tell them why you do things – recycle, mow, weed or paint the house.
- Look for tiny insects that live in the garden – but don't encourage touching!
- Plant seeds and watch them grow.
- Let them have messy play with sand, dirt or water. Making a mess can be an important part of learning as children discover and explore.
- Watch a house being built (and explain why you need to watch from a safe distance).

Things you can do with children at different ages

Babies (up to 6 months)

Your young baby is an active learner. From birth to six months they are learning from everyday experiences – having different things to look at, rattles to hit, reaching up to hold their feet while lying on their back. They will smile at familiar faces and voices, make different sounds and learn by putting things in their mouth.

They enjoy being with people – having faces to watch, fingers to grip, skin and hair to feel, voices to listen to, and being held and cuddled.

Babies (6–12 months)

Your baby is getting stronger and starting to move about. In the second six months they begin to explore the world around them. This can be scary at first and they may be afraid to let the people they feel safe with out of their sight.

Older babies will play happily with household items such as pegs, paper plates, used wrapping paper, spoons and plastic containers (but not plastic bags). They love things to crawl in and over.





Early toddlers (1–2 years)

Although unsteady on their feet at first, toddlers love being able to practise walking and climbing – falling over is common as they learn these skills. It is very important for them to do things for themselves and their first word may be 'No'. They are starting to use words to tell you what they want.

Toddlers need room to explore and run. They need big things to hold and play with, eg big balls or blocks. They like simple ride-on toys and toys they can push and pull. Parents are important as the secure base for toddlers to return to when they need reassurance.

Older toddlers (2–3 years)

Your two year old seems to be always curious and on the move as they explore more widely. They enjoy being with other children and learning to do more for themselves. Tantrums are common because they are not yet able to do things they want to do and can get very frustrated. Speech becomes clearer and easier to understand.

Two year olds enjoy dress-ups, ride-on toys, stories, rhymes and copying their parents. They are not yet able to share so putting special toys away or having more than one of the same toy can help if they are playing near other children.

Young preschoolers (3–4 years)

Your young child begins make-believe play with other children. Learning how to get on with others is important to your child's development and this is when they begin to share and take turns. This is the age children ask many questions.

Young preschoolers enjoy songs, stories and rhymes, drawing, painting, playdough, making things, swings and playgrounds and lots of time and space to run. Check out local playgroups and other early childhood services that meet your child's needs.

Preschoolers (4–5 years)

Four year olds usually move well and enjoy physical activity. Their thinking shows in the things they say, draw, make and do. They often ask 'Why?' questions. They are more able to see things from another's point of view.

Children of this age love stories and funny words, building with large blocks, make-believe play, painting and playing with others. They enjoy trying to do new things at playgrounds and problem solving with simple computer games.

What parents can do

- Provide an environment where children can explore, learn and try new things and talk about what they are doing.
- Be positive and encourage children to try new things in safe ways.
- Teach them to watch, listen, think and question and let them practise what they can do.
- Provide materials children can use in creative play.
- Give children lots of free play time and outdoor play.

If you are worried about your child's learning talk with their teacher, carer, doctor or the Child and Family Health Service.

Want more information?

Department for Education - GreatStart
Department for Education website has lots of activities to do with children to make the most of everyday learning opportunities
www.education.sa.gov.au/parenting-and-child-care/parenting/learning-your-child-greatstart

Nature Play
Ideas for making unstructured outdoor play in nature an everyday part of childhood
www.natureplaysa.org.au

The Little Big Book Club
Provides free packs of books for babies and toddlers through Children's Centres, the Child and Family Health Service and other services. Find details on the website as well as free activity sheets, ebooks and books for purchase
www.thelittlebigbookclub.com.au

Parent Helpline
Phone 1300 364 100
For advice on child health and parenting

Child and Family Health Service (CaFHS)
Phone 1300 733 606, 9am-4.30pm, Mon to Fri to make an appointment. See www.cyh.com for child health and parenting information

Raising Children Network
For information about raising children
www.raisingchildren.net.au

Parenting SA
For more Parent Easy Guides including 'More than reading and writing', 'Why stories are important', 'Living with toddlers' and 'Time in: guiding children's behaviour' www.parenting.sa.gov.au



**Government of
South Australia**

Parenting SA
A partnership between the Department of Human Services and the Women's and Children's Health Network.

Ph: 08 8303 1660
www.parenting.sa.gov.au

Parent Easy Guides are free in South Australia.

Important: This information is not intended to replace advice from a qualified practitioner.

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