

DR AMANDA GUMMER

play

**Fun ways to
help your child
develop in the
first five years**



Contents

Cover

About the Book

About the Author

Title Page

Dedication

Disclaimer

Introduction

1: Playful Beginnings (0-2 Months).

2: Sensory Awakenings (2-6 Months).

3: Fun with Food (6-12 Months).

4: On the Move (12-18 Months).

5: Imagination (18-24 Months).

6: Language (2-3 Years).

7: Social Development (3-4 Years).

8: Starting School (4 Years and Onwards).

Final Words

Appendix: Nursery Rhymes and Verses

Endnotes

Resources

Index

Acknowledgements

Copyright

About the Book

Practical, inspiring and fun ways to help your child reach their full potential

Forget expensive and competitive classes, *Play* has everything you need to stimulate your child's mental, social, physical and emotional development. Following their astonishing progress through each major milestone, you'll find out how to:

- Choose the best toys and games to enhance development at every stage
- Promote confidence, communication and bonding through laughter
- Reduce tantrums, sibling rivalry, and fussiness – all through play

Packed full of activities and expert insights, and with specific advice on children with additional needs, *Play* is your essential guide to playful, pressure-free support in the crucial first five years.

About the Author

Dr Amanda Gummer is a research psychologist specialising in child development. She has over 20 years' experience working with children and families, including lecturing for The Open University on child development and teaching children with special needs in Hong Kong. She is the resident psychologist and a co-founder of Karisma Kidz, a non-executive director for Families in Focus CIC and the resident psychologist for UKMums.TV. She also provides consultancy and training on issues facing parents to a wide range of audiences.

Widely considered as *the* go-to expert on play, toys and child development, Amanda is regularly in the media, and continues to take an active role in research, presenting a paper at the International Toy Research Association's World Congress in Portugal in July 2014. She is often involved in government policy around children's issues, having recently contributed to the Bailey Review and the Good Childhood Inquiry.

Amanda heads up Fundamentally Children, providers of the popular parenting advice site www.fundamentallychildren.com, home of the Good Toy Guide and Good App Guide, so is surrounded by play on a daily basis as she observes children engaging with the latest toys and apps. She has two children of her own and so understands how much more enjoyable a playful family life can be.

play

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DR AMANDA GUMMER

Vermilion
LONDON

This book is dedicated to my parents with thanks for a fun-filled childhood, in memory of Nan and Dood, who were always up for a game (the sillier the better), and for my gorgeous girls Katie and Frankie – may you never feel too old to play.

Any references to ‘writing in this book’ refer to the original printed version. Readers should write on a separate piece of paper in these instances.

Introduction

The first few months and even years of parenthood can feel like boot camp – with the lack of sleep, physical exhaustion and no sense of it ever ending. I have written this book to support you in not only surviving but also thriving as a parent, allowing you to help your child develop through play, be a wonderful role model for your child and have plenty of fun along the way. By giving you practical tips, no-nonsense advice and plenty of opportunities to share laughter with your children, I hope you feel more confident, relaxed and able to balance the needs of your whole family.

As we are all individuals, with different family circumstances, demands and resources, it is important that you read this book through the lens of your own family life. Consider your personal values, your challenges and your aspirations, and make it part of your unique journey into parenthood. There is no generic, one-size-fits-all manual for babies and children, instead this book allows you to start compiling your own personal guide for your child. There is plenty of space at the end of each chapter to write your own comments on what has worked and what has not. Use it to record the developmental features and milestones that your baby achieves – it might even come in useful for the next one!

Playing with your child doesn't have to come with a high price tag. There are plenty of ways in which you can promote healthy child development through play on a low budget and, in many cases, for free. In each chapter, I have

suggested playful activities and explained what skills those activities develop.

This book is a practical and light-hearted alternative to all those 'how-to' parenting guides. Have fun trying out some of the activities and enjoy putting play into your daily family life.

Play: Frivolous Fun or Serious Learning?

The benefits of play are often discounted by adults who want children to 'do it properly' and 'stop messing about', but children are programmed to play – it's how they learn best.

The Department for Education advocates learning through play in the early years foundation stage of the national curriculum (ages one to five), and the leading preschools and nurseries also promote play, especially child-led play, as the most effective way of teaching children important skills.

Building blocks, arts and crafts, role play, water or sand and a range of other play activities and toys can encourage your child's natural curiosity in safe, age-appropriate ways. Parents are often surprised at what their children learn when given the freedom to play their way, without the usual constraints of adults' rules and directions.

Trial and error is a key feature of children's free play. It is a powerful tool for enhancing your child's understanding of the world, as she explores: 'I wonder what happens if ...' Children can be engrossed in activities that are as important to them as controlled scientific experiments are to scientists.

However, learning based purely on trial and error is very inefficient, as it does not take advantage of lessons learned by other people's experiences. If a child is left to develop purely by trial and error, she will end up making a plethora of mistakes, some of which can be dangerous or even life-threatening (e.g. 'I wonder what happens if I walk across a road with my eyes shut ...'). We have spent millions of years evolving, learning and improving things. Your child can benefit from your experience and knowledge, and if you give her plenty of opportunities to play it will equip her with the skills and motivation to add her own contribution to the world too.

You can help your child learn safely by 'scaffolding' her. This provides her with the guidance that prevents dangerous mistakes and enhances her chances of success, but that still enables her to try things out for herself.

Doing everything for your child may be quicker in the short term, but learning through personal experience is the most long-lasting and so it is important that she is allowed to try things out (and occasionally fail) in order to benefit from the learning opportunities play affords.

Next time your child floods the bathroom or squeezes a bottle of ketchup with its lid off, don't worry, she is learning – even if part of the lesson she learns is that what she has done has made Mummy cross; it is all part of growing up.

In the past, little thought was given to the importance of play and how it contributed to the developing child, so it is natural that some parents see it as merely a fun activity, a reward or even a waste of time. However, incorporating fun themes into children's learning from an early stage makes the experience more memorable for them and less daunting so that they will feel more positive towards it.

Think back to your own childhood:

- What do you remember from school?

- What were the most valuable lessons you ever learnt?
- What was the most effective way for you to learn and retain information?
- When did you most enjoy learning?
- What was your favourite toy?

Reminding yourself of your own childhood is often a good check and balance for your own parenting. Are there certain activities that you enjoyed as a child, or is there something your parents did that you wouldn't want to repeat? Recreating some of those things you most enjoyed will help you bond with your baby and rediscover your inner child. You will probably also remember how much fun you had when you were free to play naturally (we all did much more of it in those days) – this will help you resist pressures to hothouse or overschedule your child.

It is important to note that there is a difference between *helping* a child to learn and *pushing* a child to learn. Children who are pressured early on do not fare any better than those who are allowed to take their time; children learn best through simple playtime, which enhances problem-solving skills, attention span, social development and creativity. The recent increase in anxiety and mental health issues in children may be due to the pressures faced by young children who are not given the freedom and opportunity to play.

Free play also allows children to develop the important skill of independent thinking. If you embrace play as part of your child's development it will give her a greater incentive to learn through her natural curiosity.

How This Book Works

This book is a progression through the first five years of your child's life, split into chapters based on age. Each chapter focuses on a key aspect of development that is particularly relevant for children around that age.

As well as outlining key developmental features within each stage, the chapters are full of practical ideas for play and advice on how to promote your child's development with fun activities. There are also useful sections about the types of toys that children at each stage are likely to engage with to help you manage birthdays and Christmases, and to avoid toys that will just end up in the back of the cupboard or be five-minute wonders. For some further play ideas you can also visit www.fundamentallychildren.com.

Please try not to get too hung up on the ages: look more at the skills that come next for your child based on where she is at any point in time. Use the advice and playful activities to encourage development of the next skill, but don't hothouse or worry if she seems to be lagging behind in some areas – children don't develop uniformly. Make sure you manage your expectations, taking into account factors such as prematurity and illness when assessing whether your child is thriving, and try not to be overly anxious if she seems to be slower at achieving some milestones than her peers, or if her pattern of development seems to span more than one chapter.

Towards the end of each chapter there is a troubleshooting section, 'It Is Not Always Easy', which provides practical advice on resolving common issues that may have been causing you frustration or anxiety. At the end of the book ([here](#)), there is also a list of useful resources for additional information on topics covered in this book, as well as signposts to specialist advice on issues raised.

At the end of each chapter I have added 10 fun things that you can try to do at some point in her childhood. Tick

them off as and when they are achieved, and feel free to add more as you go ... You can keep these lists as a memory – and you can do them all over again with your grandchildren.

Genetic conditions and additional needs

All babies are special and unique and come with their own set of challenges. One of the biggest challenges for new parents is finding out that your baby has a genetic condition resulting in physical or cognitive impairments.

The advice in this book is relevant to all parents. Children with genetic conditions, such as Down's syndrome, may develop the skills in the book more slowly than the age grouping in the chapters suggest, but they will still develop the skills in approximately the same order and still deserve to have a playful childhood.

Children with specific physical impairments, such as deafness, blindness or limb deformity, will develop additional skills in other areas to compensate for their specific impairment, and, hopefully, you will still find lots of the book very relevant and useful, though some of the play ideas will not be appropriate. Try thinking of other activities that achieve a similar aim.

My advice to all parents is to celebrate the things your baby can do and help her develop coping strategies for things that she finds challenging.

If you are worried about your child's development, do seek advice. Most problems are more easily treated if diagnosed early. Talk to friends and family, especially those with children a little older than yours, but don't be afraid to seek professional help either. The best place to seek advice for non-emergency issues is at your local children's centre – the health visitors there will be able to help you determine whether there is an underlying medical issue and, if so, where best to go for more specialist help. You can also discuss any concerns with your GP.

I really hope you find the practical advice in the following pages useful and that my play ideas will promote a fun childhood, while also supporting holistic development.

Please remember that all children progress at different rates and my suggestions are just guides. The best piece of advice I can give you is to enjoy your child and have as much fun with her as possible, laying down memories and behavioural patterns that will serve her well in later life and make your whole family closer.

Please note that throughout the book I have referred to all children as 'she' purely for ease and consistency.



Chapter One

Playful Beginnings

(0-2 Months)

The first few weeks of a baby's life are a period of adjustment for both parents and babies, and are rarely without challenges. Overcoming these challenges and maintaining a positive, playful approach to family life can promote attachment, enhance involvement and acceptance of the new baby by other family members, as well as help avoid postnatal depression. However, it can be a tall order to maintain an optimistic, playful attitude when you're faced with broken sleep, a fractious baby and the hormonal turmoil that accompanies the very first few weeks of parenthood.

It is important for your baby that you are able to look after yourself in these early weeks. If you are feeling healthy and calm, you will be more able to identify and respond appropriately to your baby's different cries and more equipped to cope with broken sleep. You will also feel more inclined and motivated to continue to nurture the relationships that are important to you, thus providing a

healthy role model for your baby to copy and learn from, and providing you with a valuable support network.

New babies can seem very passive and, as new parents get to grips with an addition to the family, it is easy to miss some of the more subtle signs of development associated with the first few weeks of life. The most noticeable development at this age is physical: regaining birth weight and strengthening muscles. However, important foundations are also being laid for cognitive, emotional and social development from the day your baby is born.

Babies can hear noises inside the womb, and hearing matures quickly after birth. Taste and smell is fully developed when your baby is born, whereas vision takes a few more weeks to fully mature. Your baby will be hypersensitive to touch due to the concentration of nerve receptors over her small body, but she won't yet be able to coordinate her movements or use touch to explore the world in the same way an adult does. A baby will use her lips and tongue to learn about shape, texture and temperature, as well as the taste of objects in her world.

This chapter will identify some of the main milestones to watch out for and suggest playful ways for you to encourage healthy development.

What to Look Out for During this Stage

All babies develop differently, and premature babies need to be given time to catch up developmentally with their peers. When charting a premature baby's development make sure you take into account her corrected age (the original due date), as she will take months, if not a couple of years, to 'catch up'.

The following key features of development are ones that you will enjoy noticing during the first few weeks of your baby's life.

Physical and sensory development

Vision

Young babies will focus on contrasting colours. Your baby may stare at edges of pictures, windows or images with contrasting colours. Her vision will mature rapidly over the first few weeks of life, allowing her to focus on increasingly more detailed or subtle images and objects.

Babies, even newborns, are predisposed to looking at faces – a trait that enables them to quickly recognise their primary carer's face, thus promoting bonding and attachment. She will start to recognise faces within two weeks.

Hearing

Hearing sudden noises and turning towards them is something babies do from an early age. All babies should be given a hearing test within the first few weeks of their life (if you haven't had this, contact your health visitor); however, you can also encourage listening skills, and check her hearing ability, by laying your baby on her back and making a loud noise to one side of her, in her line of vision. If she hears it, she should roll her head towards the sound. Early detection of hearing problems can help prevent speech delays, so it is a good idea to regularly play games with your baby that involve sound. She will be able to recognise her parents' voices within two weeks.

Head control

It is important to support a newborn baby's head until she can support it on her own (normally after at least five weeks). Her neck muscles can be strengthened by holding her to your chest, so that she can look over your shoulder and start to lift her head, but make sure you are able to support it if she suddenly lurches backwards.



'Tummy time'

Your baby spends a large amount of time on her back sleeping, but she also requires time on her front to develop both physically and mentally. This is known as 'tummy time', and it is great for encouraging babies to lift up their heads to develop their neck muscles. Try moving around the room while your baby is lying on her tummy to motivate her to try to lift her head, as she will want to watch you.

Reflexes

Babies are born with automatic reflexes and these are key indicators that their nervous system is 'wired' correctly. For example, if a bright light is shone in your baby's face she will close her eyes, if something is put in her mouth she will automatically suck on it and if something is put in her hands she will close her fist around it and hold on tightly enough to be able to support her own weight. Many of the reflexes disappear after a few months, but it's good to check that they are there in the first few weeks and talk to your health visitor if you have any concerns.

Root reflex

This is the reflex that helps a newborn find her mother's breast to feed. You can test this reflex with a gentle stroke on her cheek - your baby should turn towards your touch, with an open mouth, ready to nurse.

The root reflex will start to fade when your baby is between three and four months old (although some babies continue doing this in their sleep past four months). As the reflex disappears, babies increasingly use their sense of smell, sight and hearing to predict when food is coming. The rooting reflex can often be misunderstood as a sign of hunger, but your baby will root whenever something touches her cheek, regardless of how hungry she is.

Sucking reflex

This is one of the most important reflexes your child is born with as it enables her to feed. Her sucking reflex is triggered when something (such as a nipple, teat or parent's finger) touches the roof of her mouth. She will respond by sucking on the nipple or teat, which in turn will enable her to get milk.

She will lose this reflex at around four months old, by which time your baby has learnt to recognise the breast or

bottle and starts sucking in anticipation.

As the sucking reflex isn't fully developed until around 36 weeks of pregnancy, premature babies will need to be tube fed until they acquire this reflex. All premature babies will develop at different rates; this could be earlier or later than others, particularly depending on how premature she is. Introducing a soother can encourage the sucking reflex.

Grasp reflex (or palmar grasp reflex)

Your baby's grasp reflex is present up until she is about four months old and can be tested by gently pressing a finger, or other suitable object, into your baby's palm. Her grasp can be incredibly strong and she can even pull herself up when gripping with both hands.

Startle reflex (or Moro reflex)

You may have noticed your baby jump occasionally when she hears or senses a loud noise or sudden movement from the person who is holding her. She may even startle when experiencing a sensation of falling. She may cry when this happens, but more often than not she will simply extend and retract her arms and legs very quickly. This reflex should disappear between four and six months old.

Babinski reflex

When you firmly stroke the sole of your baby's foot, her toes will flare out and her big toes point upwards. Once her nervous system is more developed this reflex should disappear. However, it's not uncommon for it to stay until 24 months.

Stepping/dance reflex

While holding your baby upright (supporting her head) with her feet on a flat surface, she will start to make walking movements with her legs, lifting one foot, then the other. She will continue to do this for about eight weeks after birth.

Tonic neck reflex (or fencing reflex)

When you lay your one-month-old baby on her back with her head turned to one side, the arm on that side extends while her other arm bends at the elbow, creating a 'fencing' position. She will keep this reflex until she is about six months old. This reflex is believed to aid passage through the birth canal.

Thinking and communication

Babies communicate from the moment they are born. Crying is the most primitive form of communication, but you will notice other signs and movements in your baby that you will soon learn to know as hunger (excessive rooting – see [here](#)), wind (arching her back) and tiredness (yawning). At this age babies have no control over the communication signals that they are giving off, but parents' responses to them will lay the foundations for voluntary communication in the future.

Smiling

It is easy to confuse the expression a baby makes when releasing wind with a smile, but at around four to six weeks many babies will smile in response to a pleasant stimulus. Make sure you smile a lot at your baby, especially when you notice her looking at you, and ensure it's genuine! (Children are better than adults at reading non-verbal