

Indian Academy of Pediatrics (IAP)



GUIDELINES FOR PARENTS

Toys, Plays, and Sports

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10 FAQs on TOYS, PLAYS, AND SPORTS

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2. What kinds of toys and games can be harmful for my child?
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10. My child has autism/attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)/learning difficulties. How can I adapt some of these activities to his/her needs?

Under the Auspices of the IAP Action Plan 2020–2021

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Toys, Plays, and Sports


“On the seashore of endless worlds, children play”

– DW Winnicott

Q1

What kind of toys and games should be introduced to children at different ages?

Play is one of the most important aspects of a child’s life. It is the key to how children learn, express their feelings, form relationships, and engage with others. Below is *one* possible way to categorize toys.

Type of toy	Meaning	Example	Approximate age
Sensory toys	These are toys that stimulate the different senses of a child—sight, hearing, and touch and teach basic cause and effect (X leads to Y, e.g., shaking the rattle makes noise)	Rattles, squeezable toys, teething toys, textured balls, and bubbles 	2 months onward

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Type of toy	Meaning	Example	Approximate age
Combinatorial toys	These are toys that can be combined in different ways and teach the child to build	Stacking rings, blocks, nesting cups, and puzzles 	1 year onward
Pretend play toys	Pretend play is an important stage in development, as it signals that the child is able to understand the difference between the real world and the pretend (mental) world	Dolls, puppets, doctor set, and kitchen set 	1.5 years onward
Movement-based activities	Child involved in physical movement	Swings, slides, seesaw, and balls to kick/throw  <i>Image courtesy: Rudy and Peter Skitterians</i>	2 years onward (swing, small slide—with supervision) Baby swings are available for younger children
Books	In print form, to read, tell stories, and discuss emotions	Board books, picture books, and story books The younger the child, the more pictures/textures in books are likely to attract the child	1 year onward
Board games and card games	These support the child to learn rules, turn-taking, and ideas of winning/losing	Snakes and Ladder, Ludo, and Uno 	6 years onward
Social games	These games teach turn-taking and different social skills required while playing with other people	Passing the parcel and hide-and-seek Cricket and Football are more complex team games that need one to cooperate with others to succeed  <i>Image courtesy: PDPics</i>	3–5 years onward (depending on the game)

If your child has developmental delay or another such concern, consider the developmental level your child is at currently rather than the age in deciding what kind of toys your child may engage with. For example, your child may be 3 years old but has not yet reached the level of pretend play, so he/she may enjoy more sensory level toys such as bubbles, squeeze balls, and simple pop-up toys.

Anything can be a toy, from pieces of paper to a bottle of water. You do not need to buy expensive and fancy toys. But, you do need to encourage your child to engage with material physically, as children do not learn just by watching a screen or by being told verbally, they learn by *doing*.

Q2

What kinds of toys and games can be harmful for my child?

- Till at least 3 years of age, toys should have big parts to avoid risk of choking.
- Avoid toys with sharp edges.
- Toys made of polyvinyl chloride (PVC) (a type of plastic) can expose the child to lead and cadmium (which are toxic), especially if the child mouths the toys.
- It is important for adults to supervise outdoor activities, till at least 6 years (and beyond, if you feel your child needs it), as there is a risk of falling and injury.

Q3

Should I allow my child to play as he/she wants, or should I direct him/her to specific classes?

Free play means allowing your child to play as he/she wants and not as the adult directs the child (e.g., young children may prefer to tear paper rather than scribble on it or an older child may use a bus as a bridge rather than driving it). Free play is important at all ages. It allows children to use their imagination and be creative. You should definitely allow your child to play freely. However, if the child engages in inappropriate actions (throwing toys at people and hitting others), you should *not* ignore it and gently but firmly redirect the child to a more appropriate action. If you ignore it, the child will learn that these actions are acceptable and will continue to do them.

At the same time, this does not mean that the child's entire time has to be free play. There is value in doing structured activities with your child such as puzzles and playing games with rules. However, before 2 years of age, your child will generally not engage in structured activities on your command. This is perfectly okay. Remember that your child's attention span is much lesser than yours, and even 10 minutes is very long for a 2-year-old child to sit and do something!



Image Courtesy: Rein Schoondoorp.

Q4

How can I spend time in playing with my child?

As adults, we often think that play is for children, and it is silly or unnecessary for us to engage in it. However, playing with our child can be an excellent way of building a relationship with the child, finding out his/her thoughts and concerns, and teaching the child the importance of recreation.

While playing with children, give them the freedom to choose *what* they want to play and *how* they want to play. Play at the level of the children, i.e., sit down where they are—sitting, make eye contact, and copying their actions. Giving too many instructions or always using play to ask questions to test their knowledge can put off the children. Instead, you can describe or comment on the child's actions. For example, if the child is arranging some cars, you can say—“*Oh, you are making a car park*”. Or, if the child has drawn something, you can say—“*Oh, you have drawn a yellow flower*”.

Q5

There is barely any time or avenues to engage in sports nowadays. How important is it to expose my child to sports?

It is important to expose your child to sports. Sports can help children to develop and maintain physical health, to learn playing by the rules and in a team, to learn the importance of discipline and practice, and to find a source of enjoyment and fun. They also learn to be resilient in life and to face disappointment and failure on losing in a game with courage and perseverance. Exposure does not mean that children have to be good at the sport or that they have to take part in competitions. It means that the children find something that they enjoy.

Examples of sports that children may enjoy include—football, swimming, cricket, running, carom, dancing, gymnastics, badminton, *kho-kho*, kabaddi, etc. It is a good idea to start exposing the child to sports at younger ages, preferably before puberty, when the child is fairly open for trying out different activities.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends that children aged 3–5 years should be physically active throughout the day. WHO has recommended 3 hours of daily physical activity for 1–4 years old. Children aged 5–17 years should have at least 60 minutes of moderate-to-vigorous aerobic physical activity a day. If we do not expose children to sport, there is a risk that they do not engage in physical activity when they grow older.

Q6

How should I decide which sport to engage my child in? If my child does not want to engage in sports, what should I do?

To decide which sport to engage your child in, the main factor to consider is your child's interest and likes. Secondly, you can consider which sport is accessible to you in terms of expense, time, space, and coaching.

It is your role to provide your child with the *option* of playing sports and *encouragement* to do the same. However, *do not force* the child to play a sport because of your personal liking.

Q7

Can sports have any harmful effects in the long run?

Participation in sports offers many benefits, as described above. However, if your child is pursuing sports at a competitive/professional level, the training regimes can be very strict and vigorous and coaches may not understand the physical and mental limits of children. This can lead to a greater risk of injuries and burnout. Hence, it is recommended that:

- There should be scheduled rest periods and limits on time spent in sports (>16 hours/week is not recommended)
- The intensity of the training and any injuries should be carefully monitored, as when children go through puberty, there can be more injuries, as their bodies are still developing.
- Many parents encourage their children to engage in a single sport, as they feel; it will lead to specialization at a competitive level. However, participating in one single sport can have greater risk of injury due to doing the same repetitive movements and can also lead to decreased motivation and enjoyment.
- Adequate emotional support should be provided to the child and it should be ensured that the child does not feel pressurized to participate in the sport. Sports should always be for recreation, physical fitness, and, at times, competition.
 - *High-contact sports* are those sports in which athletes hit or collide with each other or other objects with great force (e.g., boxing, kabaddi, and mixed martial arts).
 - *Semi-contact sports* involve less contact and force (e.g., football and basketball).

The higher the "contact level" of a sport, the greater is the risk of an injury. If your child is playing a contact sport, ensure that your child wears appropriate protective gear (such as helmets) and any injury is quickly recognized and adequately treated before the child resumes the sport. Even noncontact sports such as skating and dancing have risks of injuries and need protective gear (e.g., knee guards and helmets) to ensure safety. Further, if your child has a medical condition (e.g., heart disease), you need to check with your doctor about sports that your child can participate in.



Image courtesy: Marcisim.

Finally, drinking adequate amounts of water, especially in hot and humid weather, is extremely important to prevent dehydration while playing sports.

Q8

My child wants to join a gym. What are some important aspects I should consider before he/she joins?

There is no scientifically determined minimum age to join a gym. However, if your child wants to join, consider three important factors:

1. Overexertion can impact physical growth, as the body is still developing till around 20 years of age, hence intensity of gym use should be lesser than for an adult.
2. Gym use requires concentration; and children and adolescents may have less ability to concentrate for long periods of time.
3. The younger the child, the more important it is to supervise the child, as gyms have different kinds of equipment that can cause injuries.

Based on these individual factors, you should consider if your child is ready for the gym. Resistance training (e.g., lifting of weights) is safe, as long as it is supervised and part of a properly designed training program (gradual increase of weights and use of correct equipment). Otherwise, there is a high risk of injuries.

It is important to be aware of the reasons that your child wants to train and go to the gym. Too much of a concern with “bulking up” or getting a “superhero’s body” could be an indication of serious disorder about appearance or weight and may need deeper investigation.



Image Courtesy: David Mark.

Q9

My trainer has recommended protein powder. What are the advantages and disadvantages of the same?

Protein powder is a type of protein supplement. Protein supplements can help to build muscle mass and strength, *if* your child is training or exercising adequately. They will not benefit your child, if they are taken without adequate physical activity. Secondly, as much as possible, protein should be derived from whole foods such as eggs, fish, and legumes. Supplements are processed food items and should *not* be used as a replacement for regular food.

Overconsumption of protein can have harmful effects on digestion and the body’s functioning, especially when it is accompanied by unhealthy or restricted diets.

In conclusion, protein supplements need to be taken based on whether the child really needs it and only as an addition to a healthy and balanced diet.

Q10

My child has autism/attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)/learning difficulties. How can I adapt some of these activities to his/her needs?

For children with physical disability, it is as important to engage in sport and play. Modified equipment (e.g., hand cycles) and modified rules may be needed for participation. Try to ensure that your child's social group is accepting of your child by speaking to their parents about it beforehand.

For children with developmental disabilities, you may have to use simpler and more attractive material at first. If your child is not interested in conventional activities, try using sensory material (e.g., dry rice, water play, and sand). Respect your child's likes and dislikes, and do not force the child to do something, as this may be scary for the child.

Dos and Don'ts

Do encourage your child to play, i.e., engage with people or material physically



Do not let your child be passive or watch screens all the time

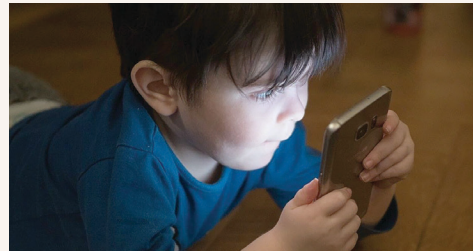


Image Courtesy: Andi Graf

Do allow your child to free play



Image Courtesy: Joseph Samson

Do not force your child to play in a particular way or allow inappropriate actions (e.g., hitting)



Image Courtesy: Gerd Altmann

Do expose your child to sports



Image Courtesy: Anncapictures

Do not pressurize your child to play at a competitive level

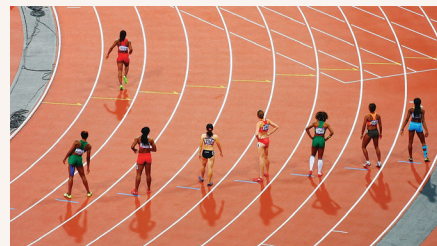


Image Courtesy: Free-Photos

Do play with your child



Image Courtesy: Candid Shots

Do not just test your child or give instructions

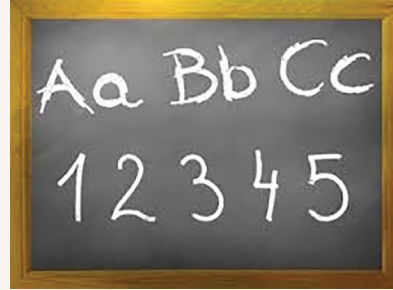


Image Courtesy: Blue Budgie

Play and sport is just as important for children with physical and/or developmental disabilities.



Image Courtesy: Vestita