

The LEGO Foundation

What we mean by:

# Playful parenting

in the early  
years





**Parents are children's first playmate and therefore have the opportunity to give them a headstart on learning through play that will last beyond the early years**

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# Parenting matters

The LEGO Foundation aims to build a future in which learning through play empowers all children to become creative, engaged, life-long learners. Parents are fundamental to that aim, as they are heavily invested in their children's development and learning. While this is true across all ages of children, this leaflet has a critical focus on children from birth to three years old. The importance of parenting for infants and young children in this age group cannot be overstated. This leaflet brings together our understanding of playful experiences that lead to deeper learning, with the international conversation around high quality parenting.



## Play is the perfect breeding ground for these important positive interactions

Play between a parent and child between birth to three years of age can be, quite literally, life changing for both parties. A long-lasting bond between parent and child can be established through playful interactions, laying the foundation for a positive and healthy relationship that can grow throughout childhood<sup>1</sup>. Furthermore, the potential for children to learn fundamental skills through parent-child play in the early years is vast<sup>2</sup>. The first three years of a child's life are a particularly important time for learning and development. The brain develops rapidly in this period of a child's life, producing more than a million neural connections each second. The experiences and relationships that a child has in this period, along with health and nutrition, have a huge impact on neural development<sup>3</sup>. Given this critical period of development, coupled with young children's propensity for play between birth and three years of age, the potential for learning through play at this age is huge and exciting.

**The skills and engagement of primary caregivers is at the core of quality learning through play experiences in early childhood... Here's why:**

- 1. Parents are children's first playmate and teacher**  
Children from birth to age three spend more time in their home than at any other age, typically with their parent(s) or primary caregiver<sup>4</sup>. Parents are children's first playmate and therefore have the opportunity to give them a headstart on learning through play that will last beyond the early years.
- 2. Parents are uniquely special to the child**  
The parent-child relationship is unique and significant. The bond between a parent and child is established and cemented through consistent positive interactions<sup>5</sup>. Those consistent, positive interactions are critical to two major areas of child development:
  - **Development of important skills**  
Children need a range of socioemotional and cognitive skills to become creative, engaged, lifelong learners. These include self-regulation, theory of mind and language abilities<sup>6</sup>. These skills can be practiced through early interactions with others, including parent-child play.
  - **Emotional wellbeing**  
A wealth of evidence now shows that secure attachment and adequate bonding with a parent is important for a child's emotional wellbeing, including stress and anxiety reduction<sup>7,8</sup>.



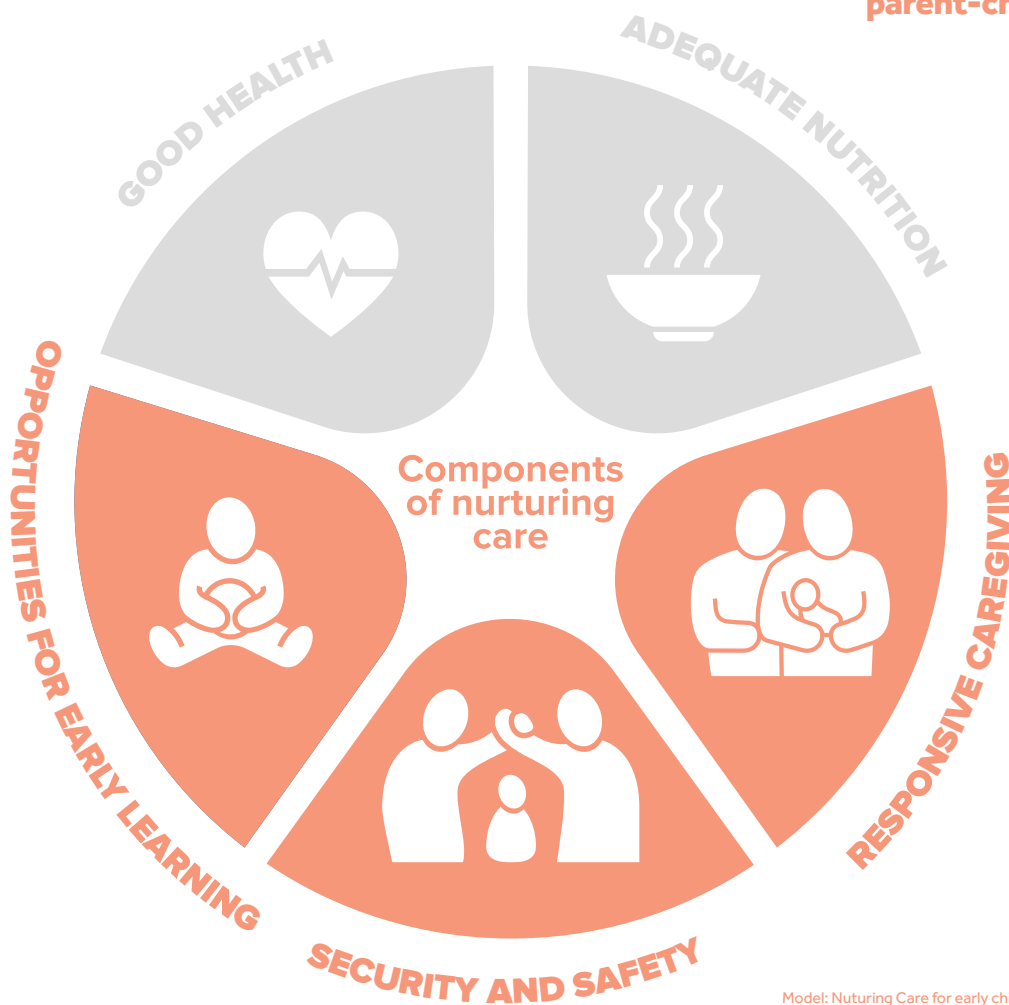


**Pretend play  
between a parent  
and a child is an  
ideal space to  
discuss feelings  
and practice  
reasoning**

# Why now?



Three out of five components in the early learning framework can be supported by parent-child play



Model: Nurturing Care for early childhood development



Playful parenting is a timely topic. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDG)<sup>9</sup> provide signposts for addressing some of the world's biggest challenges. Within these goals, there is a focus on early childhood development; "By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education." This illustrates the pressing importance of a nourishing and stimulating home environment in the early years.

With the SDGs calling for action, the Nurturing Care for Early Child Development framework<sup>10</sup> has been developed by the global community to provide a roadmap for action that will help children survive and thrive in order to transform health and human potential. Fundamentally, nurturing care includes giving young children opportunities for early learning, through interactions that are responsive and emotionally supportive. **Within the framework, three out of five of the identified components can be supported by parent-child play: responsive caregiving, opportunities for early learning, and security and safety.**

- In terms of **responsive caregiving**, the framework points to interventions that encourage play and communication activities between caregiver and child. This kind of playful, enabling environment can help to achieve the kind of nurturing care that allows all children to have high quality early childhood experiences.
- Another component of the framework, **opportunities for early learning**, can also be supported by parent-child play between birth and three years of age.. The framework suggests that through smiling and eye contact, talking and singing, modelling,

imitation and simple games, like "wave bye-bye", young children can learn important features of social interaction. In addition, it is suggested that playing with common household items – like tin cups, empty containers, and cooking pots – can help a child learn about objects' feel and quality, and what can be done with them.

- The third component of the framework supported by parent-child play is **security and safety**. Children should feel safe in their relationship with their parent in order to form a secure attachment. This sense of safety and trust can be built through consistent positive interactions, such as play experiences. Play can be a fantastic opportunity for a parent and child to get to know each other's emotional cues, adding to a feeling of familiarity and warmth.

Recent data collected across multiple countries from almost 13,000 parents, shows that most parents want to play with their children (LEGO® Play well report<sup>11</sup>). Overall, 89% of parents responded that they enjoy playtime as much as their child does, 94% responded that play helps them get to know their child better, and 91% believe that play is good for their own wellbeing.

Taken together, it is clear that global organisations, as well as parents themselves, have a strong desire to ensure that all children have high quality play experiences facilitated by their primary caregivers. In order to capitalise on this momentum, practitioners, researchers and policymakers have great incentive to better understand the relationship between playfulness and parenting, identify tangible examples, document its potential developmental benefits, and explore gaps in our current knowledge.

# What exactly do we mean by playful parenting?

Being playful conveys a joyful, engaging, creative quality to interaction, in which giving or expressing pleasure and providing meaningful social interactions are important. Parenting is essentially the activity of raising a child, and can be done by anyone who takes on that responsibility. This might include biological relatives such as grandparents, or it might include non-relations such as adoptive parents or community leaders. The activity of parenting itself is deeply rooted in cultural traditions and practices, and therefore varies widely across cultural contexts<sup>12</sup>. With this in mind, playful parenting will have important differences across cultural contexts.

Previous research from the LEGO Foundation has defined that these are the characteristics of playful experiences that parents and caregivers can engage their children in.

**Meaningful**

**Joyful**

**Iterative**



**Actively  
engaging**

**Socially  
interactive**

Previous research from the LEGO Foundation has contributed to an understanding of what we mean by learning through play<sup>13</sup>. Drawing on extensive conversations with experts in the field, as well as reviews of the literature on play and learning, five characteristics of playful experiences were established. Importantly, these are suggested as characteristics of playful experiences that lead to deeper learning, such as the learning of important skills, e.g. critical thinking and problem solving. Based on this previous work, we suggest that a parent-child play experience that leads to deeper learning has one or more of the following five characteristics:

- Joyful
- Actively engaging
- Socially interactive
- Meaningful
- Iterative

Parent-child play doesn't require lots of time and toys. High quality play moments between a parent and child can happen during everyday routines, such as cooking, feeding, bath time and bed time. Readily available materials such as tissue paper and cardboard can be used as toys. In addition, play between a parent and child develops vastly in the first three years of life. When it comes to play with young infants, this will often involve facial expressions, sounds effects and be parent initiated rather than parent driven. Later in development, at around 18 months to 2 years, play becomes more child-led as children grow in language and cognitive abilities. Therefore, parent-child play at 4-months will look very different to that at 24-months. With that in mind, here are some examples of how these characteristics are manifested in parent-child play in the first three years of life, as well as a brief explanation of how this play can lead to deeper learning:

# Deeper learning

## Parent-child play

### Joyful

Parents can make eye contact with their baby during play to communicate the joy of the interaction, such as exaggerated smiling and laughing, as well as gestures such as clapping and high-fiving when an infant completes a tricky task. Young infants are greatly amused by unexpected events during play, and so a parent can provide joyful play through building excitement during peek-a-boo or a jack in the box game.

## Learning

The learning potential of these early playful experiences is vast, and may range from learning how to regulate emotions during the unpredictability of games<sup>14</sup>, to the knowledge that persevering through challenging tasks often lead to a sense of accomplishment and joy (something that may be referred to as "hard fun").

## Actively engaging

Parents can contribute to their child's absorption in an activity by elaborating on it and enhancing it through multisensory stimulation. For example, if a child is pretending to fly a spaceship to the moon, the parent could contribute to the story by making "whoosh" sound effects or building on the story by suggesting objects that could also represent the moon (e.g., a toy ball). Maintaining eye contact during play, or physically stimulating the infant through movement will enhance engagement.

## Meaningful

Early parent-child play allows children to make sense of their world, by pointing to things in the environment and expressing what they are. During pretend play, a parent can model how to use a toy telephone. The infant is likely to imitate this behaviour within the play activity, serving as practice for real-life actions.

## Iterative

Young children love to explore and try things over and over again in play. For example, they will fill a container with small objects and empty them all again in a repeating pattern. To parents, this may look like pointless repetition, but toddlers are iterating on this process and experimenting with the physical properties of the objects. In this way, parents can think of iterative play as mini-scientific experiments. They can support this through playfully encouraging the tweaking and repeating process.

## Socially interactive

While parents can play in parallel alongside their child, it is likely that deeper learning comes from socially interactive parent-child play. During pretend play, parents can take on a character that must negotiate, plan and work together with their child's character to accomplish something. This kind of team work during play feels truly socially interactive.

Active engagement provides the essential fine and gross-motor support for a child's development and learning, allowing them to move around, focus and coordinate their body. In addition, young children's self-talk and gestures during play and other activities should be encouraged by parents, as it is believed by researchers to enhance children's ability to self-regulate in emotionally heightened situations such as play<sup>15</sup>.

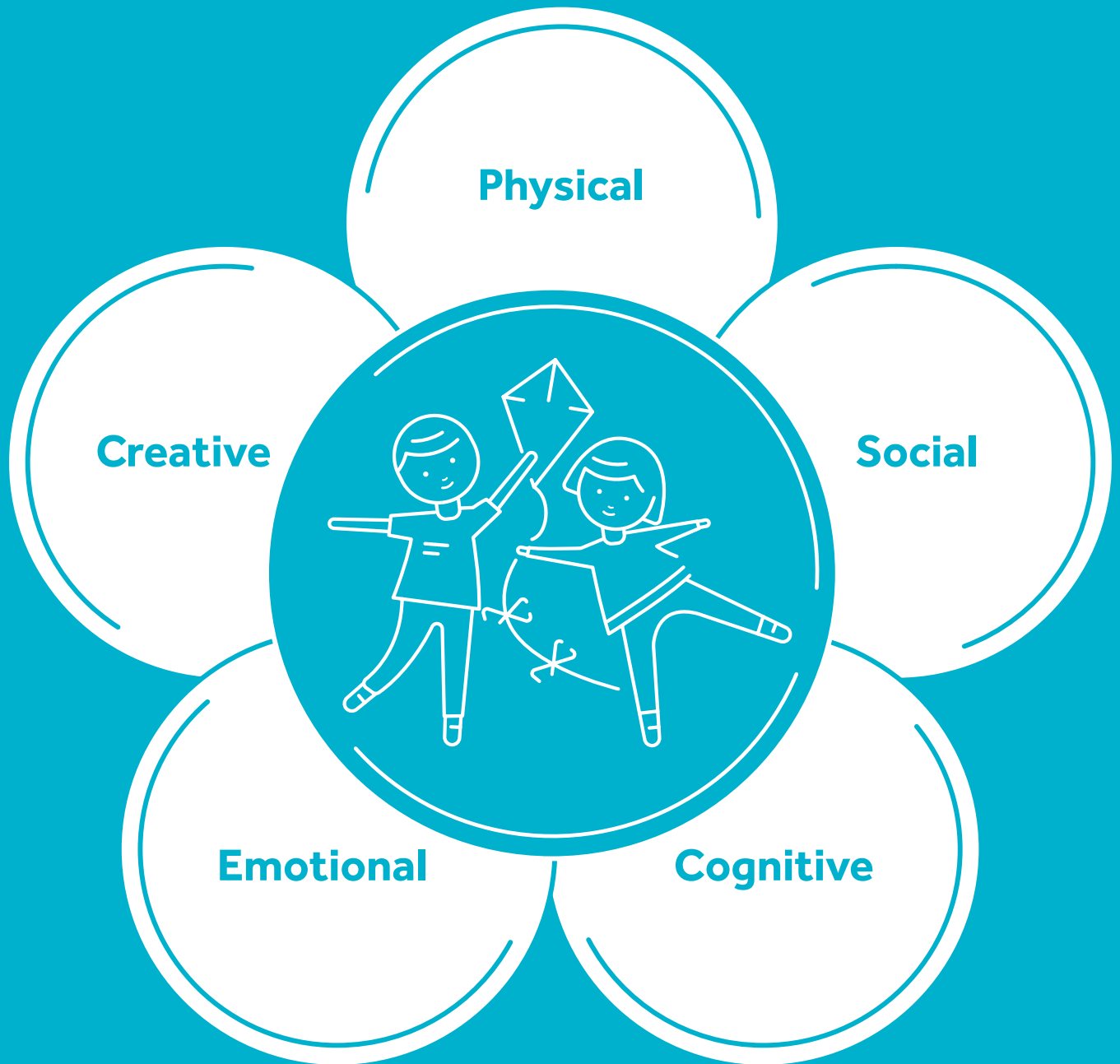
Using real-world situations in play helps young children make sense of their environment. Importantly, what is meaningful will vary across cultures and so children will learn to use the information that is relevant to them. The importance of meaning-making for learning has been firmly established<sup>16,17,18</sup> and can begin during play in the birth to first three years of life.

As a child grows, it becomes important for them to be able to experiment with different approaches to problem solving (from throwing objects on the floor from their high chair to trying new ways to feed themselves), and this kind of iterative play is likely to provide important practice for future challenges. It is therefore important that children are given the space to try new things (and likely fail the first few times), in order to master new tasks.

Socially interactive play can set expectations for how children interact with others throughout childhood. In this way, socially interactive play can be seen as "practice" for fundamental life skills such as team work, clear communication and negotiation.

# What can children gain through play with a parent?

Parent-child play in the first three years should ultimately be about fun and mutual enjoyment, but it's also beneficial for children's development and learning. Specifically, holistic skill development and enablers of this skill development, such as a securely attached relationship with parent(s), can be supported through parent-child play.



# Holistic skill development

- Early in life, social connections make neural connections. The brain's architecture is partially shaped by early interactions with others. Positive, responsive interactions between birth and three years of age (the most active period for establishing neural connections) can provide a strong foundation for connections that form later. The absence of responsive caregiving – or if responses are unreliable or inappropriate – alters the development of the brain's architecture and impairs learning and behaviour<sup>19</sup>.
- Parenting interventions which involve encouraging parents to engage in stimulation of children aged birth to three years often include play activities as a method, such as playing with homemade toys. Interventions that involve this kind of playful parental stimulation have been found to positively affect receptive vocabulary<sup>20</sup>, cognitive and motor development according to well-known and standardised measures of development<sup>21</sup>.
- Object play with an adult can harness important cognitive skills in babies, including the understanding of cause-and-effect relationships. It has been found that babies as young as 16-months can infer important features of a toy, for example whether it can play music or not, simply by watching adults play with that same toy first<sup>22</sup>.
- Block play has been proposed as a window into children's spatial understanding, which has been found to relate significantly to early mathematical ability in three-year-olds<sup>23</sup>.
- Between the ages of one and a half and two years, there is a dramatic increase in how often infants engage in pretend play. For example, using a shoe to symbolize a telephone or pretending to feed a toy teddy bear. It is likely that pretend play with a partner, such as a parent, can enhance important skills such as understanding other peoples' minds. Research has shown that even very young infants can read their parents' social cues, and can distinguish between pretend and real acts, such as pretending to drink a cup of tea<sup>24</sup>. This kind of "mind reading" is fundamental to successful social relationships<sup>25</sup>, and can be practiced during parent-child pretend play from a very early age.
- Researchers have found that mothers' responsiveness during a play interaction with their 9 and 14-month old babies predicted the timing of children's early language milestones between 9 and 21 months<sup>26</sup>. This suggests that parent-child play can provide an excellent opportunity for parents to stimulate their child's language development through responsive interactions.



# Parent-child relationship

- Secure attachment between parents and children between birth and three years of age (typically demonstrated by the child seeking closeness and comfort from their parent in times of distress) has been positively associated with the way in which children learn to regulate their high intensity emotions during times of stress, anxiety and illness<sup>27</sup>. It has been established that sensitive parenting in the first year of life plays a pivotal role in establishing a secure attachment between parent and child<sup>28</sup>.
- This important sensitive parenting involves reading a child's cues and responding to their needs in an appropriate and prompt way<sup>29</sup>. Parent-child play can be a great environment for parents to get to know their child's signals and practice appropriate responding. For example, in early face-to-face play, an infant may turn their head and avert their gaze if the play is over-stimulating. It is important that parents can read these cues in order to match the pace of their baby for high quality, mutually enjoyable interactions.
- Mutual back-and-forth exchanges between adults and young children are often referred to as "serve-and-return" interactions. When an infant or young child "serves" through vocalisations or gestures, an adult can "return" with eye contact, speech, affection and so on. Through these serve-and-return interactions, neural connections are built and strengthened in the child's brain that support the development of communication and social skills<sup>19</sup>.
- Pretend play between a parent and a child is an ideal space to discuss feelings and practice reasoning, both of which have been linked to secure attachment and the ability to relate to the minds' of others<sup>30</sup>.





**Object play with an adult can harness important cognitive skills in babies, including the understanding of cause-and-effect relationships**







# What can parents gain through play with their young children?

- Most parents wish for a positive and healthy relationship with their children. From very early infancy, this positive relationship can be nurtured through playful interactions that are warm, sensitive and engaging.
- Parents themselves report that playing with their children makes them feel good. The LEGO Play Well report<sup>11</sup> shows that 9 in 10 parents also say play is fundamental to their own happiness, and makes them feel relaxed, energised and more creative. The same number say play also strengthens family relationships, builds trust and helps them know their children better.
- Parents who experience mental health problems may find it especially difficult to form a positive

and mutual bond with their child. Many programmes which aim to support parents experiencing mental health difficulties advocate play as a context in which parents can form a sensitive and positive relationship with their child. For example, research in Pakistan has found that depressed mothers of children aged 0-3 benefitted from an intervention that involved a "learning through play" programme. Parents were given activity calendars with a range of suggested parent-child play activities to try out over a 10-week period. Mothers in the learning through play intervention group showed a decline in depressive symptoms compared to the group of mothers who received routine care. This decline was sustained 6 months after the intervention had ended.

# Conclusion

There is an urgent need to consider the importance of parent-child playful interactions for children and parents between birth and three years of age. Research has firmly established that this is a critical stage of child development, during which there is huge potential to shape a child's developmental trajectory. Examples of parent-child play at this stage of development are all around us; in the supermarket, playground, and home. The benefits of these playful interactions to both children and parents are clear and compelling.

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