



partou

The Partou Guide to Play

Simple ways to help children
learn, explore and thrive





Introduction: Why play matters



Play is how children make sense of the world around them.

It's how babies, toddlers and pre-schoolers build connections, test ideas, and develop confidence, creativity and independence.

To mark International Day of Play in support of UNICEF, we asked almost 900 Partou educators across 99 nurseries what children genuinely love to play with and, through their expert understanding of early years development, what truly helps children to thrive. Every day, our educators use their

specialist knowledge and experience to create play-based learning environments that support children's communication, confidence, creativity, problem-solving and emotional and physical wellbeing.

In early years, play is far more than a bit of fun, it is how children make sense of the world, build relationships, develop resilience and lay the foundations for lifelong learning and success.

Again and again, educators told us the same thing: children are happiest when play is simple, sensory, active, imaginative and led by their own curiosity.

This guide brings together those insights, along with easy, low-pressure ideas families can use at home.

Because meaningful play doesn't need to be perfect, it just needs time, space and connection.



supports



What children really love and how they choose to play

We heard from 869 educators across 99 nurseries.

Highest-rated activities:

Babies:
Songs & stories

4.6
out of 5

Toddlers:
Outdoor play

4.72
out of 5

Pre-school:
Outdoor play

4.76
out of 5



Outdoor play was the most-loved activity for toddlers and pre-schoolers



Songs, stories and books were among the highest-rated activities for babies



Sensory play, sometimes referred to as messy play by families, featured across every age group



Children consistently preferred open-ended play over structured activities



Sensory play encourages children to explore the world through touch, sound, movement, texture, smell and sight, helping to support brain development, language, coordination and emotional regulation.

Open-ended play is play without fixed rules or outcomes, where children are free to lead their own ideas and imagination. This helps build creativity, confidence, problem-solving skills and independent thinking.



**The message from educators was clear:
the best play experiences are often the simplest.**

The five big play truths

1. Outdoor play is real learning

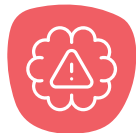
Outdoor play isn't a break from learning, it IS learning.

Whether they're climbing, balancing, splashing through puddles or exploring the world around them, children develop important physical, emotional and social skills every time they play outside.

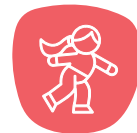
Outdoor environments encourage children to:



test their limits



assess risk



move their bodies



build confidence



solve problems



explore with curiosity

Unlike more structured activities, outdoor play often changes moment to moment. A stick becomes a fishing rod. A muddy patch becomes a kitchen. A fallen tree becomes a balancing beam.

These experiences also play an important role in building resilience, independence and imagination. Whether children are climbing, balancing, building dens, creating their own games or working out how to overcome obstacles together, they are constantly learning to assess risk, adapt when things don't go to plan, persevere through challenges, work with others, think creatively and build confidence in their own abilities.

Outdoor play also supports emotional wellbeing. Fresh air, movement and open space can help children regulate emotions, release energy and feel calmer and more connected. And it doesn't need to be complicated.

Some of the richest learning moments come from the simplest activities:

- ✓ jumping in puddles
- ✓ collecting leaves and sticks
- ✓ spotting birds and insects
- ✓ building dens from blankets or branches
- ✓ visiting the park
- ✓ balancing on low walls
- ✓ going on scavenger hunts
- ✓ riding bikes and scooters
- ✓ running, climbing and exploring freely

The goal isn't perfection. It's giving children opportunities to move, practise skills they've learned, discover and experience the world around them in their own way.

2. Sensory play builds brains

For young children, sensory play is far more than just fun.

While it can sometimes feel chaotic for adults, it is often deeply calming and absorbing for children. From splashing water and squeezing playdough to scooping sand or exploring different textures, sensory experiences help children understand the world through touch, movement, sound and exploration.

Educators consistently highlighted sensory play as one of the most valuable and engaging experiences for children of all ages.

Through activities involving touch, sound, taste, movement and texture, sensory play supports:



**language
development**



creativity



**emotional
regulation**



concentration



**problem-
solving**



confidence

It also encourages children to experiment, practise and try again and follow their own curiosity. These are all important foundations for learning.

Thankfully, sensory play doesn't need expensive resources or advance planning.

**Some of the best sensory experiences can be created
using simple household items:**

- ✓ water bowls and cups
- ✓ bubbles
- ✓ scarves and fabrics
- ✓ kitchen utensils
- ✓ homemade playdough
- ✓ sand
- ✓ cardboard tubes
- ✓ natural objects like leaves, sticks and stones

Children are often most engaged when they can pour, mix, scoop, squeeze, splash and explore freely at their own pace.

3. Stories and songs matter most

Some of the most powerful learning moments still happen through stories, rhymes and conversation.

Long before children learn to read or write, they learn through listening, watching, repeating and connecting with the people around them. Songs, books, poems and storytelling help children build language, confidence, imagination and emotional security from the very earliest years.

Educators consistently highlighted stories, singing and musical activities as some of the most valued experiences across every age group.

These moments support:



communication and vocabulary



memory and concentration



imagination and creativity



listening skills



attachment and connection



emotional understanding

Don't worry – you don't need to channel your inner Shakespeare. Some of the richest learning happens through everyday routines:

- ✓ reading a bedtime story together
- ✓ singing whilst in the car
- ✓ repeating favourite books again and again
- ✓ making up stories at bath time
- ✓ sharing nursery rhymes
- ✓ talking about the day at bath time
- ✓ telling stories without screens or distractions



4. Imagination is serious work

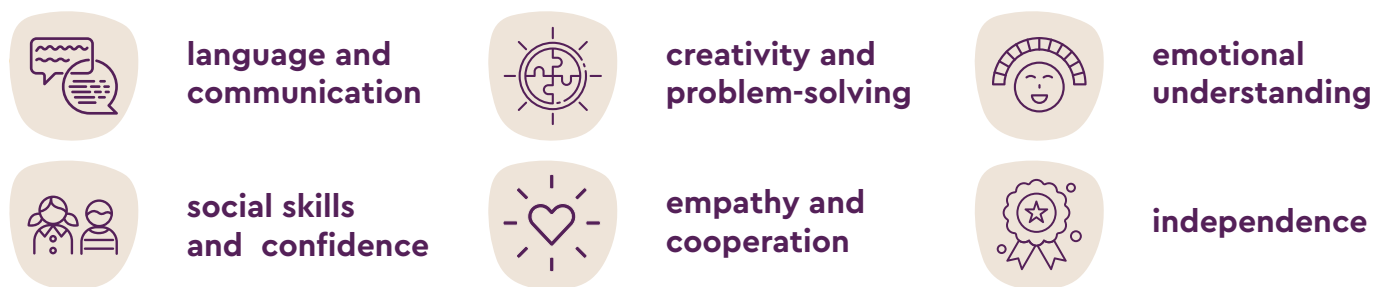
When children pretend, they practise real-world skills.

Whether they're running a make-believe café, caring for a teddy, building a spaceship from a cardboard box or turning the sofa into a pirate ship, imaginative play helps children make sense of the world around them.

Role play allows children to experiment with ideas, relationships, emotions and everyday experiences in a way that feels safe and enjoyable.

Educators consistently highlighted imaginative play as one of the most engaging experiences for toddlers and pre-schoolers.









Because there is no 'right' or 'wrong' outcome, pretend play encourages children to think creatively, make independent decisions, adapt when things don't go to plan and build confidence through exploration. This is how children can develop:



Imaginative play also gives children the opportunity to process experiences they may not yet fully understand. Recreating routines, conversations or situations through play helps children build confidence and familiarity over time.

Because the magic often comes from the child's imagination rather than the toy itself, role play doesn't need expensive costumes or designated playrooms.

Children are often happiest with simple, open-ended resources such as:

- | | |
|--|---|
|  cardboard boxes |  dolls and teddies |
|  dress-up clothes |  blankets and cushions |
|  toy kitchens and food |  homemade "shops" or cafés |
|  puppets |  small world toys and figures |

In these moments of pretending, children are developing skills they will use for life.



5. Children don't need more toys

One of the clearest messages from educators was that children do not need expensive, endless toys or constant entertainment to play well.

In fact, some of the richest play experiences come from the simplest everyday objects.

Children are naturally imaginative. Given time, space and freedom to explore, ordinary items can quickly become castles, dens, cafés, obstacle courses, boats or secret hiding places.

Simple resources often encourage more creativity because there is no fixed rule about how they should be used and they allow children to decide what the play becomes.

Children were frequently drawn to things like:



blankets, cushions and boxes



pegs and containers



loose parts and recycled materials



wooden spoons and kitchen utensils



scarves and fabrics







natural objects like sticks and leaves



building blocks

These kinds of open-ended materials encourage children to:

-  **experiment**
-  **problem-solve**
-  **create independently**
-  **and use their imagination freely**

Importantly, children do not always need adults to lead or direct their play. Moments of boredom can actually be valuable because they create space for creativity, independence and curiosity to emerge.

Sometimes the best thing we can give children is the freedom to play in their own way.

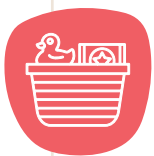




Play by age

Babies (0-2)

Ideas to try at home:



Treasure baskets:

Fill a basket with safe, everyday objects (wooden spoons, soft fabrics, brushes) for your child to explore.

What children learn:

Curiosity, sensory awareness, and early problem-solving as they explore different textures and objects.

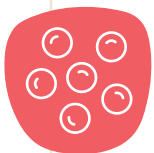


Water play:

Splashing hands in a bowl, pouring from cups, or playing during bath time.

What children learn:

Their actions make things happen, coordination, and early scientific thinking.



Posting and filling:

Dropping pom poms or balls into cardboard tubes or boxes.

What children learn:

Hand-eye coordination and spatial awareness.



Songs and rhymes:

Repeating favourite songs with actions.

What children learn:

Language development, memory, and connection with others.

Top tip: Sit alongside your child and describe what they're doing, this helps build language and connection.



Toddlers (2–3 years)

Ideas to try at home:



Simple role play: Pretending to cook, care for dolls, or go shopping

What children learn: Understanding of the world, social skills, and imagination



Mark making: Drawing, painting with water, or using chunky crayons

What children learn: Early writing skills, creativity, and fine motor control



Building and stacking: Using blocks, boxes, or recycled materials

What children learn: Problem-solving, balance, and early mathematical concepts like size and shape



Helping in the kitchen: Washing vegetables, mixing, or cutting ingredients

What children learn: Independence, coordination, and understanding routines



Outdoor adventures: Collecting leaves, jumping in puddles, or exploring local areas

What children learn: Physical development, confidence, and connection to the natural world

Top tip: Follow your child's ideas rather than leading the play, there's no 'right' or 'wrong' way to play.



Pre-schoolers (3–5 years)

Ideas to try at home:



Small world play: Creating stories with animals, figures, or vehicles

What children learn: Storytelling, language development, and understanding emotions



Creative projects: Junk modelling, painting, or making simple crafts

What children learn: Creativity, planning, and expressing ideas



Obstacle courses: Using cushions, chairs, and outdoor space to move in different ways

What children learn: Coordination, risk-taking, and body awareness



Cooking together: Making simple recipes like biscuits or fruit salads

What children learn: Following instructions, mathematical skills (measuring), and independence



Storytelling: Acting out favourite stories or making up new ones together

What children learn: Imagination, confidence, and communication skills

Top tip: Give children time to stay deeply engaged in play, this is where the richest learning happens.



Conclusion: The best play is often the simplest

Children do not need constant entertainment, expensive toys or perfectly planned activities to thrive.

What they need most is time, connection, movement, curiosity and the freedom to play in their own way.

Whether it's building dens from blankets, splashing in puddles, reading the same story for the fiftieth time or turning a cardboard box into a spaceship, these moments shape the way in which our little ones simply translate the complex world in front of them.

**For young children,
play is never "just" play.**

Through play, children build confidence, communication, creativity, resilience and relationships. They explore the world around them, process emotions, solve problems and discover who they are.

It's important to remind ourselves that often, the moments children remember most are not the perfectly planned ones, but the simple moments of joy, connection and discovery that come from...



laughing together



making up stories



getting muddy



singing songs



balancing on walls



collecting treasures

At Partou, our educators are our most valuable resource. The time they invest in helping children feel secure, supported and connected gives them the confidence to be curious, imaginative, creative and adventurous. This is what creates the foundations for truly meaningful play.

**Play is not something children do as a break from learning,
play IS learning.**