Fun Baby Learning Games features many research-backed activities to do with your newborn through age 2. Help your child learn new skills, grow their cognition, and pass developmental milestones as you play together.

All activities will help your child in the following areas of development:

- Cognitive
- Motor
- Social-emotional
- Language
- Self-esteem

Each activity includes instructions, necessary materials, and its research-backed benefits. Your baby will thrive as you enjoy one-on-one time together, playing and learning.

Sally Goldberg, PhD, also known as Dr. Sally, is a professor of education, author, and magazine writer. She authors a blog at www.earlychildhoodnews.net. Dr. Sally worked as an instructor of early childhood education on the adjunct faculties of Nova Southeastern University, Barry University, and the University of Phoenix. Well known for her tools and strategies for self-esteem development, she is a national conference presenter and a frequent guest on TV and radio. Dr. Sally, who grew up in White Plains, NY, has bachelor’s and master’s degrees from Cornell University and a PhD from the University of Miami.
fun baby learning games
Activities to Support Development in Infants, Toddlers, and Two-Year-Olds
Sally Goldberg, PhD
Dedication

To my friend Sue Augir:

Thank you so much for steering me in the right direction. It was your special touch of friendship and professionalism that helped me get this book back on track and ready for its final “meant-to-be” destination.

To my husband, Bob Elam:

Thank you for overseeing the “track.” It was your generosity and love that supported me in this part of my early childhood work that is such a meaningful and important part of my life.
Acknowledgments

This book puts early play into a sequenced context. Whatever age or stage your little one is at, you will be able to learn about and then guide your child through it with precision. Guesswork is out, and confidence is in. This handy resource is here today because of the many helpful people who chipped in with their time, energy, and resources. Marnie Cochran, who was in on the ground level when the book was conceived and begun, played a big role in the formative stage. Thank you, Marnie. Then years later, along came Stephanie Roselli, executive editor at Gryphon House, and she gets the biggest thank you of all. First, she gave it her scientific touch and then followed that with her genuine stamp of approval.

Thanks also go to the many mothers who tried out the activities, gave me needed feedback, and also posed with their babies for photos. Thank you very much, Corin Wiser and your daughter Hannah, Amber Bloom and your son Tyler, Rayna Spector and your daughter Peri, Guadalupe Griffin and your son Gabriel, Christine Randhawa and your son Liam, Traci Krystyniak and your daughter Rileigh, and Patty Majerus and your son Tommy. Your practical advice, insight, and patient children all helped me a lot!

Writing takes office space and time. Thank you, Pat Childres, Dan Dolan, and Brian Dolan for generously allowing me to be a visitor in your midst.
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Foreword

I was an absolute sponge for parenting knowledge as I anticipated the birth of my first child. As the publisher of a parenting magazine, the resources available to me were bountiful. I read everything I could get my hands on! It was during this time that I was fortunate enough to meet Dr. Sally Goldberg.

Dr. Goldberg and I had an instant common bond—the aspiration to educate parents on the importance of early childhood education and nurturing. However, I immediately was intrigued by her refreshing perspective on parenting and the true essence of childhood. Her energy and commonsense approach is a welcome alternative to the numerous modish techniques and gadgets that bombard today’s parents.

I implemented Dr. Goldberg’s creative ideas with my firstborn. My son and I would spend time coordinating household items of the same color, creating musical instruments from plastic spoons and containers, and making our own flashcards. It was a wonderful moment when his prekindergarten teacher credited his advanced skills to the extra time I had spent with him! Now, my youngest son is also exhibiting an advanced skill level in school. Thank you, Dr. Goldberg!

Parents will revel in the fresh approaches offered in this unique “play-and-learn” system. Dr. Goldberg’s suggestions are a blessing for both the stay-at-home and working parent. When there no longer seems to be enough time in the day, her activities allow a parent to make the most of the precious moments of child-parent bonding. Dr. Goldberg shows us that we can allow our children to take the initiative in learn-and-play activities. It is a golden opportunity for creative play when the child is more intrigued in the box the toy came in rather than the toy itself. After reading this book parents and caregivers will discover that their recycling bin is actually a treasure chest of toys waiting to happen. Parents and caregivers alike can teach invaluable skills while investing nothing more than some creativity and time.

Dr. Sally Goldberg is an inspiration to me both as a professional and a parent. To this day, I simply need to take a moment to refer to her writings and once again feel grounded in this whirlwind of new-millennium parenting. Thank you, Dr. Sally, for reminding us what a special gift parenting actually can be!

Victoria L. Grimes
Publisher
Today’s Family Magazine
This book is a theory- and research-based guide to playing with little ones. All activities foster development in one or more of the five areas—cognitive, motor, social-emotional, language, and self-esteem; and each one includes information about the activity, how to do it, and why.

Each of the suggested activities has been carefully selected or specially crafted as a stellar way to encourage a particular skill or emerging milestone. Some you may recognize, as they are based on play interactions that have been passed down through the generations. A few are specifically designed for you to create your own unique add-ons. All are there for you to experience in your own unique way.

In chapter 9, you will find short descriptions of real parent interactions. You will get glimpses of what they and many parents like them often do, but these write-ups are specifically designed to make you think about what you might do in similar situations. With all the parenting descriptions embodied in this book for every age, stage, and area of development, you are likely to have insight into new and different ways to handle these challenging and thought-provoking situations.

Parenting is just not easy. Even the simplest task, such as trying to figure out a way to get your child to go from point A to point B, can sometimes be overwhelming. Therefore, chapter 10, an up-to-date Q and A section about common cares and concerns, is specifically designed to help. Because of the necessity for parents to keep making so many decisions every day and all day long, these answers are packed with information relating to topics from the basic, such as as preschool, bedtime, and play, to the complicated, such as how to promote positive behavior with little ones.

Throughout the book you will see that you are the key player. There is no machine that can take your place. You are vitally needed day in and day out to handle properly the wants and needs of the little ones in your care. When even the most challenging situations arise—problems that an outsider would never know how to fix—poof, you solve it. How? Easy. You are the parent, and you know how. Find out more about this concept in the epilogue, “The Power of the Parent.”

Many conveniences have come our way in the digital age. However, none have made the process of guiding children through all their years of growth and development any quicker, easier, or less complex. As a matter of fact, the human touch, both male and female, is still exactly as important to children as it ever was.
Introduction

The first three years of life are more important than most people think. They lay the foundation for all of life to come. Surprising as this may sound, research tells us that if a child has high verbal skills by the age of three, she will likely be successful in school by age six. I pass on to you these well-researched and highly valued concepts. “An enriched early learning environment in the first three to five years sets the stage for later success in school, and it is the R, S, and T of parenting—reading, singing, and talking to young children that hold the key.” Moreover, “Of all the input young children receive in the early years, it is high-quality and high-quantity language that plays the biggest role.”

In the Far East, people plant Chinese bamboo. During the first four years, they water and fertilize the plant with seemingly little or no results. Then in the fifth year, they again apply water and fertilizer, and in five weeks’ time the tree grows ninety feet in height. Many people in Asia know this story and see it as a metaphor for personal growth and resilience. It also helps them to understand how important it is to provide an enriched early educational environment for their children in the first five years. While each book you read to your child, each song you sing, or each individual conversation that you have does not in itself make a major impact, taken all together they have great value and make a world of difference. Your child knows, and now you know too, that enriching her environment on a daily basis is exactly what is needed to give her the best start possible. Taking this important information into account, you have here in sequenced form well-researched and highly recommended activities that are geared specifically for infants, toddlers, and two-year-olds all the way up to age three.

There are five areas of development that emerge both independently and in an interactive way throughout our lifetime—cognitive, motor, social-emotional, language, and self-esteem. Each one is briefly described below. Just as we all need to eat food from each of the five food groups, so it is necessary for a child to participate in activities from each of the five areas of development. While technology can enhance learning in all of these areas, hands-on interactive play is most important. Each activity has been designed to focus on one particular area, but they all affect each other at the same time.

- **Cognitive: learning about the world**
  Through experiencing the environment in different ways, learning occurs. All of it takes place through the five senses—sight, sound, taste, touch, and smell.
• **Motor:** using large (gross) and small (fine) muscle movement in a purposeful manner
  Through gross motor movement, full body development takes place. Through fine motor muscle movement, finger and hand dexterity emerge. Gross motor and fine motor milestones are reached as large muscle and small muscle movements become self-initiated.

• **Social-emotional:** having appropriate interpersonal relationships and a growing sense of self
  Through a series of specific expanding relationships, almost like the concentric circles that form when a pebble hits a pond, a young person’s self-concept keeps emerging. First and foremost is the parent-child relationship; that starts the whole ball rolling. What parents do in an ongoing fashion as they react with excitement over each little miracle of their child’s unfolding development builds acceptance. In time, sibling relationships form and create strong allegiances. Next come the grandparent, aunt, uncle, and cousin connections that instill loyalty. Last but not least are the associations that emerge with close friends of the family and teachers, babysitters, and various caregivers. Those relationships model commitment.
  The major factor related to all of these relationships is that they provide a safe teaching environment. These people, who differ in personality, style, age, and interests, all love the child. Together they form a group that mirrors to her in a safe and protected way the variety of characteristics of people in the outside world.

• **Language:** understanding in a receptive way from listening and reading, and expressing actively by speaking and writing
  Through activities in the cognitive, motor, social-emotional, and self-esteem areas, language expertise emerges. It also arises out of specific reading, singing, and talking activities. The richer the content of language parents and others use with their little ones, and the higher the quality of language they maintain with each other in front of the children, the better a child’s language expertise will be.

• **Self-Esteem:** starting with self-awareness, it develops into self-worth
  Similar to language development, self-esteem develops from specific adult input. Here is the key—to do whatever you can make a child feel valued, needed, and important. “Please help me with . . .” and “Thank you for . . .” are perfect examples. The first sentence includes the magic word please that shows respect, and the second example has the two magic words thank you that convey appreciation. Combine please and thank you with a valued, needed, and important task, and you have a formula for creating inner strength.
  An extension of this concept is unconditional love. Parents should keep this coming no matter what happens. Back to one of those child development mantras: “What you think of your child is what she will think of herself.”

**Introduction**
A Word about the Activities

This book is designed to be a full program of activities for your child. Unlike most other early play-and-learn books, this is a prescriptive program that includes background information about each activity, how to play it, and why it is important. In addition, after each explanation, there is a short reference to research that is related to the described interactions.

The whole book can be used from the point of view of age, stage, or interest, making it ideal for use in fostering typical development, providing early intervention, and adding enrichment. In addition, while maintaining the fun and excitement that go with all general play, each activity is also designed to be individualized. With this book’s primary purpose being guidance, each chapter starts with developmental information related to that particular age and stage. All guidelines are based on averages and explained according to commonly accepted descriptions from current educational theory and research.

Although technology is likely to play a role in your child's life, it is by no means necessary at this early level. On the contrary, hands-on, interactive experiences are necessary. These are not only more meaningful to your little one than reacting to a screen, but they are also just as much fun, if not more. In addition, they are an absolute must for well-rounded, normal development. This whole play-and-learn program has been carefully designed around basic cognitive, motor, social-emotional, language, and self-esteem learning opportunities that are missing from most of the high-tech play that is so prevalent and available for young children today. While some experiences with technology are valuable, many are at the same time limiting when it comes to thinking deeply, using fingers and hands, socializing appropriately, listening and speaking, and simply feeling good about yourself from the inside out.

The activities are organized into sections by age range. Within each age range, the activities are ordered by stage of development. To select an activity, first start with the child’s age. If your child seems to be developing typically, go directly to the age-appropriate chapter. Find an activity that you think would be fun and beneficial to your child and play it together.

The milestones listed in the age ranges are the ones that are generally accepted by educators to be associated with those ages but are not restricted to them. Therefore, it is perfectly acceptable to work on milestones with your child from different age groups. If you think your child is functioning either above or below her age range, use the index (pages XX–XX) to find activities that support the appropriate milestones. Because every child is different and because each child develops at a different rate in different areas, you are likely to find some activities in one age group and other activities in a different age group.

Choosing activities by milestones is also excellent for children with special needs. Often they have functioning levels in one or more areas below their age range. If that is the case, you will easily be able to find appropriate activities without being restricted to the recommended age. In addition, if
you are working on a specific milestone and go directly to it, you can be sure that all activities suggested will be ones that will be beneficial for enhancing that particular milestone.

Even though the activities are presented by age range, most are not limited to that period of time. Many can be used over and over in the same or different ways as your baby grows. Reading books, singing songs, and playing simple games are all examples of appropriate activities for children all through the early childhood years. What will grow over time is the extent to which your child will be able to participate in the particular activities.

If you are looking to enrich or just enjoy one of the five areas of development—cognitive, social-emotional, motor, language, or self-esteem—start looking for activities in one age range. Then, if the level seems too high or too low for your child, go to that same area of development in another age range until you find a group of activities that you think will be both helpful and fun for your child.

This is a play-and-learn system. The major purpose of each activity is both playing and learning. Because these two processes go hand in hand, this guided-play program makes it easy for you to find appropriate play activities that will spur your child on toward positive development. Once you start using the activities and establish an enjoyable play routine, you are likely to experience increased parent-child bonding and a growing positive relationship with your child. These early experiences are ones that will have a lasting effect on you, your child, and on your whole parent-child relationship.
Before you embark on this wonderful world of guided play, here are four principles of parenting that I think you will especially like. Enjoy them like a little gift, and allow them to enrich your daily parenting all during your baby’s first year. If you start with them now, parenting in general will become a more effective experience now and for years to come.

- Play—Have fun!
- Act natural—Be yourself.
- Respond—Pay attention.
- Touch—Hug and hold.

Your pediatrician will get to know your child. So will your child’s babysitters, teachers, and other caregivers. However, no one will know your little one better than you. You began developing your expertise from your baby’s first day and even before. Probably you know each and every cry and what it means. They are all different: for hunger, thirst, dirty diapers, getting hurt, and needing attention. You certainly know his personality as it has been developing. Your baby is new and different from any other baby ever born, and you have the privilege to watch his uniqueness and individuality unfold each day. Others will have important input and advice for you, but always remember that you are the ones who know the best!
Birth to Three Months

The newest member of your family has just arrived. During this exciting time of introduction, keep your parent-child interactions focused on welcoming your baby. In addition, as you play, talk, and create, notice that you are setting up patterns of interaction that will last a lifetime. The task at hand is to give your baby love, attention, respect, and firm but positive guidance right from the start, and you are the exact right person to do that. Use the whole play-and-learn system to keep finding activity after activity for joyful play, much movement, and a high level of learning. Every aspect of this book has been well-researched, and this first chapter is specifically designed to either literally or figuratively open up your baby.

As you notice evidence of growth each day, be sure to express your happiness to your baby. Stay with him as much as you can so as not to miss even one little spurt of development. Keep enjoying anything and everything new. However you nurture, love, guide, support, protect, and teach your baby during these first three beginning months is exactly what your baby will love.

Build Skills with Play-and-Learn Fun

Start your play in any way that suits you. Go through by age range, chapter by chapter, or find an area that you like in one or more chapters and stick with that. You can also look over the following milestones of development and choose activities that go with ones you deem particularly appropriate for your baby for one reason or another. The index on pages XX–XX lists suggested activities for each milestone.
Introduce Cognitive Skills through the Five Senses

Rock-a-Bye Baby

Newborn babies love to look at faces, and yours is the most interesting of all. As you cradle your baby, you will note that his eyes are in the exact right position to see your face as clearly as possible.

Behind the Scenes
Sight is the major sense through which learning takes place, and eye contact is the part of this activity that creates your connection. This particular song has its own special way of connecting parents with their newborns. While most parents attribute this connection to the cradled position, now you know that what your baby sees—you—plays the biggest part.

Research Roundup
According to the National Academy of Sciences as reported on www.nationalacademyofsciences.org, solid eye contact traditionally takes place around one-and-a-half to two months of age. However, interestingly enough, according to their 2002 study in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, it can start as early as two days after birth.

Time to begin!

How to Do It

1. Hold your baby in a cradled position and make eye contact.
2. Get ready to rock him to the following words. As you sing each line and rock, move your baby with the motions as marked.

Rock-a-bye baby in the tree top. (Rock your baby)
When the wind blows, the cradle will rock. (Rock your baby)
when the bough breaks, the cradle will fall (Lower your baby)
And down will come baby, cradle and all. (Lower your baby and bring him back up)
**A Rattle**

One of the first play sounds most newborns hear is the sound of a rattle. Many rattles used to be made with opaque plastic, but now there are ones that are clear so that the baby can see what makes the sound. A soft bell and the clink of keys are also popular.

**Materials**

Rattle, keys, or a soft bell

**Behind the Scenes**

Sound is another powerful avenue for learning. Throughout the ages, parents have reached for whatever simple, soft, and appealing sounds might be available to attract their babies’ attention. They often combined items such as shells and beads to clank, jiggles, or make some kind of pleasing sound. Today’s rattles come in many different colors, sizes, and shapes and are made from a variety of materials.

**Research Roundup**

According to Penelope Leach, a leading child-development expert, in her book *Your Baby and Child: From Birth to Age Five*, each of your baby’s senses is in some kind of working order before birth, and they are all ready to go when your baby is born. There may not be much smelling or tasting in the womb, and there is probably too little friction for much sense of touch, but babies can start hearing quite well beginning at about six months of pregnancy.

**Nursing or the Bottle**

Feeding a newborn, whether by nursing or the bottle, is nature’s way of helping a parent bond with her baby. The natural nursing position brings your baby’s eyes just the right distance from your face for your baby to see you as clearly as possible. While nursing was the original form for this process and still is often a preference, the bottle is an excellent substitute. It can be used for one or more feedings a day or for all of them.

It is important to hold your baby in the traditional nursing position and to avoid bottle propping whenever possible.

**Materials**

If bottle feeding, clean bottle and nipple
Breast milk or formula

**How to Do It**

1. Take turns with the rattle, bell, or keys. First shake one and let your baby respond.
2. Encourage your baby to shake it for you to respond.
3. Switch back and forth, playing and creating interesting sounds.

1. In a cradled position, feed your baby. Enjoy the cuddling and use as much eye contact as possible.
2. Feeding times come often during these early months, and it is this frequency that creates such powerful bonding. It is also the prime opportunity for the parent to learn about the baby.
**Behind the Scenes**
Breast milk is produced from a mixture of all foods eaten by the mother and therefore does not predispose the child to preference for any specific one. As such, it lays the groundwork for openness to future taste development. Very clever on nature’s part!

**Research Roundup**
According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, human milk is the best possible food for any infant. Its major ingredients are sugar (lactose), easily digestible proteins, and fat—all properly balanced to suit your baby and protect against such conditions as ear infections, allergies, and many childhood diseases. In addition, breast milk has a perfect amount of enzymes, antibodies, and other valuable ingredients that foster baby health. Formulas approximate this amazing combination of nutrients as best as is possible in these three categories—cow’s milk, soy, and specialized combinations for infants with identified needs. Much more information about nursing and formulas can be found in the highly respected book *Caring for Your Baby and Child Birth to Age Five*.

**Cotton**
Since soft is a great texture for newborns, cotton is a natural. You probably already have cotton balls as one of your baby supplies, and the large size is best for this activity.

**Materials**
Large cotton balls

**Behind the Scenes**
Remember this old saying? People remember ten percent of what they hear, fifty percent of what they see, and ninety percent of what they experience. Touching is a huge learning mechanism. Texture books and activities are great for your baby, beginning at this time.

**Research Roundup**
According to Tiffany Field, PhD, touch from the caregiver-to-baby point of view improves health and contributes to the treatment of disease. As explained on www6.miami.edu, Dr. Field started her research in 1982 to help premature infants thrive, and then she later developed massage therapy to promote healthy weight gain for babies born early. She continues her work today as director of the Touch Research Institute at the University of Miami School of Medicine. Dr. Field formally established this unit in 1992 and is still one of the leading experts on touch therapy and baby massage today.

**How to Do It**
1. Slowly and gently open up your baby’s fist.
2. Put a cotton ball inside.
3. Observe your baby’s reaction. Your baby is likely to show pleasure from exposure to the soft texture.
Flower Scents

Newborns have a well-developed sense of smell. Stimulating that sense is not only appropriate but is also often overlooked. Use fresh flowers if they are available, but you can also substitute dried or silk flowers sprayed with nontoxic scents.

Materials
Fresh or dried flowers with a scent you enjoy
Silk flowers (optional)
Nontoxic scent (optional)

Behind the Scenes
All learning takes place through the five senses. The more senses are activated, the more powerful the learning experience. Certain smells that a person associates with a particular event can bring back specific related memories.

Research Roundup
According to smell research as reported by child development expert Penelope Leach in her book Your Baby and Child: From Birth to Age Five, babies can distinguish between smells and even have a stronger ability to do so than adults do. She explains it this way. “If a breast pad worn by his mother is put to one side of a baby’s head and a breast pad used by another mother placed on the other side, the baby will choose the mother-smell, turning his head to that side in seventy-five percent of the trials.”

How to Do It
1. Put your baby in a position in which he can comfortably see the flowers.
2. Together, smell them with playfulness and joy.
3. Observe the baby to note his reaction. If he seems not to enjoy the experience, try again another day.
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- Motor
- Social-emotional
- Language
- Self-esteem

Each activity includes instructions, necessary materials, and its research-backed benefits. Your baby will thrive as you enjoy one-on-one time together, playing and learning.

Sally Goldberg, PhD, also known as Dr. Sally, is a professor of education, author, and magazine writer. She authors a blog at www.earlychildhoodnews.net. Dr. Sally worked as an instructor of early childhood education on the adjunct faculties of Nova Southeastern University, Barry University, and the University of Phoenix. Well known for her tools and strategies for self-esteem development, she is a national conference presenter and a frequent guest on TV and radio. Dr. Sally, who grew up in White Plains, NY, has bachelor’s and master’s degrees from Cornell University and a PhD from the University of Miami.