

PLAYLOOP

The Complete Guide to Toys & Play

Ages 0–6

What to look for at every stage, grounded in guidance from the American Academy of Pediatrics, the CDC, Harvard's Center on the Developing Child, and the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission.

Swap more. Play more.

A free guide from Playloop — Barcelona's community-driven toy exchange

Why this guide exists

Every parent has stood in front of a shelf (or a search bar) wondering whether a toy is actually worth buying — or worth keeping. This guide is our attempt to answer that honestly, using guidance from the organizations that actually study child development for a living, not marketing copy from toy packaging.

It's organized by age, from birth to six years, because what a toy needs to *do* for a child changes constantly during these years. For each stage, you'll find: what's typically developing, what kind of play supports it, the toy categories that fit best, and a safety note specific to that age. At the end, you'll find a quick-reference summary table and the full list of sources, so you can go straight to the original research or guidance if you want to dig deeper.

One idea worth holding onto as you read: **the goal is never to own the most toys, or the newest ones** — it's to have the right kind of play available at the right stage. That's exactly why toy rotation and swapping work so well alongside this guide: a toy that's done its job for one child is often exactly what another child needs right now.

Two ideas that shape everything in this guide

Play is not optional extra-curricular time — it's core development. The American Academy of Pediatrics states plainly that play contributes directly to children's cognitive, physical, social, and emotional development, and has gone as far as recommending that pediatricians write parents a literal “prescription for play” at check-ups, given how much it supports healthy brain development and the parent-child bond.

Source: American Academy of Pediatrics, “The Power of Play: A Pediatric Role in Enhancing Development in Young Children,” Pediatrics, 2018 (reaffirmed 2025).

Back-and-forth interaction builds the brain — more than any single toy does. Harvard's Center on the Developing Child calls this “serve and return”: a child reaches out through babbling, a gesture, or a question, and a caregiver responds. That responsive loop, repeated often, is what actually wires strong brain architecture in the early years — which is a useful reminder that the best toy is often just one that invites you to play *together*, not one that entertains a child solo.

Source: Center on the Developing Child, Harvard University, “Serve and Return.” developingchild.harvard.edu

0–6 months

Newborn to early sitting

What's developing

In these first months, babies are developing basic sensory processing (tracking faces and objects, responding to sound and touch), early motor control (holding up their head, reaching, grasping), and the very beginnings of cause-and-effect understanding. Social smiling and back-and-forth vocal exchanges with caregivers begin here too.

Typical milestones (from CDC's Learn the Signs. Act Early.)

By 2 months, most babies calm down when spoken to or picked up, and make sounds other than crying. By 4 months, they begin to reach for and grab toys, and smile on their own to get attention. By 6 months, most babies are pulling objects to their mouth to explore them and starting to pass a toy from one hand to the other.

Source: CDC, "Learn the Signs. Act Early." Milestones by 2, 4, and 6 Months. [cdc.gov/act-early](https://www.cdc.gov/act-early)

Toy categories that fit this stage

- High-contrast or brightly colored soft toys and simple rattles for visual and sound tracking
- Soft blocks or fabric toys with different textures to grasp and mouth safely
- Simple stacking rings or soft rings for early hand-eye coordination
- Unbreakable mirrors designed for babies, for early self-recognition play
- Just as important as any toy: face-to-face time, singing, and narrating what your baby sees

Safety note: Everything in reach will end up in a baby's mouth. Under U.S. federal rules (16 C.F.R. Part 1501), toys and articles intended for children under 3 are legally required to be free of small parts that could come loose during normal use. Check size, stitching, and any small attachments (button eyes, small bows) before handing a toy to a baby this age.

6–12 months

Sitting, crawling, first words

What's developing

Mobility takes over this stage — sitting unsupported, crawling, and for many babies, pulling up to stand by 12 months. Object permanence develops (understanding that a toy still exists even when hidden), and babies start using toys more intentionally: banging, dropping, and repeating actions on purpose to see what happens.

Typical milestones (from CDC's Learn the Signs. Act Early.)

By 9 months, most babies look for objects that fall out of sight and pick up small objects using a finger-and-thumb grasp. By 1 year, most babies wave bye-bye, put an object into a container, and let go of objects without help — the foundation for real object play.

Source: CDC, "Learn the Signs. Act Early." Milestones by 9 Months and 1 Year. [cdc.gov/act-early](https://www.cdc.gov/act-early)

Toy categories that fit this stage

- Simple shape sorters and stacking cups for cause-and-effect and problem-solving
- Push toys and sturdy furniture to cruise along as they work toward standing and walking
- Board books with thick pages and simple pictures, ideal for shared reading time
- Nesting toys and simple containers to fill and dump — a favorite activity at this age
- Balls of different sizes for early rolling and throwing

Safety note: Small parts remain the top hazard at this age. Continue to avoid anything that fits inside a standard toilet-paper tube (a rough real-world proxy for the CPSC's small parts test), and check secondhand toys for battery compartments that don't screw shut securely.

1–2 years

Walking, early talking, first pretend play

What's developing

Walking (and soon running) opens up a much bigger physical world. Language is expanding fast, from single words toward short combinations. The very first sparks of pretend play appear — feeding a doll, pretending a block is a phone — alongside early problem-solving with simple puzzles and toys that have parts to manipulate (buttons, switches, knobs).

Typical milestones (from CDC's Learn the Signs. Act Early.)

By 2 years, most toddlers try using switches, knobs, or buttons on a toy, play with more than one toy at once (like putting toy food on a toy plate), kick a ball, and say short two-word phrases like “more milk.” The CDC also notes that at this age, children play alongside each other rather than together, and don't yet know how to share or take turns without help.

Source: CDC, “Learn the Signs. Act Early.” Milestones by 2 Years. [cdc.gov/act-early](https://www.cdc.gov/act-early)

Toy categories that fit this stage

- Simple shape and color puzzles (chunky pieces, 2–6 pieces)
- Push-and-pull toys, ride-on toys, and balls for kicking, rolling, and throwing
- Simple pretend-play sets: a toy phone, play food, a baby doll to feed and carry
- Large chunky building blocks for stacking towers (and knocking them down)
- Simple musical instruments — shakers, drums, bells

Safety note: This is the last age bracket fully covered by the CPSC's small-parts ban (products for children under 3 must not contain or release small parts). If you're swapping or buying secondhand for a toddler under 3, this is the single most important thing to check.

2–3 years

Running, talking in sentences, imaginative play takes off

What's developing

Vocabulary and sentence-building accelerate quickly. Imaginative play becomes much richer — assigning roles, acting out simple stories, using one object to represent another. Fine motor control improves enough for early drawing, simple puzzles with more pieces, and more independent dressing and feeding.

Typical milestones (from CDC's Learn the Signs. Act Early.)

By 30 months, many children notice when others are hurt and try to comfort them, and start to use pretend play with dolls, animals, or people. By 3 years, most children can work a toy with buttons, levers, or moving parts on their own, and start to draw circles when shown how.

Source: CDC, "Learn the Signs. Act Early." Milestones by 30 Months and 3 Years. [cdc.gov/act-early](https://www.cdc.gov/act-early)

Toy categories that fit this stage

- Dress-up clothes and simple prop boxes (a play kitchen, a doctor's kit, a toy toolbench)
- Chunky crayons and large paper for early mark-making
- Puzzles in the 4–12 piece range, and simple matching/sorting games
- Ride-on trikes or balance bikes for gross motor development
- Building sets with slightly smaller pieces (always checking age labeling first)

Safety note: Toys are no longer subject to the strict under-3 small-parts ban once labeled for age 3+, but the CPSC still requires choking-hazard warning labels on toys for children 3–6 that contain small parts, marbles, or small balls. Read the label, not just the picture on the box, especially on secondhand toys where the original packaging is long gone.

3–4 years

Preschool years, cooperative play begins

What's developing

This is when play starts to become genuinely social — taking turns, negotiating roles in pretend games, and starting to follow simple rules in games with other children. Storytelling, counting, and early letter/shape recognition often become part of play, though at very different paces for different children.

Typical milestones (from CDC's Learn the Signs. Act Early.)

By 4 years, most children can catch a large ball most of the time, use words like “first,” “then,” and “next” to talk about sequences, and draw a person with three or more body parts. Cooperative pretend play with peers — not just adults — becomes much more common in this window.

Source: CDC, “Learn the Signs. Act Early.” Milestones by 4 Years. [cdc.gov/act-early](https://www.cdc.gov/act-early)

Toy categories that fit this stage

- Board games with very simple rules (matching, turn-taking, no reading required)
- Bigger building sets and construction toys with instructions to follow
- Art supplies: scissors (child-safe), glue, stickers, simple craft kits
- Larger, more detailed pretend-play sets (play kitchens, doctor kits, tool sets)
- Balance bikes or first pedal bikes, balls, and outdoor movement toys

Safety note: As pieces get smaller (game tokens, craft beads, magnetic tiles), keep an eye on labeling for younger siblings in the house — the CPSC's warning-label requirement exists precisely because these toys are safe for a 4-year-old but not for a 2-year-old sibling who might still put things in their mouth.

4–5 years

Pre-kindergarten, rules and mastery

What's developing

Children this age increasingly want structure: games with real rules, activities with a clear goal, and a growing sense of pride in getting better at something. Fine motor skills (cutting, drawing recognizable shapes) and independence (dressing, simple chores) both take a leap forward.

Typical milestones (from CDC's Learn the Signs. Act Early.)

By 5 years, most children can count to 10 or higher, draw a person with at least six body parts, use scissors, and play games with basic rules (like duck-duck-goose or simple board games), and are increasingly interested in playing cooperatively rather than just alongside peers.

Source: CDC, "Learn the Signs. Act Early." Milestones by 5 Years. [cdc.gov/act-early](https://www.cdc.gov/act-early)

Toy categories that fit this stage

- Board games and card games with simple rule structures (matching, memory, basic strategy)
- More advanced building/construction sets with multi-step instructions
- Craft kits, simple science kits, and beginner musical instruments
- Bikes (often pedal bikes by now), scooters, and sports equipment for gross motor play
- Early reading-support games and letter/number games, if a child is showing interest

Safety note: This is a good age to start teaching kids to check for their own choking-hazard labels and understand why a toy might not be safe for a younger sibling — useful both for safety and for building the habit of caring for the toys they'll eventually pass along.

5–6 years

Early school years, mastery and social rules

What's developing

By now, most children can manage more complex games with multiple rules, enjoy competition (and need support handling losing gracefully), and increasingly prefer play that lets them show a skill or expertise — whether that's a sport, an art form, or a specific game they've gotten good at.

Typical milestones (from CDC's Learn the Signs. Act Early.)

Play at this stage increasingly resembles the building blocks of school-age friendships: structured games with peers, turn-taking, negotiation, and rule-following become the norm rather than the exception. Attention spans for a single activity also lengthen noticeably compared to the preschool years.

Source: CDC's Developmental Milestones overview, ages 2 months–5 years, and the AAP's guidance on play supporting executive function and self-regulation skill development.

Toy categories that fit this stage

- Strategy games and card games with real rule structures (won/lost outcomes, turn order)
- Advanced construction sets, art supplies, and beginner craft or science kits
- Sports equipment matched to a child's specific emerging interest
- Cooperative board games that reward teamwork rather than pure competition
- Journals or simple creative-writing prompts, for kids showing early reading/writing interest

Safety note: At this age, safety shifts from choking hazards toward age-appropriate content and rule complexity — a toy or game that's too far above or below a child's current stage tends to get abandoned quickly, which is exactly the kind of toy worth swapping onward.

Beyond age: the toy quality that matters most

Age is the biggest factor in what toy fits, but a second factor matters almost as much: whether a toy is **open-ended** or **single-use**. An open-ended toy (blocks, a doll, a set of play silks, art supplies) can become a hundred different things depending on what a child brings to it. A single-use toy (most battery-powered, single-function toys) does one thing, and once a child has done that thing a few times, interest tends to drop off fast.

This is also why open-ended toys tend to be the best candidates for swapping: they don't really “age out” the way single-use toys do. A basic set of wooden blocks is genuinely useful to a 1-year-old stacking them and a 5-year-old building elaborate structures — just in different ways.

Screens, media, and play

The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends no screen time at all before 18–24 months, apart from video-calling family members, since infants and young toddlers learn best through direct exploration and interaction rather than a screen. For ages 2–5, longstanding AAP guidance has recommended limiting screen use to about one hour a day of high-quality programming, ideally watched together with a caregiver rather than alone.

More recently, the AAP has shifted its public messaging away from a single strict number and toward a framework it calls the “5 Cs of Media Use” — focusing on the *child*, *content*, *calm*, *crowding out*, and *communication* around media, rather than a one-size-fits-all time limit. In practice, both versions of the guidance agree on the same underlying principle: screen time shouldn't crowd out the hands-on play, sleep, and face-to-face interaction that actually build a young child's brain.

Sources: American Academy of Pediatrics / HealthyChildren.org, screen time and media-use guidance; CDC “Learn the Signs. Act Early.” parent tips, Milestones by 2 Years.

A quick toy-safety checklist (especially for secondhand and swapped toys)

Swapped and secondhand toys are just as safe as new ones — as long as you check the same things a retailer's quality control would. Before a toy moves from one family to another (through Playloop or anywhere else), it's worth running through this list:

- **Small parts:** for any child under 3, make sure nothing on the toy can come loose and fit inside a standard toilet-paper tube — the rough at-home proxy for the CPSC's official small-parts test.
- **Choking-hazard labels:** for toys aimed at ages 3–6 with small parts, marbles, or small balls, check whether the toy (or its original packaging, if you still have it) carries a choking-hazard warning — and use that as guidance for which younger children shouldn't have access to it.
- **Battery compartments:** make sure covers are intact and require a screwdriver or similar tool to open, especially for toys with small button batteries.
- **Sharp edges or points:** run a hand along any broken or worn plastic edges, especially on older or heavily-used toys.
- **Strings and cords:** check that any string, ribbon, or cord attached to a toy is shorter than about 30cm, particularly for cribs, strollers, and anything a young baby could get tangled in.
- **Recalls:** for any secondhand toy, especially branded ones, a quick search of the toy's name plus "recall" takes thirty seconds and can catch a genuinely dangerous item before it reaches a child.

Sources: U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission, Small Parts and Choking Hazard Labeling FAQs (16 C.F.R. Parts 1500 & 1501).

Quick reference: toys by age at a glance

Age	Developmental focus	Toy categories	Key safety note
0–6 mo	Senses, tracking, early grasp	Rattles, soft blocks, textured toys, board books	No small parts (federal ban under 3)
6–12 mo	Object permanence, mobility	Shape sorters, push toys, nesting cups, balls	No small parts; check battery covers
1–2 yr	Walking, early pretend play	Chunky puzzles, ride-ons, simple pretend sets	Small-parts ban still applies (under 3)
2–3 yr	Language, imaginative play	Dress-up, art supplies, 4–12pc puzzles, trikes	Check choking-hazard labels from age 3
3–4 yr	Cooperative play, storytelling	Simple board games, building sets, craft kits	Watch small pieces around younger siblings
4–5 yr	Rules, mastery, independence	Games with rules, construction sets, bikes	Teach kids to check labels themselves
5–6 yr	Structured play, social rules	Strategy games, sports gear, advanced kits	Shift focus to content/complexity fit

A note on how to actually use this table

Treat these age ranges as a compass, not a rulebook. The CDC is explicit that its milestones reflect what most children (75% or more) can do by a certain age — not a pass/fail test for any individual child. If your child is between two brackets, it's usually safest to look at the younger bracket's guidance, especially for safety-related notes like small parts.

Sources & further reading

This guide draws directly on publicly available guidance from the following organizations. We've linked to the specific pages we used so you can read further in your own time.

Ginsburg, K.R., and the AAP Committee on Communications & Committee on Psychosocial Aspects of Child and Family Health. "The Importance of Play in Promoting Healthy Child Development and Maintaining Strong Parent-Child Bonds." *Pediatrics*, 119(1), 182–191, 2007. publications.aap.org/pediatrics

Yogman, M., Garner, A., Hutchinson, J., Hirsh-Pasek, K., Golinkoff, R.M.; AAP Committee on Psychosocial Aspects of Child and Family Health. "The Power of Play: A Pediatric Role in Enhancing Development in Young Children." *Pediatrics*, 142(3), e20182058, 2018 (reaffirmed 2025). publications.aap.org/pediatrics

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. "Learn the Signs. Act Early." Developmental Milestones (checklists for 2 months–5 years, last reviewed 2026). cdc.gov/act-early/milestones

Center on the Developing Child, Harvard University. "Serve and Return" and "Brain Architecture" key concept pages. developingchild.harvard.edu

U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission. "Small Parts and Choking Hazard Labeling FAQs" and 16 C.F.R. Parts 1500 & 1501. cpsc.gov/FAQ/Small-Parts-and-Choking-Hazard-Labeling-FAQs

American Academy of Pediatrics / HealthyChildren.org. Screen time and media-use guidance, including the "5 Cs of Media Use" framework. healthychildren.org

This guide is for general information and doesn't replace individual guidance from your child's pediatrician or healthcare provider, especially if you have any concern about your child's development. If something in this guide doesn't match what you're seeing with your own child, your child's doctor is always the right first call.

One more thing

Every toy in this guide eventually gets outgrown — and that's a good thing, not a problem to solve alone. Playloop is a community-driven way for families to swap the toys their kids have grown past for toys they need right now, starting with the communities you already trust: your school, your ludoteca, your neighborhood.

Swap more. Play more.

[Join the waitlist at playloop.com](https://playloop.com) — Barcelona, 2026