



play smart

There's no magical toy that will turn your tot into a genius. But you can pick playthings that boost your baby's development at every stage.

BY MEGAN MATTES
PHOTOGRAPHS BY ALEXANDRA GRABLEWSKI

0-3
MONTHS

Eat, sleep, poop, and repeat!

True, that's how your newborn spends most of his day. But he's also getting acquainted with his surroundings through touch, hearing, and smell. "Add a few simple, washable toys in with activities like singing and rocking to help develop his senses," says Stevanne Auerbach, Ph.D., author of *Dr. Toy's Smart Play Smart Toys*.

BEST BETS

■ **UNBREAKABLE MIRROR** Since your baby can't move much, he's exploring the world around him with his eyes, even though his vision is still blurry. He's also developing a sense of self, which makes staring at faces especially interesting. Hold a toy mirror, and make silly faces, blow raspberries, or move around in it to engage him.

■ **HIGH-CONTRAST PLAYTHINGS** Toys in contrasting colors not only provide visual stimulation, they also improve motor skills by encouraging kicking, wiggling, and arm waving as your baby reaches for the vibrant object. Pick playthings that combine black-and-white patterns (such as stripes and polka dots) with bright colors.

■ **SOFT TOYS** Plush dolls and rattles that have varied textures, crinkling fabric, vivid colors, and squeakers can provide a stimulating multisensory experience for your little one.

Wimmer Ferguson
Mind-Shapes, \$22;
manhattantoy.com

3-6
MONTHS

Everything looks like a toy to your baby.

As your child's vision improves, she can focus accurately and track objects with her eyes. She's also learning to sit up and can purposefully grasp for things, which means she will want to touch (and taste) everything. Don't be surprised if she becomes vocal now when she plays.

BEST BETS

■ **PLAYMAT** Tummy time is crucial to strengthening your baby's muscles. Go with a playmat that has plenty of toys hanging overhead to tempt her to lift her neck, reach her arms up, and work on her hand-eye coordination. It should also include a mirror, different fabrics, and rattles or squeakers to keep her active.

■ **SOFT BOOKS** Your baby is becoming fascinated with language, so there's no better time to introduce soft books, which are easier for little hands to grasp. Look for ones with bright colors, varied textures, and liftable

flaps. "Make sure you turn storytime into an interactive experience," says Jennifer Fogo, Ph.D., a pediatric occupational therapist at the University of Indianapolis, in Indiana. Point out pictures and repeat names ("Dog," "Baby.") to help develop motor and early language skills as well as boost social interaction.



Lil' Lion's Happy
Hangout Activity
Gym from Infantino,
\$35; target.com



6-9
MONTHS

It's all about exploration!

"Expect your baby to have his hands in everything, thanks to his budding fine motor skills," says Kendra Ransom, a pediatric occupational therapist at the Children's Hospital of Denver. He'll like to clap his hands, bang objects together, and grab furniture to help himself stand.

BEST BETS

■ **PLAY SAUCER** Between 4 and 6 months, your child has the proper head and neck control for a stationary play center. Most have several toys that spin, flip, and make noise when your kid grabs or pushes them. These activities help build hand-eye coordination, dexterity, and even leg strength as he stands and sits in it. But try to limit use to 20 minutes at a time and avoid baby jumpers, which can cause a walking imbalance by putting weight on the toes instead of the heels.

■ **STACKING TOYS** Blocks, cups, and rings that stack are great for any age, but kids reap the most benefit between 6 and 12 months. At first, your child will just bang them together or knock them down when you set them up. Closer to 12 months, he'll learn to stack and nest them himself. These toys may seem simple, but your baby will pick up on spatial relationships and size and color differences while playing with them.

■ **PLASTIC CONTAINERS** You may have let your baby play with kitchen containers to keep him busy while you're cooking, but they're actually good for his development too. He'll get a kick out of putting objects in and pulling them out, and these actions will improve motor skills, introduce spatial concepts, and create an awareness that some things actually fit together.

Haba Color Tower
Stacking Game,
\$25; oompa.com

STYLING BY KRISTEN PETLISKI. GROOMING BY CHRIS NEWBURG FOR J. BENNETT REPRESENTS.

9-12
MONTHS

One word to describe this age? Busy!

Your curious, energetic kid is pulling herself up, crawling around, or learning to walk (and, in some cases, climb!). She's also attempting her first words and can follow simple directions. The best toys during these active months are those that encourage movement and exploration.

BEST BETS

■ **MUSICAL TOYS** Babies love music and even begin to dance. (Is anything cuter?) As your child approaches her first birthday, she can shake her head, move her arms, and bob up and down to her favorite songs. She'll dig electronic toys that play tunes like "Old MacDonald," but she'll probably have even more fun making her own music with kid maracas and drums. Test an electronic toy's volume in the store—if it's too loud for you, then it definitely is for your baby.

■ **PUSH-TOYS** These playthings offer your child support when she's taking her first steps. Whether it's a pretend car or a shopping cart, the best models come with knobs, buttons, or other activities that let her practice both her gross and fine motor skills. Make sure the push-toy is sturdy and has some resistance so it doesn't slide out from under her when she's trying to walk.

■ **BALLS** Simple ball games help improve hand-eye coordination, balance, and muscle strength. Encourage your kid to squat down and pick up a ball or throw it to you. You can also have her sit on the floor with you and roll it back and forth. As she grows, you'll be able to do even more.



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PlanToys Baby
Walker, \$65;
amazon.com