



# child's play

In addition to being fun, peekaboo and other playtime games have brain-boosting powers, writes *Marie Teather*.

**P**laying peekaboo with a baby or toddler comes naturally to most of us. It's simple, fun, you use anything on hand, and our babies love it. Yet, beyond the fun, there are also important developmental benefits to playing this kind of seemingly innocent game.

"To a parent, what may seem like play is learning to a baby," says Priscilla Ip Pui-see, director of Shichida Hong Kong, an early learning organisation that focuses on whole brain development. "It helps them develop an understanding of the world around them."

"With peekaboo, for example, you are teaching your baby you are still there," says Priscilla. "At around three to four months, babies start to learn that objects and people don't just magically appear or disappear. Peekaboo teaches them that objects can exist even if they can't see them."

Games stimulate a baby so she can make connections with the environment and people around her. These early experiences provide the basis of the brain's organisational development as a baby grows, explains Etta Hiang Lee, principal of SPRING, an early childhood activity and education centre. "It's through play that different skills are developed and

refined, including problem solving, concentration span, and language, social and fine motor skills."

With this in mind, easy-to-set-up games can be adapted at home into a daily practice of "educated play".

#### Play to learn

Present your baby with a new toy to play with and immediately she starts to learn the new texture, its function, weight, noise and how it moves through space. Sensory information enters baby's brain at every moment, not only from the eyes and ears, but also by movement and how the toy causes the baby to move her body.

It's this understanding of how psychomotor skills are highly stimulated through play and movement that led Anne Knecht-Boyer, a special education and psychomotor skill therapist from Montreal, to launch a PEKiP school in Hong Kong.

PEKiP (*Prager Eltern Kind Programm*, or Prague Parent-Infant Program) is a child development programme aimed at facilitating the development of babies in the first year, through play and movement.

"Being in a pushchair or carrier all the time isn't enough to nourish your baby's brain," Anne says. "But



# Game on

Try these games to stimulate little brains.

## Ages six weeks to three months

At this stage, mastering head and neck control is fundamental to the balance, posture and coordination that develop later. Lay your baby down and move a toy from one side of his head to the other, allowing your baby to track the toy with his eyes and move his head.

## Ages three to six months

Babies start to understand the concept of quantity with an adapted game of peekaboo. Take three or four toys and hide one under a blanket. Ask baby, "Where did the car go?" before excitedly revealing it under the blanket. Next, hide two, three and four of the toys under the blanket. While this game is not to teach them how to count yet, it will teach that one of something is not the same as three. It also works to improve their memory skills.

## Ages six to nine months

Babies at this stage love to create noise. Banging different objects together teaches different sound effects, as well as builds upon the concept of cause and effect: when she hits an object hard, it makes a loud sound, and a gentle hit makes a soft sound. Use household objects such as pans, wooden spoons, plastic storage containers and sandpaper to introduce different textures and sizes.

## Ages nine to 12 months

Introduce a simple obstacle course with cushions and toys to encourage your baby to crawl under, over, around and through objects. The changes in movement will stimulate her nervous system, teach her how to work her body around gravity, and increase muscle and bone strength.

## Ages one to two years

As your baby really starts to get mobile, move and dance around the room together and individually to various types of music, from jazz to pop, classical and ballroom. Then progress into more complicated moves that she can copy. Also, let her take the lead and show you how to move to the music!

the more you play with a baby, the more he wants to play, and playing is learning because everything is new for a baby."

At PEKiP, babies are laid naked on a towel on the floor to encourage a sense of freedom and movement. During a typical session, toys and objects will be placed at locations around the baby, depending on her developmental stage, to encourage her body to adapt to different physical challenges and gain control of her body. Each session works towards a specific goal and includes rest breaks, rhythmic movement to work on muscle tone and coordination, and baby massage – all of which can easily be practised at home.

Even when a baby is too small to stay on her tummy for long, colourful balls can be rolled along the floor or squeaky toys can be moved slowly

above her face from one side to the other to encourage visual tracking and neck and upper back control.

Demita Yu has two children: her youngest followed an educated play programme at PEKiP and at home from two months old, and her eldest didn't. "At the same age, my youngest is stronger and socially more interactive," she says. "It [following a play programme] helped me to become more confident as a parent and we could involve Daddy. It was great for him to become more involved with our games."

Over at a Kindermusik class, led by Lorraine Cook, the emphasis is similarly on teaching parents how to create fun learning opportunities at home. "Kindermusik is very much for the parents," says Lorraine. "We teach them how to put music into their children's lives."

"It's amazing how many ways there are to put music into a baby's world: anything can become a drum, you can make a guitar out of a tissue box and rubber bands, you can bang along to the beat when reading a book, or you can tap on a glass of water then a cup to produce different sounds."

## Lead the charge

So just how do we develop playtime games into education? Etta from SPRING says that the best time to engage in an activity is when your baby is alert and rested.

"A baby and toddler's brain is most active after they wake up in the morning or [from an] afternoon nap," she says. "Make sure your baby is fed and her nappy changed. Turn off any background music that might interfere with her ability to concentrate and keep the sessions in short spurts of ten to 15 minutes."

Of course, until babies and toddlers are able to clearly communicate their thoughts, it can be difficult, and at times discouraging, to understand how much a baby is taking in.

Until the age of two there is little communicative output, but leading to this point a baby's development comes from a variety of informative input. As Priscilla explains, "It's a lot like planting a carrot. You have to apply sunlight and water, then trust it to flourish."

Still, is there such a thing as pushing a baby too hard? Priscilla thinks there can be. "It depends on how intense the parent is. Sleep is hugely important and if you are interrupting your baby's sleep schedule, it might be an indicator you are overdoing it." And if your child is animated and engaged? Keep playing! 