

Toys and play for young deaf children



The importance of play

Being the parent of a deaf child can be tough, especially for those with no experience of deafness (more than 90% of deaf children are from families with no first-hand experience of deafness).

There's a lot of information to get to grips with, as well as coping with the emotions of your child being diagnosed as deaf.

It's challenging trying to find time in busy lives for rewarding and constructive playtime and some parents feel daunted by this. Although research and experience tells us that it's parents who contribute most to their child's support and achievements you don't have to be there all the time.

One-to-one time is good, even making time to sit down with your child for a few minutes a day, away from distractions, will be a big help. Just try to turn every activity into a chance to learn through play – make it part of everyday life so that it becomes 'the norm'.

Playing with your child is important for developing bonds and encouraging communication skills. However, playing alone is also important

for creativity, self-esteem and imagination so don't feel you have to be involved in every minute of your child's play – you can just enable it to happen.

Everyone in your child's life can play a part including grandparents, brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles and the childminder. It all adds up to extra playtime from many people close to your deaf child – creating strong beneficial relationships. They are likely to be grateful to receive tips on how to play and get to know your child, and may give you a well deserved break.

The most important thing is allowing time for your child to play.

Why play is more than just fun

Play has important developmental benefits for all children. Research shows

that play encourages children to improve their physical, mental, social and emotional abilities. These four main developmental areas can be broken down into smaller areas of skill development such as:

- gross motor skills (using large muscle groups such as arms and legs)
- fine motor skills (using precise muscle groups such as face and fingers)
- stamina
- social skills (such as taking turns and building communication ability)... and many more!

To learn more about the developmental benefits of play visit www.maketime2play.co.uk.



The development of effective communication and language skills is particularly important for learning, as well as social and emotional development. This includes sharing experiences, expressing ourselves, listening, the ability to negotiate, healthy self-esteem, the ability to empathise and the development of good relationships. Most of life in fact!

**LOOK OUT FOR THIS SYMBOL!**

Toys with this symbol contain small parts that could be swallowed. They should only be given to children over 3 years or of a more advanced development.

Tips for getting the most out of playtime

- Games and activities should be short enough to hold your child's concentration – take regular breaks as concentrating is tiring, especially for a child who lipreads.
- Whenever possible, make sure play takes place in a good listening environment. This means somewhere quiet (where background noise is at a minimum), with soft furnishings to help acoustics. Choose a well lit place so your child can clearly see your face and with no distractions.
- Always try to use gestures and, if possible, signs to back up speech.
- Try to play with your child when you are most likely to get their full attention and always gain their attention before you expect them to listen. Give your child a specific focus to listen out for, for example, stories with a repeating phrase will hold their attention. Give your child a prop to join in with at a particular point in a story or rhyme.
- Activities should present a challenge, but should not be too advanced for their level of development. If a game is too easy, they may get bored. If it is too hard, they may become frustrated and give up.
- Play games and activities that allow your child to maintain eye contact with you, as this will make communication easier.
- Give praise throughout the activity and try to end it on a positive note. Acknowledging your child's efforts and the things that they have done will build up their confidence and encourage them to try again next time.
- If you feel that you are not making progress, don't give up. Try a different approach or take a break.
- Just about every part of your daily routine can be made into play – bath time, mealtimes, car journeys, bus rides or going shopping. Encourage games and play that help your child to mimic or understand real life situations.

Always be on the lookout for fun games that encourage verbal or non-verbal communication skills.

Top Tip

The three Rs – rhyme, rhythm and repetition

- **Rhyme** – singing poems and nursery rhymes is a fun way for children to practise controlling their voices, both in terms of volume and frequency (otherwise known as 'pitch' e.g. high or low pitched sounds), and in recognising the melody of intonation in spoken language.
- **Rhythm** – any kind of rhythmic play can help your child by giving the foundation of the rhythms that will be needed to develop language skills e.g. drums, pat-a-cake and clapping.
- **Repetition** – include favourite songs and rhymes in every play session to help children reinforce the rhyme and rhythm of speech and improve auditory memory (the ability to take in information that is presented out loud, process it, retain it and then recall it).

Toys and games

- You don't need special toys for deaf children – everyday toys and games that hearing children play with are just as good.
- Look for toys that are appropriate for your child's age and level of development (look for age warnings and recommendations), and toys that also help them to learn new things and to develop new skills.
- Toys with a purpose may help your child to understand different concepts (for example, where a child pushes a button and the toy moves or a light flashes).
- Toys which produce noises may help your child learn about different sounds and help develop their listening skills – including awareness, attention, discriminating between sounds, and recognising sounds and sound sources.
- Toys that have an interesting texture, feel nice to touch or are attractive (such as those with bright colours or flashing lights) may be especially engaging.
- Building blocks, rhythmic toys/instruments, stacking toys and soft sensory toys should be staples in the toy box.
- Most of all, toys should be fun for your child.





Research shows there is a link between playing with toy building blocks and the development of language skills. It is thought that the physical act of building blocks develops the part of the brain that literally builds the communication blocks of language.

Play ideas to get you started

- Point to objects as you go through your day, name them, sign them, make up a silly rhyme about them, sing nursery rhymes and do actions to match. Every part of your day can be transformed from mundane routine into playtime – describing, having fun, repeating, making funny faces, and making signs.
- Drawing games e.g. finger painting and drawing in the sand and on blackboards can help develop hand-eye coordination. It can also help in learning how to express different emotions and understand what might lead to them.
- Sensory play – water-based games, sand pits, modelling clay, games involving different textures, tastes or smells e.g. smelling or tasting different fruit and vegetables and guessing what they are.
- If you have 30 minutes at home, for example, on the rug, or at bedtime – story-tell with speech, sign and gesture, using visual memory clues such as photos, pictures and objects to prompt recall, or choose one of the ‘listening games’ below.
- If you have 10 minutes to play, for example, in a hospital waiting room – develop auditory memory by playing memory games, for example ‘I went shopping and bought...’
- Encourage active play, particularly outdoors to get children fit and build up confidence in the world around them.

Rhythmic play

- Make musical shakers from empty plastic bottles filled with rice grains or dried pasta shapes. Decorate them with paint or coloured paper.
- Children love to bang. A wooden spoon on a box makes a good noise.

Noisy play

- Mouth organs, castanets, tambours, an empty plastic bottle to blow into, cardboard tubes from kitchen foil or

similar all make excellent trumpets, rattles and toy car horns.

- Toy animals are always popular. Make the animal noises with your own voice. Children particularly enjoy the lion that roars and the mouse that squeaks.

Communication games

- Make simple little finger puppets with scraps of material and then draw different faces on each finger, all showing different emotions. When you hold a finger up copy the emotion, like sad, happy, and angry – it will end in giggles!
- An alternative to the idea above – make puppets using wooden spoons and bits of leftover fabric and draw different expressions on each puppet.
- In role play sessions encourage children to control their voices by making them sound different. Be a character with a deep voice. Try different voices, gestures or facial expressions to denote: happy, sad, angry, etc.
- Some toys or props could encourage vocalisation, such as phones that need answering, echo microphones, or a knock at the door. Ask or sign ‘Who’s there?’ and role play the visitor.
- Play peek-a-boo with very young children, using lots of facial expressions.
- Turn speech and language therapy practice into a game by using a large mirror – it will help with ‘th’ and ‘f’ sounds by enabling your child to see what your mouth, lips and tongue are doing. Show them how to distinguish between ‘p’ and ‘b’ sounds using your breath against the mirror and with your hands in front of your mouths to see and feel the difference.

Listening games

Much of learning is based on listening, so it’s important to help develop auditory attention skills (the ability to focus on specific sounds and make sense of them)

and concentration. Severely or profoundly deaf children will always need some degree of visual support provided by lipreading or signing, for example.

- Choose the right sound: match musical instruments to their sound.
- Musical statues – respond when the sound stops.
- Waiting games in response to a voice: ‘Ready, steady... GO!’
- Games with instructions like ‘Simon Says’.
- Games with rules that require careful listening because nobody wants to miss their turn or lose the game if they don’t follow the instruction properly.
- Picture card games or board games that use repetitive rules and a visual focus so that a deaf child can begin to overhear without having to look up.
- Arrange a selection of toys or everyday objects (e.g. a spoon, a biscuit, a sock etc.) in front of your child, get them to look at you as you say the word of one of the items – now encourage them to guess which item you referred to. To keep score for each correct guess, let them choose a coloured glass bead/counter/sweet to add to a pot.

Signing games

- Sing songs like ‘Row your boat’ and sign key words, for example ‘crocodile’ or ‘scream’, while encouraging your child to join in and sign with you.
- Play a matching game, using photos of objects or facial expressions (happy, sad, scared, angry etc.) cut out from magazines, then sign a word and ask your child to choose a matching photo.
- Play ‘I spy’ with signing.
- Have a game of ‘Chinese Whispers’ with no voice for lipreading practice, or with signing.



Digital playtime ideas

Websites and downloadable apps for computers, touch-screen tablets and phones can provide fun ways to help your child develop new skills, including interactive stories, matching games and dressing up characters.

To find out more about the latest fun apps that could help your child, including a wide range specifically aimed at early years skills development, go to www.ndcs.org.uk/apps.

The Make Time 2 Play app gives hundreds of free play ideas and is free to download. Visit www.maketime2play.co.uk for more information.

It is important to check that any software is suitable and doesn't rely on sounds that your child will not be able to hear. If your child has some hearing, they may benefit from using a direct audio input lead with their hearing aids or cochlear implant – your audiologist or Teacher of the Deaf can give advice on this.

Reading together

Reading can have a positive effect on your child's development and help them to find out about (and imagine) different ideas and people, as well as realising that other people have feelings and thoughts distinct from their own. These are important for good communication and social development. Reading may also help to increase your child's concentration and improve their writing.

- Remember to make sure your child can clearly see your face and the book – it may help to prop the book up in front of your child and try looking over the top (you will probably become an expert at reading upside down!).
- Establish good eye contact to help keep their attention. If you don't use British Sign Language (BSL), try using gestures to demonstrate the story, and facial expressions to help show characters' emotions.
- Keep reading fun, for example introduce props (put together a story sack for each favourite book), pull funny facial expressions and dress up as characters.
- Encourage them to read the characters' emotions by looking at their expressions.

Further information



The National Deaf Children's Society is the leading charity dedicated to creating a world without barriers for deaf children and young people.

We estimate there are more than 45,000 deaf children in the UK. We use the term 'deaf' to refer to **all types of hearing loss or impairment** from mild to profound. This includes deafness in one ear or temporary deafness such as glue ear.

We provide free targeted, timely information to support you at every stage of your deaf child's life.

For information and practical support on issues related to your child's deafness, take a look at our website: www.ndcs.org.uk or contact the National Deaf Children's Society Freephone Helpline on **0808 800 8880**, email us at helpline@ndcs.org.uk or contact us via Live Chat at: www.ndcs.org.uk/livechat.

NDCS is a registered charity in England and Wales No. 1016532 and in Scotland no. SC040779



The **Make Time 2 Play** campaign's overall aim is to promote the value that play has in children's lives whilst encouraging and helping parents to find fun and innovative ways to incorporate more playtime into their daily schedules.

Play ideas can be found on our website: www.maketime2play.co.uk, through our Facebook and twitter pages, and our mobile app.

