

# How to Start A Play Group

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Babysitting co-ops are fairly common and a boost to families who want to receive and give support. They also provide a very economical childcare option. Here is another idea to consider for parents of young children.

When our youngest daughter, Katie was 18 months old, two friends and I created a Play Group. Mabel was mother to Eric while Dawna was mother to Sarah. There was only a couple months difference in the children's ages. We agreed to a number of mutually satisfying goals. We all wanted:

- Some time and space to ourselves.
- A flexible, economical and informed support system.
- A safe, nurturing and stimulating environment in which to regularly leave our children.

How did we accomplish these goals? We established the following guidelines:

1. The children would be together every Tuesday and Thursday morning from nine am until noon.
2. We would rotate locations with the homeowner responsible for the caregiving. On Tuesday it would be at my home, Thursday at Mabel's, the following Tuesday at Donna's and so on. It was wonderful to know that you would have two mornings for errands or rest on a regular basis.
3. When we were on duty our total focus would be the three children.
4. A loose program would be provided. Each morning would include a story time, music, outdoor play, exploration with creative materials and lots of supervised but spontaneous play.
5. The "free" parent would return right at noon.
6. It would be optional if all six of us joined in to have a mutual lunch. This happened frequently and we began to function as an extended family.

Our Play Group served us well for nearly two years. When we enrolled our three-year-old children at the same pre-school program, they had instant friends. We continued to meet on a less frequent basis but the extended family feeling continued.

Should you decide to form a play group here are some activity tips.

## Activity Tips

### Routines:

Establish routines such as washing hands, snack, story time, play time, tidy up time, outdoor time and time to go home.

### Books

- Have a variety of picture books available. The library is a great resource.

- Expect young children to want a favourite story to be read over and over again.
- Read when children ask and at specific times, particularly when you are winding down the session.
- Point to words as you read them. That way they will learn that you are not reacting from the pictures and those marks on the page mean something.
- Allow time for discussion and finger pointing as children name what they can see in the picture books.
- Create themes. After reading about a farm, bring out a basket of farm animals to incorporate into play with Duplo or building blocks.

## **Toys**

- Avoid using a toy box. Items at the bottom are at risk of being damaged at worst and not played with at best. Shelves work much better. Keep toys on low, accessible shelves.
- Remove most toys to a storage area and each session display a different variety for excitement and pleasure.
- Near the toy shelves place a good sized, child height table and chairs for table toys such as small blocks, nesting cups, toy animals, felt board with shapes, games like Memory and puzzles.
- Be cautious about battery operated toys. Choose toys that have many possibilities and require the child to problem solve or be creative. Crayons, Duplo (for younger children) and Lego (for older ones) are at the top of the list.

**Note about puzzles:** borrow them from a toy lending library if possible. Toddlers benefit from the hand eye coordination of using wood puzzles with very few pieces. Once they can put simple ones together they will be ready for more complicated puzzles. The trick with puzzles is if they are too complicated the child will feel frustrated but if too easy will find it is boring. Puzzles need to be developmentally matched to the child.

## **Scribbling, Drawing and Painting**

- Using the child size table provide opportunities for children to discover their abilities with a variety of materials.

Avoid "craft" books and projects that require copying. Let children explore possibilities with different coloured paper, cardboard, crayons, washable markers, oil pastels, chalk and paint. **Hint:** take a man's short sleeved shirt and put it on the children backwards for a paint cover-up. If developmentally ready include handle glue, sparkles, magazines and scissors.

## **Imitation and Dress-up**

- Children love to play grownup. If you do have a toy box it would be best used to store a variety of fun clothes. Other items for dramatization include play dishes, two telephones, a doll, child's broom, puppets, doll house, and play tent.
- Ideally hang a mirror that is low and nearby.

## **Music and Movement**

- Play their favourite Raffy, Fred Penner or “Sharon, Lois and Bram” songs.
- Play the Beatles (or am I dating myself?) and dance.
- Dance with scarves.
- Add some pot lids and spoons for a band.
- Sing nursery rhymes and other silly songs.
- Learn some finger plays such as *Head and Shoulders*. Check the library or the Internet for finger plays.

### **Water Play or Sand Play**

Provide water in a Tupperware pan or bin with bath play items. In a container of sand or coloured rice you can add shovels, sieves and plastic figures such as dinosaurs or farm animals.

### **Large Muscle**

1. Provide opportunities to pull, push, climb, jump, crawl, roll and tumble--whether you have equipment or offer a box with a rope attached and several boxes to crawl through.
2. Outside ideas may include a climbing gym, small slide, balance board, wading pool, snow shovel, toboggan, trike, wagon, wheelbarrow or a variety of balls..
3. Go to the nearby playground.

### **Involvement**

- Have 15 minutes of *Child Directed Play* where the children tell you how to act and what to do within the realm of safe and healthy participation.
- Get on the floor and enjoy yourself.

Books such as *Learning Through Play* by Jean Marzollo and Janice Lloyd provide many more activity ideas from inspiring the five senses to language development, creativity and self esteem.

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