

Everyday learning about



Imagination

Lyn Bower

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About the author

Lyn Bower

Lyn Bower has been involved in early childhood for over 30 years as an educator in a variety of settings from preschool to university.

Lyn believes it is important for children's development to create early childhood environments that encourage and support children's imagination, creativity and a sense of wonder.

With a strong sense of imagination and creativity, children will become confident problem solvers with abilities above average. Imagination and creativity can be nurtured at home—in fact it is the best place to start. Both adults and children will benefit from the experience, especially if it is playful and with a sense of fun and good humour.

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The *Everyday learning* series has been developed to focus attention on the everyday ways in which children can be supported in their growth and development. It is for all those who are involved in children's development and learning, including people caring for young children in their own or others' homes, such as parents, grandparents and those with an ongoing responsibility for young children.

The first years of life are the foundation for all later growth, development and learning.

- Early experiences set the pattern for all later learning.
- Early experiences and relationships affect how children feel about themselves, how they get on with other people and how they join in and enjoy life.
- Every experience has an impact. Babies and young children are learning all the time, regardless of whether we think we are 'teaching' them.

Research has shown that a strong foundation in these years starts children on the pathway to:

- being able to relate confidently and effectively with others;
- mental and emotional health; and
- making the most of each child's abilities in education.

Adults provide responsive and sensitive care, a safe and interesting place to be and follow children's lead in providing things they like to do ... children and adults learn together.

Babies and young children are learning all the time.

This research also shows us what kinds of experiences and relationships babies and young children need, to get the best start for living and learning.

What matters is how they are learning and what they are learning. Learning takes place in relationships. If the earliest relationships are warm and loving, babies and young children have the best chance to make the most of the opportunities in their worlds.

To learn best they need parents and carers (their first teachers) who:

- are warm and caring;
- know each baby or child very well and appreciate what is special about them;
- take time to understand the child's messages (cues) and to respond to them with encouragement, praise, comfort, independence and rest as needed; and
- are able to see, share and celebrate the big and small joys and achievements of the children in their care.

There is no set list of things to teach babies and young children.

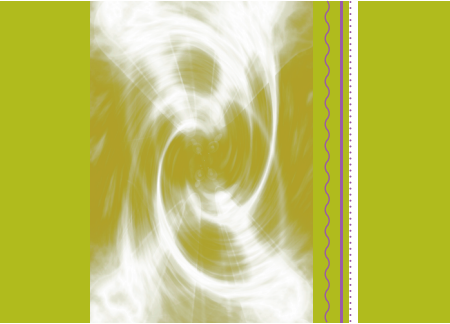
Living is learning and children learn through living. These books are a guide to how young children learn and how best to help them at the different stages of early childhood. All children and babies have their own abilities and interests.

Adults watch and listen and provide opportunities and support to build on each child's strengths. Babies and children also come from family and cultural backgrounds that are part of the way they are and need to be included in their experiences.

Think left and think right
and think low and think
high.

Oh, the things you can
think up if only you try!

Dr Seuss (Geisel, 1975)



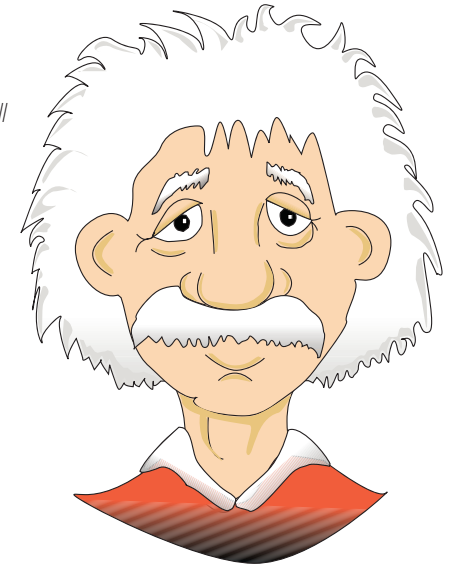
Introduction

Albert Einstein is probably one of the best-known personalities in the world today. He was known primarily as a scientist and is often portrayed as the 'mad scientist', with his wild and woolly hair, and sometimes a larger than average head. This was no doubt to show how intelligent he was.

But what does Einstein have to do with early childhood or children, or about the way we think about imagination and creativity? He actually knew a lot about people (as well as science) and cared deeply for them. He had a sense of humour and a childlike approach in his search for knowledge. Over the years he received many letters from children and, in responding to them, encouraged their natural inquisitiveness. Einstein believed imagination, playful investigation and self-belief in their ability plays an essential part in developing children's skills. He once said,

Imagination is more important than knowledge. For while knowledge defines all we currently know and understand, imagination points to all we might yet discover and create. (Rosenkranz, 1998)

But how do you encourage imagination? What do you need to provide for children? They won't all be like Einstein, but we do want them to develop to their full potential. We want them to develop an interest in learning, reading, exploring and discovering the world around them. We want them to have an interest in music, the arts and technology, and in whatever the future holds for them.



Where do we start?

Ideally, we start during pregnancy. Pregnant women should try to eat well, have regular exercise, make sure they sleep well and be as relaxed as possible during their pregnancy. This can be difficult, especially if there are other children in the family, if the woman is working, or if they are in other stressful situations. But it is worth making the effort.

The latest research in brain development tells us that what happens in the first few years of a child's life is very important, and has a significant impact on their ability to learn and achieve. Today's technology gives researchers a far greater ability to see how the brain develops even before birth. They can see the structure of the brain, how it responds to different experiences and how it uses energy.

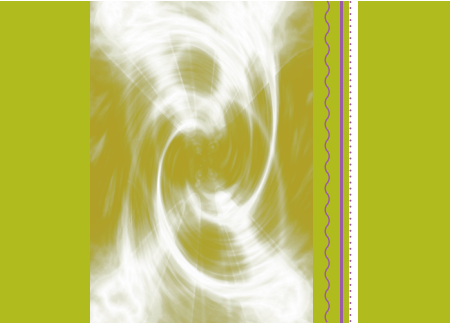
The brain is made up of a network of millions of neurons (nerves). In order to develop fully, these neurons need to make connections with each other. The connections are made through the child's experiences, nutrition and physical conditions. This experience is unique; it is not possible for any two brains to grow and develop in the same way. This explains the differences in some families where children share much the same experience but have entirely different personalities and temperaments.

Things to do for all children to support the development of imagination

All children must feel secure in their environment if they are to grow and develop to their full potential. Children need to feel unconditionally wanted and loved.

Families, carers and teachers need to build feelings of trust, security and mutual respect. Current brain research emphasises the importance of children living in a stress-free environment if they are to grow and develop well.





Children need adults around them who will encourage and support new ways of approaching problems and problem-solving—adults who will accept original ideas and allow children to try out these ideas, even when knowing that they might fail. In fact, children will often learn more about themselves and ‘the problem’ when they do fail, as long as the adults offer genuine support and allow the children to think or work through the problem, rather than telling them what to do or solve it for them.

Adults need to allow children to learn to make decisions by giving them choices. Choices about what to wear, what to do next, what books to read or what games to play etc. Children also need to understand what their choices mean. As with most things with children, start slowly. Start with a couple of choices so the whole process doesn't become overwhelming for both children and parents.

Children need to learn about things that are important to them at the time. Attempting to learn reading and writing or other formal subjects before they have the necessary skills will only cause problems and discourage children from learning. Formal work should not be attempted until the child is at school. This is not to say that some children are not developmentally ready earlier, but as a general rule this is not the case. It is better to develop the physical skills such as upper body strength, coordination, movement and small muscle developments that are needed to hold a pencil and read and write.

Brain research stresses the importance of good food for children's growth and development. This means preparing a variety of foods, drinking lots of water, and not having too many take-away meals or processed foods.

Develop and support children's curiosity and sense of wonder

There are many opportunities to stop and take a closer look at the natural wonders around us. These opportunities lead to learning lots of new words, the use of descriptive words, and a vivid imagination.

Children need adults who encourage imagination and creativity—adults who allow children to play, and adults who will also play and imagine with them.



Your imagination is your
preview of life's coming
attractions.

Albert Einstein
(Rosenkranz, 1998)



Babies

Babies—what to expect

Babies learn from the adults around them, and it is particularly important that babies learn they can trust adults. Babies and adults need to develop strong relationships to feel comfortable and secure, so it is vitally important to spend time with babies. Time to build a sense of security and trust, which comes from meeting the baby's needs. Time to nurture and time to develop that special relationship.

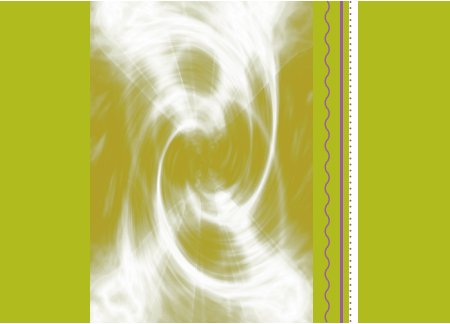
Brain research tells us that it is essential for children to have a close relationship with at least one important person in their lives. This could be with a mum or dad, brother or sister, other relative, caregiver or some other person close to them. This person will be the child's support and guide in the early years, helping them to understand how they 'fit in' and how the 'world' operates.

Babies respond to their environments and are watching everyone and everything around them. They need different things to look at, but not too many at once. They need to be able to relax and not feel stressed.

Babies—things to do

- Make the baby's room or environment colourful, bright, fresh and full of things to look at, touch and listen to. There need to be areas of 'quiet' as well as colour, so as to not confuse the baby. This doesn't mean you have to spend lots of money buying the latest fashions or redecorating, but it does mean you need to spend some time thinking through what you can do with the room.
- Add fresh flowers so the baby can smell them and see the colours.
- Hang bright mobiles and other colourful things around the walls or ceilings. These do not have to be expensive. Strips of coloured material or paper can be strung across a room to add interest and movement—these can be changed regularly. Cut out pictures from magazines and put them up on the walls—a good job for older children to participate in.

- Have light curtains that can blow gently with a breeze so baby can watch the movement.
- Play music during the day. Choose what you like, but keep in mind that, according to the latest brain research, the best music to play is baroque or classical pieces. Most ABC stores carry a good range of suitable music for babies and children (see Appendix). Your local library is also a good source if you're on a limited budget. But remember that babies also need some quiet time, so do not have music playing continuously.
- Allow babies to feel, taste, touch, see and hear lots of different things. Allow them to crawl across different surfaces or textures. Let them feel different materials and hear different sounds. Cook foods that have different smells and tastes.
- Take babies outside every day—but not in the middle of the day—so they can explore the outside world. Let them fall asleep under trees or on shady verandas.
- Use a swing cot or something similar where babies can feel the gentle motion.
- Talk to your baby about what you are doing. Talk about what you are doing when changing nappies or bathing baby. Talk about how water feels and sounds.
- Encourage babies to have conversations with you. Talk to them and then pause, allowing them time to respond. This is how they learn about the turn-taking in conversations.
- Sing to them—you don't need to have a great voice. Just let them know that you enjoy singing and that it's fun to sing.
- Involve babies in things you do around the house—even the cleaning and ironing can be made interesting. Just make sure everything is safe, and you may find that even the most boring task can be enjoyable.



- Involve your baby in shopping. Choose a pram or stroller that allows the best view and is high enough to be out of the way of bags and other objects that may cause harm. Place yourself at the baby's level and have a look around. This is what your baby sees. Is it interesting? Is it safe? The rows of groceries are colourful and you can talk about what you are buying. Most people in shops love babies and will often stop and chat. This is a great way to introduce your baby to other people. But remember that babies can become very wary of strangers and this experience can be more upsetting than enjoyable. Be sensitive to this, and, if this happens, make changes to your shopping routine until your baby can cope.
- Keep your routines simple and as predictable as you can. Babies need the security of knowing what is happening and what to expect next.
- Play with your baby regularly. Simple games—probably the ones you remember, such as peek-a-boo, blowing raspberries, and singing games—all add to the baby's experiences.
- If possible, have a mirror where babies can look at themselves.
- Babies love to know they make things happen, so hang mobiles for them to kick, push or pull.
- Start reading books to babies early on. Start with colourful, simple picture books and talk about what the objects in the pictures are and what they can do, etc. This shows babies that reading is an enjoyable experience.



Children who lose themselves in play—who escape to an inner world of imagination, dreams, and ideals—gain an enhanced sense of themselves as human beings.

Shiple (2002)



Toddlers

Toddlers—what to expect

This is the time of learning to be more independent. Toddlers want to do things for themselves. Sometimes this works, and at other times leads to tantrums and tears. Toddlers have no understanding of safety, and this can be a dangerous period if they are not closely watched. But they do need to be given freedom to try things and come to understand what they can and cannot do.

This is also a time when imagination is starting to develop and children can become frightened by some of the things they have imagined. 'Monsters', and things in cupboards or under the bed, become very real for the older toddler. It is important for adults to make time to reassure and comfort the child. Bed lights, secure and regular bed routines, and 'quiet' bedtime stories can help children through this period.

This is also a time when toddlers start pretending. They will act out familiar routines such as eating or sleeping, and use things around them as pretend objects. For instance, blocks of wood can become telephones or cars.

Toddlers—things to do

- Toddlers love to copy others. Encourage this by playing games where they copy what you are doing.
- Encourage lots of pretend play, have lots of tea parties.
- Find dress-up clothes which are easy to put on and take off. Toddlers love hats, and things to drape around them.
- Toddlers love collecting things. One of the easiest things to do is give them an old bag for their collecting. This is much better than finding bits and pieces in their pockets. You also need to have stuff around for collecting. Pegs, keys, rocks or pebbles, and pieces of material are just some of the things that toddlers like to collect. They are interested in the world around them, so take time to explore with them, talking about what you have found together and what you can do with it.

- Toddlers love making their own music. Simple musical instruments can be made from things around the house or outside. For example, make shakers by adding dried beans or rice to a bag or tin, then closing securely; or a drum from an open-ended container that has been covered with adhesive-backed plastic. If you play an instrument, show toddlers how the instrument works.
- Make a habit of playing, enjoying and letting toddlers hear music. Do not limit the music to one particular style, but include only 'good' music—music that will enhance and enrich a child's experience. Choose carefully, remembering that quality is important. If the budget is tight, then visit the public library. If it doesn't have what you are looking for, find out if it can order in the requested CDs. (See Appendix for some good classic CDs for toddlers.)
- A range of CDs produced by ABC Music includes a selection of well-known or well-loved songs which are very suitable for young children. The quality of these CDs is good and worth the investment.
- Toddlers love drawing and making marks—sometimes on places where you really do not want them to draw. It's a good idea to organise a place where they can play around with pencils, crayons or other drawing materials without causing too much trouble for anyone.
- Let them help you when you are cooking. Let them roll dough or cut out shapes, mix in eggs or sift flour, add milk to or just stir mixtures, and—best of all—lick the spoon.
- Toddlers can also help sort things in the kitchen. Sorting things helps children learn about patterns—a most important skill for maths and music.
- When outside, help children discover the natural beauty around them. Look closely at things in the garden, discuss them and ask questions. Pick flowers and arrange in vases to be taken inside. Encourage toddlers to help you plant seeds and pull out weeds.
- Let toddlers feel different textures such as sand, mud, tanbark chips and freshly-mown grass.

Imagination and safety

For children's imagination to grow and develop they need to be able take risks, 'test their limits', discover and learn by their mistakes, and they need to do this in a place that is safe and where someone is carefully watching them.

Mixed age groups need extra care and thought when planning activities. Preschool aged children often use small things for their art and construction. The puzzles they use can also have small pieces that can be easily swallowed by younger children.

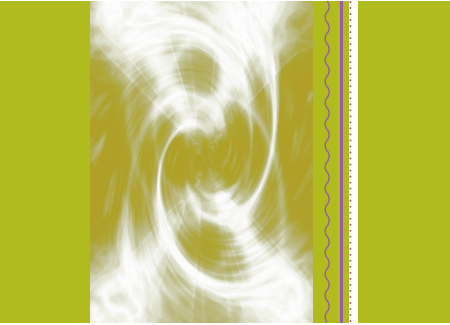
A tip—anything that can fit inside a plastic film canister can choke a child.

Sometimes it is best to use these materials at times when the babies and toddlers are sleeping or resting. You can use an old schoolbag, suitcase or box to store these special things so it is easy to bring them out when the time is right.

All children need to draw and paint but sometimes it is not easy for the younger children to use or manage the materials. It is good for them to be able to watch the older children, but this takes a little bit of planning. There are a few ways to do this, so choose something that fits you and your children. You can have the younger children sit on your lap and watch with you, or you can give the older children clipboards and they can work on a table or they can work in a playpen outside while the younger children play.

Other areas to consider for safety are with water play (young children can drown in a very small amount of water) and any materials that may be toxic, as young children also put most things in their mouths.

Be responsible for children's safety, but do not let it limit your child's imagination.



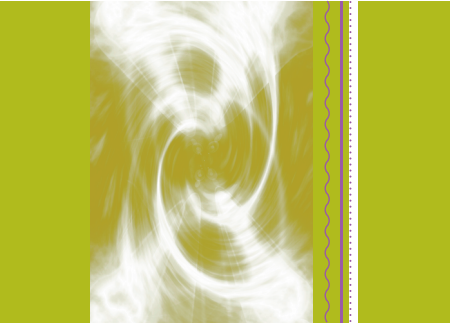
Let them smell different fragrances in the garden. Remember that toddlers are likely to put things in their mouths, so it's a good idea to have a herb garden where they can eat the plants without any concerns about safety. Check with local nurseries about the plants to avoid in your garden.

- Create spaces that encourage pretend play. Use a cardboard box to make a car. Just add some old sheets or material to make a house.
- Attach a large unbreakable mirror or reflective surface to a wall or frame so toddlers can spend time in front of the mirror. Toddlers love looking at themselves to see what they can and cannot do. They will also dress up and check out their appearance in the mirror.
- Sing often. Sing in the bath, sing while driving, sing whenever you can. Encourage toddlers to sing and move to the music—it doesn't usually take much effort to get them moving. It doesn't matter if you think you cannot sing; what is important is to teach children that singing is enjoyable.
- Play often and let toddlers see that you enjoy playing.
- Read to toddlers every day. Visit the library for access to a wide range of books. Buy the well-loved and most requested books, as toddlers will never tire of hearing them read—they are an investment in the future. Don't be afraid to use your voice or body movements to tell stories dramatically.
- Check with the local library for storytelling sessions. Develop your own ability as a storyteller—it only takes practice. (Smyth, 2005.)
- Talk to your toddlers about everyday things. Explain why you do things, how things work and what you use them for. Brain research shows a clear link between the time spent talking and listening to toddlers and the size of their vocabulary.
- Have a good supply of pegs, small boxes, plastic containers and odd bits and pieces which can be used for play outside and inside, and in the bath. Store these in baskets (laundry baskets are good) so they are easy for toddlers to access.



When young children use their imaginations in play, they are more creative, perform better at school tasks, and develop a problem-solving approach to learning. Educating a child's imagination is therefore an important way to prepare children for the future.

Isenberg & Jalongo (2001)



Preschoolers

Preschoolers—what to expect

Preschoolers have the physical development, language and thinking skills to be very imaginative and creative with everyday objects and their surroundings. They are often 'lost' in the world of make-believe. This ability to change objects into other things through imagination is an important part of creativity and should be encouraged. It is vital to allow children to play in this way, without being made fun of or laughed at.

Preschoolers' pretend play becomes increasingly involved. There are more characters in their play and a more complex plot, which can extend over a few days. They are likely to become a character and become very involved in that character, sometimes only answering when called by that name. You may even see your own family or a teacher 'come alive' before your eyes. Children have great skills in copying the characteristics of people around them and replaying events.

A child's creativity and imagination can sometimes create problems, however. Preschoolers are not always able to separate fact from fantasy, so watching too much television can be stressful. Adults need to be very careful about children's TV viewing and should, where possible, watch with them. This makes it easier to explain what is happening, and to reassure children that what they see is not always true. It will also help the adult to understand what children are seeing. Children tend to copy the characters in TV shows, and these may not be desirable.

With their growing language abilities, preschoolers make up stories and songs, and are starting to make up jokes and rhymes. They often invent characters and imaginary friends who become very 'real'. They also start pretending and will act out everyday, familiar routines such as eating or sleeping.

Preschoolers love solving problems and being seen as an important person who can influence the world around them. They are able to suggest solutions to simple organisational and planning problems, and should be encouraged to do this. Not all their ideas are practical, but they are creative.

Preschoolers—things to do

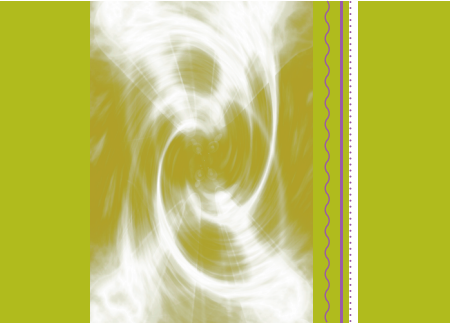
- Make spaces where preschoolers can paint, draw, dress up, and play with boxes and other materials without having to tidy up all the time. These spaces will most likely be well used and there will always be a creation happening. (And other areas don't have to be left in a permanent mess!)
- Keep toys simple. Children love to create, and some toys are limited in what can be done with them. Use natural materials such as wood, stones, shells and flowers, allowing children to use them any way they want. Sand, mud and water-play are sure winners when it comes to play materials that stimulate creativity and imagination.
- Invest in good-quality pencils and paper, and clay. These materials allow endless possibilities for creativity to flourish.
- Avoid colouring-in books. Children tend to draw more creatively when they see works of art by adults and hear about how the artist worked, or when they draw things they see around them.
- Take children out into the garden to look at things through a photographer's loupe (small magnifier). They can use this experience to draw things from a different point of view.
- Use an empty frame to show children how to frame their view of what is around them, then see what happens in the children's work.
- Teach children how to use art materials correctly and then encourage them to experiment. Do not be critical of the work they produce. It takes time for all artists to develop, and it takes time for children to experiment with different materials before they feel confident.
- Take children to the local art gallery to view and discuss the different styles of painting and sculpture. Teach them to appreciate different styles.

To invent, you need a
good imagination and a
pile of junk.

Thomas Edison
(Brainymedia.com, 2005)

- Study good books about art. Lucy Micklethwait has produced a number of books which are well worth reading or using with children (see Appendix).
- Preschoolers appreciate good stories and good storytellers. You will soon know which stories they love. Act out some of the stories. Dress up and use different voices for the characters.
- Invent and write down your own stories, and involve preschoolers in the process. They will love the experience and learn about themes, plots and the use of language, and how books are made. You can illustrate your book, which makes it an even more creative experience.
- Enjoy and explore music. Listen to a variety of music, and encourage preschoolers to listen for the sounds of the different instruments.
- Make time for preschoolers to relax—to sit and think, or do nothing in particular. We are all so busy in today's world that stress can easily overtake the important things of life, and our own stress can easily be passed onto children.
- Make some musical instruments with things around the house. Explore sounds that can be made with your mouth, hands, feet etc. Make up a story around these sounds.
- Sing and dance with children to the music you either listen to or play yourself, or at least encourage them to sing and dance.
- Develop children's ability to listen. Sometimes children spend so much time concentrating on the visual images on television that they do not learn the important skill of listening.
- Instead of watching television, listen to music that has some imaginative qualities. *Catch the Rainbow: Imaginative Journeys for Children* by Helen Martin and *Follow the Rainbow: Imaginative Journeys for Children* read by Noni Hazelhurst are just two CDs which encourage children to listen and imagine.

- Tell stories without books. This allows preschoolers to 'see their own characters'. Encourage them to make up stories of their own, or do this with them instead of reading the usual bedtime story. This can be great fun, and it's amazing how creative and imaginative the stories can be.
- Make a treasure box full of useful bits and pieces such as small boxes, shells, jewellery, dress-up clothes and beads. Collecting things for this box can be an adventure if you take the children with you. A good source of cheap, interesting bits and pieces are second-hand shops or garage sales.
- Old sheets or bedspreads to cover large boxes, cushions or tables turned on their side are great for making secret places.
- Make puppets and a puppet theatre. This will provide children with hours of creative and imaginative fun.
- Involve preschoolers in the preparation and cooking of food. This helps to develop an understanding of food, cooking processes, measurement, numbers and word recognition. When children help to cook their food, they usually eat it all without any complaints!
- Allow children to make mistakes. Making mistakes is part of learning. It is important to be able to make mistakes in an environment which is supportive and caring, rather than demanding and critical.
- It is not easy to avoid the new technology around today. Try to use computer programs that allow children to create and design, rather than just pressing one or two buttons.
- Using the small muscles in the hands and feet is important for the stimulation of the brain. Encourage children to sing 'finger plays', to play string games, to use chopsticks, tie their shoelaces, and do other things that encourage the use of their hands. Make sure this is done in fun and not as a prescribed exercise.



Allow children the freedom to play whenever they feel the need. There is plenty of time to be an 'adult' later in life. Encourage children to feel comfortable playing, dressing up and being creative. Play with children—you'll both feel better for the experience. Stimulate your child's curiosity and sense of wonder ... and you'll be surprised at what you learn!



Appendix

Music for babies – a selection of CDs

Classic kids: A fun way to enjoy the classics (1992). Compiled by S. McGhee. Australian Broadcasting Corporation.

Bach and baby playtime (1998). Performed and recorded by the Faculty of the College of Music at the University of Colorado. Festival Mushroom Records.

Also:

Bach and baby bedtime

Bach and baby bathtime

Bach and baby traveltime

Beethoven at bedtime: A gentle prelude to sleep (1995). Various artists. Phillips Classics Productions / PolyGram.

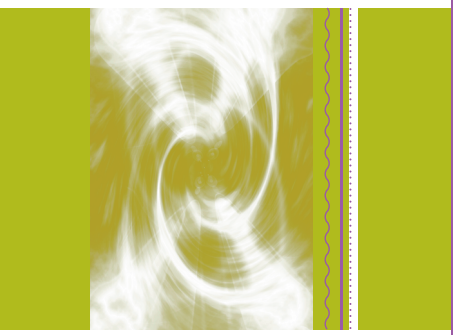
Beethoven for babies: Brain training for little ones (1995). Various artists. Phillips Classics Productions / PolyGram.

Baroque at bathtime: A relaxing serenade to wash your cares away (1995). Concept and Compilation R. P. Murves & P. Bennett. Phillips Classics Productions / PolyGram.

Bach at bedtime: Lullabies for the still of the night (1995). Phillips Classics Productions / PolyGram.

Classic sleepies (1994) Concept and compilation dreamt up by H. Capaldi & B. Holland. Teldec Classics International / Warner Classic.





Symphony of lullabies (Vol 1) (2001). S. O' Boyle. Tasmanian Symphony Orchestra.

Sweet dreams: Lullabies from around the world (2005). Composer, K. Cunio; soprano, H. Lee.

Hush little baby: A collection of calming songs to promote a restful sleep (2004) S. O' Boyle.

Good classic CDs for toddlers

So Smart! – Sleepytime: For babies 0-36 months (2004). Australian Broadcasting Corporation.

So Smart! – Playtime: For babies 0-36 months (2004). Australian Broadcasting Corporation.

So Smart! – Cartime: For babies 0-36 months (2004). Australian Broadcasting Corporation.

Dream children: Orchestral lullabies for sleep and relaxation. Adelaide Symphony Orchestra.

Mozart for your mind: Boost your brain power with Wolfgang Amadeus. (1995). Various artists. Philips Classics Productions.

More Mozart for your mind: Raise your IQ with Wolfgang Amadeus.(1997). Various artists. Philips Classics Productions.

Swagman's promenade - Australian Light Classics (2003). Australian Broadcasting Corporation / Universal Music.

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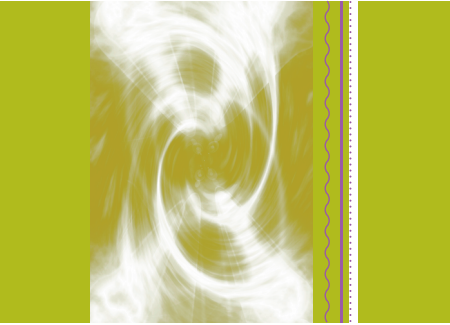
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I have no particular talent. I am merely inquisitive.

Albert Einstein
(Rosenkranz, 1998)

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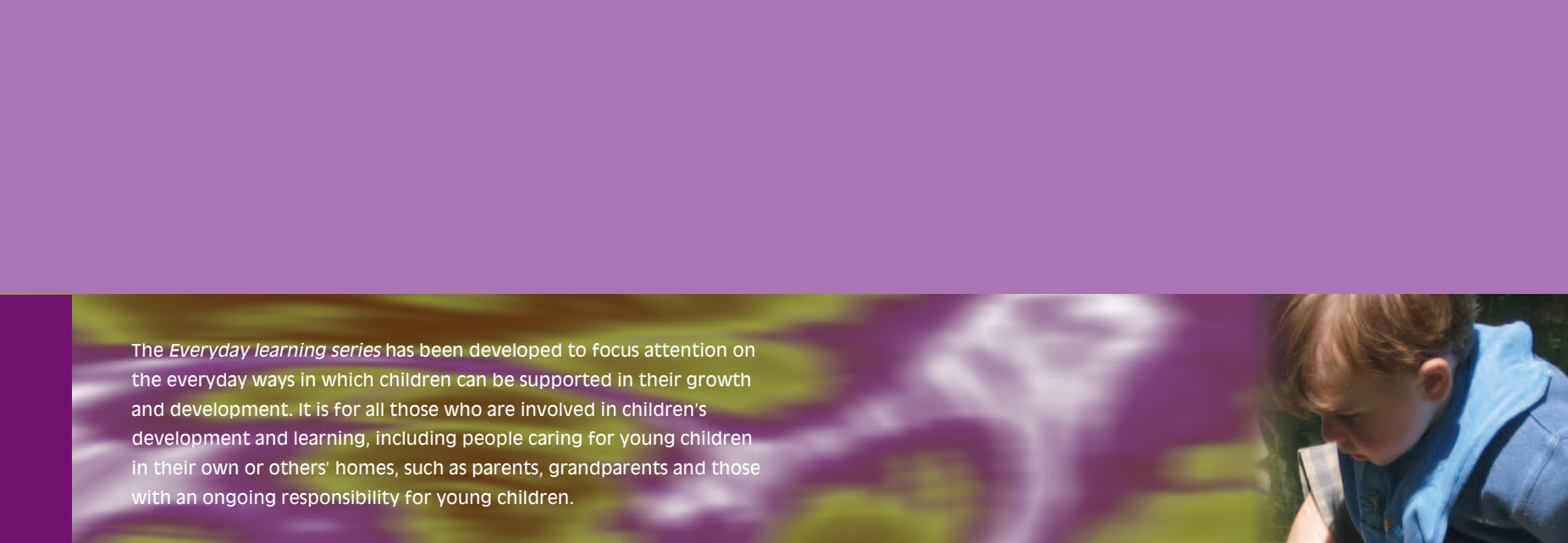


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