

A Families' Guide to Best of All Birth to Three

**best of all (noun) \best of all\
is continual, measurable, celebrated and it never ends.**

It is a daily challenge to do a little better than you did the day before and it's always celebrated.

Possible manifestations: standing just one second longer, reading just one more word, learning just one new number, taking just one more step, never a competition, never completed.

GiGi's
Playhouse™

Down Syndrome Achievement Centers
educate. inspire. believe.



You can unleash your child's potential! and we'll help!

Coming to programs at GiGi's Playhouse is your first step – congratulations! The second step is to play an active role in your child's development at GiGi's Playhouse and at home. We'll show you how!

Our goal at GiGi's Playhouse is to celebrate every display of a learner's *Best of All!* We do this through purposeful programs at our Playhouses that start at the prenatal stage and build into adulthood. We build specific skills and focus on areas of development. For our infants and toddler aged learners, we specifically focus on fine motor skills, gross motor skills, communication and language development.

GiGi's Playhouse is a place to practice skills and develop behaviors. We understand that it takes time and practice to understand our bodies and our development – and that this is sometimes hard for parents. But we must start building lifelong skills now!

This book is a tool for you! Our program leaders build play-based activities for your child to participate in while at the Playhouse and to continue this learning at home, we've provided many of our favorite activities in this book. Each activity is FUN, but very purposeful and learning-based.

With your dedication and GiGi's Playhouse programs, your child will

- **Increase fine motor skills**, including independent play, self-care skills and visual motor skills;
- **Increase gross motor skills**, with focus on general strengthening, achieving independent mobility and balance;
- **Increase social skills**, with focus on eye contact, imaginary play and simple interactions with peers;
- **Develop communication skills**, with focus exposure to language and development of oral motor skills necessary to support speech development; and
- Achieve his or her *Best of All!*



Fine Motor
Development



Gross Motor
Development



Speech/Language
Development



Social
Skills



Family
Involvement

Build *Best of All* during programs at GiGi's Playhouse

It is so important for family members to participate in programs while at the Playhouse. Your child is watching you and all adults - model the behavior that you want to see in your child!

Here's what you can do -

- Encourage independence! Assist or coach your child through the activity, but do not complete the activity for him or her. He or she can do it – allow your child to struggle a bit, as this is learning in action!
- Set high expectations for your child. Push him or her to do just a little more each session, such as participate in circle time a bit longer or focus on an activity a bit longer each time you attend.
- Attend programs regularly. Consistency is so important for your child to grow and develop. Exposure to social interactions is key!
- Redirect your child back to the activity if distracted. If he or she gets up during circle time, allow him or her a minute to wander and then bring him or her back to the group. This will help build his or her ability to attend.
- Model appropriate behavior, such as sit on the carpet during circle time, sing along with the group and practice the sign language.
- Use hand-over-hand techniques when needed.
- Frame your statements to say what you **want** your child to do. For example, say “please walk” rather than “don’t run”. Your child may only hear the word “run”! Remember, think positive!
- Observe your child during meal time to ensure that he or she is using this time for skill development in the areas of feeding, social skills and self-help skills. Encourage your child to use utensils, wipe his or her mouth and throw away trash (if they cannot walk to the trash can, have them drop the trash into your hands or a trashcan you bring to them).
- Use time during programs to connect and converse with other families. These families will become your rocks!
- Pay special attention to the activities during the program and continue them at home – use the sign language, read a book or sing a song.
- If appropriate, implement strategies from ongoing private therapists to optimize techniques when your child is performing a targeted skill.
- Encourage your child to achieve his or her “best of all” by celebrating accomplishments!

Tips & Tools for *Best of All* at Home

We've provided a number of take home activities that are easy, take little time and are purposeful. Build these activities into your everyday life and make them fun. Always start with the things your child enjoys or their areas of strength, and then build on them. The growth that you'll see will be amazing!

Build Fine Motor Skills at Home

Fine motor skills refer to the small muscle movements in your hands, such as those needed for eating, writing, dressing, etc. Stability, bilateral coordination and sensation are the basic fine motor skills that develop during the birth to 3 year old range. These skills become refined as the child grows and gains more control. A child will develop a greater degree of dexterity (use of spoon, using isolated fingers to pick up objects, etc.), visual motor skills (i.e. beginning drawing motions) and self-help skills (zipping, fewer spills when using a cup, etc.) during this time. The best part of strengthening fine motor skills is that they can be practiced through play! It's easy to set up an enriching environment that encourages play and can be as simple as it sounds!

Fine motor skills increase your child's ability to interact with her environment by using her hands to manipulate and move objects in a controlled manner. In the earlier stages, much of what you do with your child during play and therapy will overlap between specialties. For instance, at some point physical, occupational and speech therapists might be working on trunk control, stabilization and weight bearing in the shoulder areas. Proper posture is important for not only sitting and walking, but also for fine motor and speech development! Always consult your child's therapists for specific questions or ideas to strengthen specific desired movements or skills.

Remember that every child develops at their own pace, but you can assist in this learning process by assisting them when needed. This includes holding objects for a child to explore, pointing out objects in their surroundings while naming and describing them, and offer a wide variety of toys and textures for your child to experience. All of these opportunities to explore objects in their environment will not only impact their fine motor skills but have been shown to impact their language and communication skills, too. Allowing your child to play with finger paints, mud, water play, or sit on carpet, grass or sand as well as many other textures, will positively impact their ability to adapt to new environments, try new foods and use daily living items necessary for independent living, such as shampoo, soap and handling ingredients while cooking. Have fun with the following activities at home:

- Build play into your regular routine. Everyday items can be brought into their play area, such as wooden spoons, pots and pans, plastic containers with objects to put into them (small nerf balls, cotton balls, crayons, chalk, etc.) or measuring cups. Have your child help you with laundry by pulling out all the socks from the pile, matching the colors of different items, etc.
- Utilize bath time! Talk with your child about how soothing the warm water is to their skin, let them play with shampoo bubbles, give them a bar of soap to explore, etc. Use craft foam or bath crayons to create simple shapes on the wall, squeeze out sponges, use eye droppers or turkey basters and play with cups for pouring and filling larger plastic containers.
- Offer toys of varying sizes, weights and textures for the child to explore. If a child cannot hold a rattle yet, hold it for him to touch and shake with your help. Don't forget that tasting the toy will be part of this exploration, so make sure it is non-toxic and not a choking hazard.
- Play with anything that will snap, stack or fit together – Duplos, large pop-apart beads, puzzles, building blocks, measuring cups and even Tupperware. Don't forget those that open and shut (those with lids) or those with holes/slots for inserting pieces into (shape sorters).
- Allow your child to get messy – playdough, sand, shaving cream and finger paint all encourage texture exploration, creativity and provide an array of tactile sensations. Add tools such as rolling pins, paint brushes, cotton swabs and more to further develop gripping and grasping.
- Sing action songs throughout the day. These are quick to sing, packed with action and can be done in the car or while waiting in line at the grocery store. Examples include *Head, Shoulders, Knees and Toes*, *Itsy Bitsy Spider* and *Simon Says*. During this age you will probably have to use the “hand over hand” technique while performing the songs. These will help your child to learn to follow simple directions and make connections between what they hear and how their body feels to respond.
- Play hide and seek with toys but show your child where you are hiding it in the beginning to help them to learn about object permanence. This is also done by playing peek-a-boo. It is an important stage of development during these years. (Object permanence means understanding that objects -including people- continue to exist even when they cannot be seen, heard or felt.)
- When developing fine motor skills, it is important to make sure they are sitting in a supported fashion,



either in your lap or on a properly sized chair. If sitting independently, make sure their feet are on the floor and the table is not above their shoulders for greatest success.

- Baby toys can be made of a variety of materials for increased sensory play and exploration: plastic, wood, silk, cotton, burlap, rubber, etc.
- Playing dress-up is a great way to foster independence and build motor skills. During this stage they will start to undress (usually at the most inconvenient times) so keep a change of clothes with you at all times. Let your child help you with undressing as much as they can. Getting dressed takes more dexterity so give items that will lead to success and greater imagination: oversized hats and shoes, elastic skirts, scarves that can be used as capes, etc. in order to increase confidence and imagination. Give your child a bag or bin in which to store them.
- Build routines, keep them consistent and talk about them as they are being executed! For example: we get dressed after breakfast; we brush teeth after bath, etc. Providing a visual schedule can help your child stay focused and on track. Even very young children will understand these steps if used consistently. Learning routines during this age will help to prepare them to the routines of school. Routines and consistency will build their confidence and cooperation when they know what to expect. They also help to increase a child's ability to handle unexpected situations and "rare occasions" that may occur.
- Incorporate sign language into your daily life and be consistent with it! Start with a few simple signs (eat, tired, more) and will increase the language learning process. Don't focus on accuracy of the sign at this point and adopt a modified sign if needed, as long as the same sign is used consistently.
- As a child gets older, let them peel stickers from a sheet, even if they simply stick them onto a larger piece of paper in a stack. This peeling action will help prepare them for opening bags, containers with tight lids as well as buttoning and zipping.

Visual motor skills refer to the development of hand-eye coordination, which will lead to writing, catching and cutting to name a few.

Tips and activities to promote visual motor skills:

- Practice holding scissors, opening and closing them and then introduce paper for your child to snip. Keep a child's elbow down by his waist and feet on the floor for optimal positioning when learning to use scissors.
- Use cut pieces of paper and a glue stick to make a collage or simple picture. Let the child tear small pieces of tissue paper to use, too. *Note-using tissue paper will help the child to distinguish between paper that can be torn for play (thin tissue paper) vs. paper that shouldn't be ripped (book pages) especially if you describe the differences as he is playing.

- Match and sort everything – introduce colors, sizes and shapes. Match shoes, colored socks and silverware. Ask questions about sizes, such as “which is bigger?” or “which is smaller?”
- Play with toys that encourage placement and shapes, such as large-piece puzzles, pop up toys, stacking blocks and rings. Be sure to include the verbal interactions and use directional terms such as next to, under, over, behind, etc. while playing.
- Keep a small ball or a bean bag with you at all times, as this can be used for so many things, such as squeezing, rolling or throwing.

Build Gross Motor Skills at Home

Since your child entered the world, your child’s life has been filled with movement. From the first stretching of the arms and lifting of her head to moving independently, the first three years will encompass a huge change in your child’s mobility! As family members you will have the opportunity and privilege to help teach and guide your child through play activities designed to make movement fun, motivating, and purposeful. You will also be creating a lifelong healthy lifestyle by including active play into every day.

Below are some ideas on using playtime and everyday routines to encourage motor skills. Because each child’s movement patterns, tendencies, strengths and needs are individual, consult your physical or occupational therapist for ways to facilitate particular movement patterns or for specific exercises geared toward your child.

“Tummy Time” and Infant Positioning: Once your child is home, you may begin to wonder, “Where do I put him?”; “Should I hold her all the time?”; “Is it OK to start tummy time when he is so young?” Where and how to place and position your infant when awake is a topic that isn’t discussed very often. The American Academy of Pediatrics advises that all newborns be placed on their back for sleeping, but when your child is awake, think variety, variety, variety!

When thinking about places for your baby to play, start with the floor. A firm surface, such as a carpeted floor with a thin blanket or a foam play mat is perfect. Being on the floor, with or without support, allows your baby to move her body in all directions. These movements are your baby’s first “exercises”. Simply moving against gravity is strengthening! It also allows your baby the freedom of movement (wiggling across the floor, rolling to her side, belly crawling, etc.) because she is not strapped into a seat and stuck in one place and one position.

Tips and activities for Tummy Time: Because it is SO important, we have devoted a special section just to tummy time! Tummy Time, also called prone, is a crucial position

for all babies to gain strength through their entire body. By lifting the head, your child strengthens the neck muscles to look around at his world and support his own head when picked up. By pushing up with his arms, your child strengthens his shoulders, arms, and hands for reaching, crawling, and eventually, precise fine motor skills. While playing on his tummy, your child also strengthens his core and his hips to prepare him for crawling, sitting, standing and walking. Tummy time is truly the foundation for all motor skills.

- Unless your child has a medical condition that contraindicates tummy time, begin as soon as possible. Beginning tummy time within the first few weeks of life will greatly increase the likelihood that your child will tolerate and enjoy tummy time!
- To start, aim for 30 minutes of awake time spent on their tummy each day. Initially, this may be six bouts of five minutes each spread throughout the day. A young infant usually does not tolerate more than a few minutes of tummy time because it is hard work! When children are able to lift their head and reach for toys, many begin to prefer tummy time over other positions because they can easily play with toys. Be consistent! Little by little, your child will get stronger and gain endurance in this position!
- Tummy time also includes time spent on their tummy while laying on a parent's chest in the recliner, or on a caregiver's lap for burping after a feeding. Be creative and think about non-traditional ways that you can introduce tummy time.
- Babies tolerate tummy time best when it is fun! Lay next to your baby and sing a song, shake a rattle, place a mirror or colorful book in their line of sight, engage big brothers and sisters to play with your child while on their tummy. As babies are able to prop on their arms while on their tummy, place small rattles within their reach.
- Babies should push up through their forearms while lifting their head. If your child lifts her head by arching her back and lifting head, arms and/or legs off of the floor, gently help her place her elbows on the surface near her shoulders. This will teach her to push up through her arms while lifting her head.
- Discuss specific positioning needs with your doctor or therapist. Using a wedge, large yoga ball, or rolled up blankets may help your child lift their head and push up with their arms as they are getting stronger.

Tips and activities for infant positioning: Besides tummy time, there are SO MANY options for positions that your baby can be in throughout his or her day. Remember-Variety is best!

- All young babies should spend time in their caregivers' arms. Human touch, the warmth of your embrace, and the proximity of your presence helps your child develop a close bond and a secure attachment. It also provides a rich sensory

experience of deep pressure, tactile, proprioceptive, and vestibular inputs. Talk or sing to your baby as you carry her around to expose her to your voice and words.

- **Back-lying (also called supine):** Laying your child on his back allows him to freely move his body. In this position, your child will move his arms and legs. He will bring his hands to his mouth, gaze at his fingers, reach for a toy in sight, or grab his feet and explore his toes. Use lightweight rattles, soft toys of different textures, and board books with simple, colorful pictures to encourage your child to turn his head, reach toward objects, and hold toys. If your child needs more support, you can use a positioning pillow (such as a Boppy) or a large bath towel rolled up and placed in an upside down “U”. This will help your child keep his head in the middle and allow him to more easily move his arms and legs.
- **Side-lying:** Side-lying is a great position for young infants, as it brings the hands to midline near the baby’s face so that she can visually explore them, and bring them to her mouth. Babies may be able to reach or hold toys more easily in this position because they do not have to lift their arms against gravity.
- **Carrying your baby:** By using a variety carrying positions, your baby will strengthen their neck and core muscles to adjust to your movements. Carrying in a cradle hold, upright at your chest, upright while facing out, in a supported side-lying, or even carrying in a supported tummy time position gives your infant different opportunities to use his muscles and develop his vestibular system (sense of movement).
- **Baby equipment:** Choose baby equipment carefully. Although convenient and often listed as “must-haves” on baby registries, many pieces of baby equipment limit variety and inhibit movement. Some baby equipment does not provide adequate positioning for infants with low muscle tone, or may not suit your child’s individual positioning needs. Outside of an infant car seat when traveling, it is best for your child to spend the majority of his or her day playing on the floor. **Recommended baby equipment that will facilitate development includes:** a play gym (mat with toys hanging overhead) or tummy time mat; infant swing for vestibular development; feeding seat or high chair that is appropriately sized (some high chairs are much too big for young infants), play yard or pack-n-play to safely contain baby once they are on the move.
- **Sitting:** As your baby gets older and stronger, he or she will be ready to learn to sit. She will first sit by using her hands on the floor, her legs, or a toy to help her balance. As her hips and core get stronger, she will be able to lift her hands and play with toys while sitting.
 - When your baby uses her hands for balance, you can use a small footstool, a toy, or a book in her lap for her to prop her hands on. By bringing the surface up a little from the floor, she will sit more upright.

When she becomes steadier, place small rattles in front of her that she can pick up with one hand.

- Give your baby support first under her arms when holding her in supported sitting. As she gets stronger, move your hands down to her stomach, and eventually to her hips. The lower your hands are, the more your baby will be controlling her own balance. When she feels steady, see how long you can release your support!
- Use a Boppy pillow with your child sitting in the middle of the “U” shape. Placing the Boppy around his hips and legs will provide additional support while he is learning to sit. You can also use small throw pillows behind and next to your baby’s hips and legs.
- When your child is able to use his hands to play while sitting, practice reaching for favorite toys placed in front and to the side of his legs. Blow bubbles above his head and see if he can look up to watch, or reach up to pop them!
- Play games to challenge your child’s balance such as *Row, Row, Row your Boat* or *I’m a Little Teapot* with your child sitting in your lap with minimal support. Gently move your body with the music to challenge their core strength while they work to stay sitting upright.

Achieving Independent Mobility while Playing on the Floor: As a young infant, your child will soon begin to explore the world independently by rolling, pivoting on his tummy, belly crawling or creeping on hands and knees. Often, the motivation to move comes from seeing a parent walk in the door, trying to reach a favorite toy across the play mat, or striving to get the family pet laying just out of reach. This is an exciting time for your child, as curiosity will lead to movement and exploration of the world!

Tips and Activities to Encourage Independent Mobility through Play:

- Introduce your child to movement through play. Roll her side to side on the play mat, bounce her up and down on your lap while singing *The Wheels on the Bus*, swing him in your arms or in a supported playground swing, gently pull your baby for a “magic carpet ride” on a blanket (either while he is laying down or sitting up if he is a stable, independent sitter) on a carpeted floor. Teach your child that movement is fun and interactive!
- Catch your child in the act! When your child is trying to roll from her back to her side, place a toy in front of her that will encourage her to continue rolling to her tummy. If you see your child trying to push toward a desired toy, encourage them to keep going rather than moving the toy within their reach. You can help guide an arm or leg in the direction that you want your child to move, however never pull on extremities. Every effort, whether successful or not, is helping strengthen movement muscles. Praise, show your excitement and be

demonstrative in your support. Your baby will work hard to see the smile on your face!

- Allow your child to get (a little) frustrated. Sometimes, desperate times call for desperate measures! When you are across the room and unavailable to help place that favorite toy in front of her, your child may begin to experiment with rolling, wiggling, squirming, or crawling to get her most prized possession. By placing toys to the side of your child, they may try pivoting or rolling toward it. By placing toys in front of your child, they may try belly crawling or creeping on hands and knees toward it. Once your child has begun having success in moving toward toys, you can place her on the floor with a few toys just out of reach in several directions. She will be able to choose which toy she wants to play with and move toward it!
- Continue to encourage variety in positioning. Even though your child may be sitting, continue to place your child on his tummy, in kneeling at a step stool, on his back, etc. Practice more difficult positions such as hands and knees by placing your child in this position with support as directed by your therapist. By moving in and out of different positions, independence will increase.
- When your child is sitting and crawling (either on belly or hands and knees) use cushions and blankets to make your environment fun and challenging! Climb up the “mountain” (several cushions), slide down the “hill”, crawl through a play tunnel or in a mini ball pit. Teach your child how to crawl up the stairs.

Standing and Cruising: Your child is movin’ on up! After learning to sit and crawl, your child will gain strength to pull themselves into a standing position. This will provide a whole new perspective on the world! Providing opportunities to stand and cruise (walk along the furniture while holding on) will help strengthen the muscles for walking!

Tips and Activities to Encourage Standing and Cruising:

- Begin to place your child’s toys on higher surfaces. This will encourage him to play in a standing position more often. A coffee table, ottoman, toddler activity table, or sofa with the cushion removed are possibilities you may have in your home.
- Encourage your child to stand up! When you greet him in his bed in the morning, gesture for him to pull up to standing before you lift him out of his crib. Let your child pull up to standing against you with as little help as possible. Encourage him to stand for you to lift him in his high chair at meal time.
- While standing at a surface (couch, coffee table, etc.), let your child reach in all directions for toys. Using a puzzle or shape sorter that has multiple pieces will provide a lot of practice as she continues to reach for more pieces to the toy. When she is able to reach away from the surface, hold toys at knee level or place

them on the floor close to her feet. She will begin to bend her knees to squat down and retrieve the toy.

- When your child is comfortable standing at a surface, begin to move the toy sideways along the surface so he can practice moving his feet sideways for cruising. Initially, you may need to help move or position his feet until he understands the movement pattern.
- Keep upping the ante! As your child masters cruising, continue to challenge her. Move her toy to the other side of the ottoman to teach her to cruise around corners. Encourage her to transfer from the coffee table to the couch. Put stickers on a mirror or sliding glass door and see if your child can cruise sideways with no surface to lean on, only using hands for balance.

Walking is such an exciting skill to achieve, both for children and parents! Developing the strength, balance and coordination for independent walking takes lots of practice and repetition. Keep walking fun, positive and motivating! Celebrate each small gain, whether it is taking one more step independently or choosing to attempt walking rather than crawling.

Tips and activities to encourage walking skills:

- Allow plenty of practice to walk with support. Walk while pushing objects. Use a push toy to walk to the mailbox, push the chairs in after dinner or push the laundry basket to the bedroom.
- When you walk holding your child's hands, position his or her arms so that they are in front of your child at approximately chest level. This will help engage the abdominal muscles for balance. Holding hands above the head causes the back to arch, which results in poor use of the core and balance. When your child can walk holding two hands, progress to walking with one hand held.
- When your child is ready to take independent steps, begin by placing them only 1-2 steps away from you or the couch. When they are brave enough to try those first few steps all by themselves, CELEBRATE!
- Practice taking just 1-2 steps until your child is very confident! Move a small activity table just two steps away. Sit on the floor and have your child take two steps towards you for a giant bear hug. Slowly increase the distance. Always make it positive and fun!
- Create play stations around the room to encourage spontaneous walking – place toys on the couch, coffee table or ottoman. Make sure they are all a few feet away from each other so that your child can take a few steps between each station.
- Help your child think of themselves as a walker instead of a crawler. Use walking as part of your daily routine. Walk into story time, at the grocery store, to their chair for breakfast or to throw away trash. Your child can walk independently or with assistance by holding your hand.

Running is a natural extension of fast walking. As your child moves faster, they will achieve the “flight” phase of running, in which both feet are off of the surface at the same time. This is the hallmark of running and is what differentiates it from fast walking. Once your child is running, put on your own sneakers and get on the move together!

Tips and activities to encourage running skills:

- Use simple verbal cues that your child can associate with running, such as “Ready, Set, Go”, “Run fast”, or “Go, Go, Go”. Be sure to include the “Stop!” phase of running, too.
- Play games to encourage moving faster. Run races, play chase, play tag, kick a ball and run after it. Run just slightly in front of your child and encourage them to “get you”!
- Run downhill. Running down hill will naturally increase your child’s speed. Some children will feel nervous with this activity as they have to control their speed without losing their balance. Start with a very small hill/ramp and progress to a larger hill as your child feels confident.
- Incorporate running into your daily routine. Run to the corner on your way to school, run to the mailbox, run while playing fetch with the family dog, etc. Find ways to move throughout your day by running.
- To build up your child’s endurance to run longer distances, set a “finish line”, such as a tree across the field or the swings at the park. You can tailor the distance to your child’s level, and over time, increase the distance to encourage him or her to go just a little farther.

A note about motor skills: Children with reduced muscle tone and/or reduced muscle strength may use compensatory patterns when learning new motor skills. Compensatory patterns are alternative movements or postures that may make the movement feel easier for your child. Compensatory patterns can be (and should be) addressed by a physical or occupational therapist. It is often easier to address a compensatory pattern as your child is first learning a skill rather than waiting until it is a well-developed habit. Many times, compensatory patterns prevent or delay children from strengthening the proper muscles to allow them to progress forward to the next skill.

Common compensatory patterns include:

1. Hyperextending or “locking” joints. This is commonly seen at the knees or elbows. Some children may also hyperextend their head and neck when lying on their back, on their tummy, or in sitting.
2. Using a very wide base of support. You may notice your child spreading his arms or legs far apart during tummy time, while sitting or standing. Even though your child may have the flexibility, he should never do the “splits” as a movement strategy.

3. Poor posture in sitting. While adults do not always have good sitting posture, babies typically sit up very tall and straight . If you do not see this posture, address it with a therapist.
4. W-sitting. This is a sitting posture in which the legs look like a “W” when viewed from above a seated child. The child sits on their butt with hips rotated inward and the feet next to either side of the hips.

If you notice your child demonstrating any of these movement patterns, or you observe a movement that looks unnatural or uncomfortable to you, discuss it with your physical or occupational therapist. Your therapist can instruct you in exercises, activities, and strategies that will help your child get stronger and no longer need to use compensatory patterns to successfully achieve a particular movement.

Build Social Skills at Home

Many relationships are in your child’s future! The foundation of building social skills starts at a young age through eye contact, imaginary play and simple interactions with others. Many children start playing with peers in a parallel state, which means that they are playing “with” another child by simply sitting next to him, which will eventually evolve to more interactive play.

Eye contact: Eye contact is an important foundation for communication, development and attending skills. Eye contact sends information to your communicative partner and demonstrates listening. It also promotes learning when the child is looking and listening to the parent, teacher or friend.

Tips and activities to promote eye contact:

- Encourage your child to look at the person speaking by simply coaching him or her to do so.
- Sign language can be incorporated by signing “look” during an activity when your child becomes distracted.
- React! When your child makes eye contact with you, respond with an exaggerated facial expression. This will encourage your child to maintain eye contact for a short period of time.
- Make silly faces in a mirror or through games, such as *Simon Says*.
- Make animal or character masks that have large cutouts to look through.
- Always look your child in the eye when speaking to them or when they are speaking to you. You might need to bend or squat down to their level in order to facilitate this action.
- When your child asks for something, make sure they look directly at you when asking and you look directly at them when giving it to them.
- Celebrate or acknowledge when your child makes direct eye contact by smiling, nodding or thanking them.

Imaginary Play: Children learn through experiences! Imaginary play encourages creativity, problem solving and gives a child practice for real-life experiences. Imaginary play also aids in learning many vital social and emotional skills.

Tips and activities to encourage imaginary play:

- Model the behavior or play you want your child to practice- cuddle with a doll, wrap it in a blanket, change its diaper and give the doll a bath.
- Allow your child to help you with chores! Give your child a small broom to help sweep the floor, ask him or her to dry the dishes, and allow him or her to feed the dog. Even non-mobile children can participate in helping behaviors, such as picking out all the socks in a load of laundry, putting toys into a bin, wiping their eating area with a wet cloth, etc. Use hand-over-hand method of showing your child what to do if needed. Teach them to clean up their toy area when done playing, even if it means using the hand over hand method every time until they do it independently. Remember, consistency is important!
- Use play food and utensils to make a meal and don't forget to clean up using a small bin to "wash" the dishes.
- Build forts and hideaways using large boxes and sheets. Include costumes, props and decorations for a full imaginary experience. Talk to your child about what you are doing, including details about the scene and storyline.
- Use puppets and stuffed animals to re-create stories from your child's favorite books.
- Introduce stories in which your child creates characters, setting or theme. For example, "Let's tell our own story today. Who should it be about?" Let your child choose the main character by choosing which stuffed animal or doll to use, then offer choices for the next part of the story (should we let fluffy the cat play in the sand or curl up next to you?). Choices give a child a sense of power and control in a positive direction.

Simple Interactions with Peers: Preschool aged children and younger are usually engaged in parallel play (playing side by side without many interactions) and will be learning to interact with their peers through play and role modeling of parents and siblings.

Tips and activities to encourage simple interactions with peers:

- When playing with your child, practice turn taking, cooperation and choice making. Acknowledge the times your child chooses an activity and the times that you or others choose an activity. For instance, have your child choose the first activity and state "you choose the first game, but I will choose the next one."
- Play games that encourage turn-taking, such as playing on a simple obstacle course, going down a slide, or swinging on a swing, while one swings and the other pushes.

- Create a group activity, such as making a pretend meal or playing house, and encourage each child to have an active role. Even the very young child can be included in this activity.
- All of these activities can be done with babies and non-verbal children. Watch their eyes to see which item they seem to be most interested in, or let them point or reach for the desired toy, etc.

Build Language Development at Home

The first three years of life provide great opportunity to develop a strong foundation for your child's communication development, as communication development starts at birth with the first cry. Many parents think of communication as 'speech' or verbal communication, when in actuality nonverbal communication is the underlying early foundation. Early communication includes, eye gaze, pointing, facial expressions and vocalizations. The first three years in a child's development, when the brain is developing and maturing, is an intense period for the development of these skills. The skills develop best in an environment that is rich with sounds, music, gestures, speech and language. This is important information for parents, as there are many strategies to facilitate communication with infants and toddlers. The sooner communication development is addressed, the stronger the foundation will be and the more opportunities the child will have to practice these skills.

Exposure to Language: The development of language follows a predictable pattern and is impacted by a child's physical, sensory, motor and cognitive development during the early years. Language learning takes place within the everyday interactions young children have with their family. These interactions should be fun and geared toward the current level of the child. If the family members are using language that is too high for the current language level of the child, it is more difficult for the child to learn and benefit from the language interaction. The language should be relevant and appropriate to your child.

Tips and activities to encourage language exposure:

- Encourage and respond to all forms of language, both verbal and nonverbal. Interacting should be FUN!
- Teach your infant to imitate actions, such as clapping, bye-bye, blowing kisses, it'sy bitsy spider. etc. These types of games teach turn taking and imitation skills which are important for communication development.



- Speak slowly and clearly. Children learning language need to hear words hundreds of times before they can produce the word. Also, children need to see a sign or gesture, such as 'more', 'all done', 'help' many, many times before they are able to use that sign or gesture. Be patient and encouraging when working on these skills.
- Using sign language, gestures, facial expressions and picture/visual communication at an early age is an important tool to facilitate language learning. Research supports that when a young child uses these additional forms of communication, it strengthens language learning earlier and frequently creates an environment where speech develops sooner than if signs, gestures and visual supports were not used during these early developmental years.
- Children who initiate frequently and engage with others create an ideal condition for their own language learning. You have many daily opportunities to label, describe and comment about ongoing activities in your child's day. This is language learning at its best!
- Most children with Down syndrome strongest learning modality is visual. Use pictures or objects to teach language. The child can look at a picture or hold an object for as long as needed to process and understand that vocabulary. Always use the spoken word and possible sign or gesture when presenting a photo or object to the young child. Repetition is an important learning tool.
- Observe: this means pay close attention to your child so you know what he or she is interested in or what he or she is trying to communicate. Many young children communicate in subtle ways. Examples of this are:
 - A toddler sat on the floor with her mother as she pushed a toy horse across the floor while looking at her mother several times. As she looked at her mother she was waiting for a reaction. Seize the moment to use language! This mother should respond with a horse sound or a comment such as "big horse".
 - An infant claps as music begins. This communicates enjoyment and should be responded to with clapping, smiling, singing or a verbal response such as "Yes, music!"
 - An infant pushes a bowl away communicating 'finished'. The parent should say and sign "All done." The parent may need to use the child's hands to move them through the sign they are teaching the child. This helps the child learn the motor movement necessary for that sign.
- Listen! This increases the likelihood the child will use more language to interact with you.
- Teach turn taking at a young age. This is the foundation of communication. When an infant begins to coo, give eye contact and imitate the sound. Then

wait for the infant to respond back to you. Keep this turn taking going until the child loses interest in the interaction. Praise the child for the sounds that were produced. This shapes verbal behavior and encourages the child to try again. The more we practice the better we get!

- Encourage your child's coos, gurgles and babbling with music, bubbles, toys, books, singing, etc.
- Build a strong gestural/ sign vocabulary in conjunction with the spoken word. As the child's verbal skills develop and the child no longer needs the sign language to communicate, the signs gradually disappear from use.
- Talk to your child in simple language as you interact throughout the day. Your young child is listening to everything you say even though they might not be responding. "Mommy is eating carrots," "Daddy is sleeping."
- Read simple books with basic pictures and limited words, label the pictures and have the child touch the picture. This builds vocabulary
- Tell nursery rhymes and sing simple songs like *Wheels on the Bus*. The melodic intonation of music can jump start vocal/verbal development, so encourage your child to listen to music. Repetition and predictability are beneficial with young children learning language.
- Play simple games like *pat-a-cake*, *peek-a boo*, *Simon Says*. Make it fun...smile, laugh!
- Use choice making to facilitate communication development. A very young child can make a choice between two toys or objects presented. The young child may use nonverbal communication to make this choice. This could be eye gaze (looking at the desired object), reaching for or touching the object. Assign communicative intent to the communication by following up with statements such as "Yes, bunny" or "You want the blue cup!"
- Praise your child's effort to communicate with attention (look at the child when he or she is attempting any form of communication) and respond with 'good talking', "Yes, more music." smiling, nodding, etc. This strategy is shaping the child's behavior for higher level communication skills.
- Repeat a child's words or word approximation over and over. If a child says "ooke" for cookie, slowly model back the correct pronunciation. This, over time, provides the model for improved speech production of the vocabulary the child is using.
- Provide 'wait time' when interacting with your child. This will give a young child an opportunity to communicate which provides needed practice for the child. Studies of adult-child interactions have shown that adults give children approximately one second to respond to questions or comments. After one second, the adult repeats, comments or provides the answer, thus depriving the child of needed time to formulate a response.

A young child's feeding and oral motor development go hand in hand in developing the oral motor skills necessary to support speech intelligibility. The basic oral motor movements needed to chew and move food efficiently to a swallow are the underlying skills needed to support the production of speech sound development. Speech production is the most complicated and refined motor activity that the body performs. A young child with reduced muscle tone or reduced muscle strength may have challenges in developing intelligible speech sounds, as the oral muscles needed to produce these rapid and precise oral movements are impacted by reduced strength and endurance caused by hypotonia. It is strongly recommended that an infant with Down syndrome receive services by a speech language pathologist who has training in this particular area of feeding and communication development as soon after birth as possible. Basic feeding knowledge, the importance of teaching parents how to facilitate all forms of their young child's communications and general knowledge about reduced muscle tone and the impact on their child's development is very important information for parents to understand. The earlier this information is provided, the better the parent can support their child's feeding, oral motor and communication needs.

Oral motor development: Muscle tone significantly impacts both the breath support and ability to develop muscle movement needed for speech intelligibility. Low muscle tone affects the ability of the cheeks, lips, jaw, tongue and soft palate to move independently and simultaneously. These oral motor skills are very important for the production of precise speech sound development and the child's core strength impacts this area of development.

Feeding development: A child's oral motor development may also impact a child's ability to eat. It is important to help your child develop his or her range of motion in tongue movement, strong chewing ability, jaw strength and stabilization and reduce/eliminate any forward tongue posture or jaw shifting. These oral motor issues may not only impact the child's feeding and nutritional intake, but may also impact the child's ability to produce accurate and precise speech sounds.

Tips and activities to help with oral motor and feeding development:

- Infants may benefit from oral stimulation to the face and oral cavity. The needs of each infant and toddler need to be individualized by a speech language pathologist with training in feeding and oral motor development. If your state has Early Intervention services, discuss this with your case manager and specifically ask for a speech language pathologist trained in this specific area.
- Strengthen your toddler's lips by practicing sounds, such as "oooo", "eeee", "oo-ee". Say 'puh' and pop the sound with your lips. Puff out the lips while keeping your lips sealed. Purse the lips to make a kiss. Blow bubbles, whistles, kazoos or horns.

- Discuss with your speech language pathologist appropriate strategies for feeding your young child. This may include positioning, oral support to move from bottle to cup drinking, spoon placement during feeding to decrease tongue thrusting, jaw strengthening exercises, difficulties that the child may have transitioning to higher textured foods ,etc.

It is very important to work with a speech language pathologist that is experienced in YOUR child's needs.

Here are some possible questions to ask (depending on the individual needs of your child) during the initial conversation with a speech language pathologist that may begin servicing your child:

- How many young children have you worked with that have reduced muscle tone in their face and mouth?
- Do you use basic sign language to support communication and language development in your therapy sessions?
- Do you use picture communication to support language learning and provide opportunities for my child to communicate wants and needs that he/she may not currently have the verbal skills to communicate ?
- Do you have oral motor/feeding training in addressing my child's reduced muscle tone and the impact it has on eating and speaking?
- What strategies do you work on to eliminate my child's drinking from a straw or cup with his tongue under the cup or straw to support it while drinking?
- What exercises do you work on in therapy to address the need for improved tongue retraction as my child has an open mouth posture and forward placement of his tongue?
- My child's jaw shifts and juts out when he talks. What can be done to address that issue?
- My child has difficulty tolerating taste, temperature or texture in foods and is a 'picky' eater. What type of therapy do you use to address these feeding issues?
- My child has difficulty chewing food well and often swallows it before he should or spits it out. He fatigues quickly when eating. What interventions do you use in therapy to address these issues?

A speech language pathologist that is trained to work with your child should be able to answer these questions with appropriate explanations and share therapy strategies specific to your child's therapy needs.

Hearing acuity and its impact on speech and language development: Hearing is critical to communication, speech, language development and learning. All children with Down syndrome should receive audiological evaluations to determine their hearing acuity. An audiologist will then determine the frequency that these evalua-

tions should occur and discuss any concerns (ear infections, middle ear fluid, etc.) that may impact your child's audiological status. Audiological issues have the potential to significantly impact your child's speech and language development.

Following directions: Following directions is an important receptive language skill and should be encouraged from a very young age. By working on this skill in small steps, the young child begins to strengthen his or her ability to follow directions and comprehend what is asked by the parent. It also builds self-esteem and works toward independence.

Tips and activities to encourage direction following:

- Start by giving the child a simple one-step directive, such as “give me the book” or “give me your cup”. The type of directive will depend on the child's age and skill level.
- Slowly increase this directive to include more common objects. Move to actions such as “clap your hands” or “touch your nose”. The game *Simon Says* is great for listening and following directions. Use hand-over-hand if your child is having difficulty with the directive. Praise the child as he or she moves to successful completion of the directive.
- Remember to reinforce every step the child takes in learning these skills. Many children will need assistance in learning these skills and may require the parent moving them through the directive, initially. This encouragement will shape the behavior and lead to further development!



Glossary

Audiology: the study of hearing disorders including hearing function/hearing acuity

Co-contraction: the action of completely stiffening one part of the body by contracting muscles on both sides of a joint

Compensatory movement pattern: an atypical movement pattern used due to reduced strength or control

Dexterity: accurate and efficient hand movements for function

Digital palmer grasp: a grasp used to hold a pencil or tool, in which the handle is stabilized in the palm, while the thumb, second and third fingers extend to the end; the second stage of grasp development

Expressive language: the ability to put thoughts into words and sentences in a way that makes sense and is grammatically accurate

Fine motor skills: the small movements of the body that use the small muscles of the fingers, toes, wrists, lips and tongue

Gross motor skills: the large movements of the body including rolling, sitting, crawling, standing, walking, running, and jumping

Hyperextension: “locking” a joint by over-extending it, using the skeletal stability rather than muscle control

Hypotonia: the condition in which muscles don’t have the normal amount of tone, or contraction, so they appear loose or floppy

Language: using words, gestures, visual support to express wants, needs and thoughts

Ligamentous laxity: Ligaments are connective tissue that help support our joints. Ligamentous laxity, which is common in people with low muscle tone, results in increased mobility and possibly decreased stability around the joints

Muscle power: the ability to contract a muscle for a quick or explosive movement

Muscle strength: the ability to contract a muscle and generate force

Palmer grasp: a grasp in which the utensil or pencil is held firmly in the palm by all the fingers and thumb; the first stage of grasp development

Pincer grasp: the thumb and first finger come together to pick up small objects

Pronation: When related to fine motor skills, it is the normal resting position of the forearms and hands (palms down). When related to gross motor skills, it is when the foot and/or ankle roll inwards, placing weight on the inside of the foot.

Prone: laying on one's stomach

Quadruped: positioned on one's hands and knees

Receptive language: what we understand and comprehend, such as following directions and understanding a story that was read

Sensory Integration: the neurological process that organizes and integrates sensations from the body and the environment in order to make an adaptive response

Sensorimotor: Sensorimotor (sensory motor) skills involve the process of receiving sensory input and producing a response (motor output).

Speech: the verbal ability to make the sounds that become words, the physical act of talking. Speech consists of articulation (how speech sounds are made), voice (the use of the vocal folds and breathing to support speech) and fluency (the rhythm of speech)

Supination: When related to fine motor skills, it is the rotating of the wrist to turn the forearm and the palm up. When related to gross motor skills, it is the rolling outward of the foot and ankle.

Supine: laying on one's back

Visual motor: refers to activities in which the eyes guide hand movements

Wide base of support: positioning the body part, typically the arms or legs, spread wide apart

Resource List

Suggested Books:

Activities for Gross Motor Skills Development Early Childhood by Jodene Smith

Babies with Down Syndrome: A New Parents' Guide by Susan J. Skallerup

Down Syndrome Parenting 101: Must-Have Advice for Making Your Life Easier by Natalie Hale

Early Communication Skills for Children with Down Syndrome: A Guide for Parents and Professionals by Libby Kumin

Excell: Experiences in Context for Early Language Learning by Catherine B. Raack

Fine Motor Skills for Children With Down Syndrome: A Guide for Parents And Professionals, Third Edition, by Maryanne Bruni

Gross Motor Skills for Children With Down Syndrome: A Guide for Parents and Professionals by Patricia C. Winders

It Takes Two To Talk: A Parent's Guide to Helping Children Communicate by Ayala Manolson

Learning Language and Loving It: A Guide to Promoting Children's Social, Language and Literacy Development by Elaine Weitzman and Janice Greenberg

The Out-Of-Sync Child Has Fun by Carol Kranowitz, activities for kids with sensory processing disorder

Sign With Your Baby: How to Communicate With Infants Before They Can Speak by Dr. Joseph Garcia

Signs For Me by Ben Bahan and Joe Dannis

Suggested Websites:

American Speech-Language and Hearing Association: www.asha.org
National association website for speech, language and hearing information and resources.

Therapy ideas for occupational, physical and speech therapy: www.pinterest.com

ARK Therapeutic Services: www.arktherapeutic.com
A leading manufacturer of innovative therapy tools and special needs products.

Beyond Basic Play: <https://beyondbasicplay.wordpress.com/>
Blog by a pediatric physical therapist with tips, tricks and more to promote movement.

Beyond Play: www.beyondplay.com
A catalog and website provide products for early childhood and special needs children.

Fine Motor Skill Activities: www.education.com and www.otplan.com

Fine Motor Skill Development : www.sensory-processing-disorder.com
This includes multiple links for activities for handwriting, scissor use and other F-M skills.

Playing with Words 365: www.playingwithwords365.com
Blog by a speech language pathologist to promote language development using fun activities.

The Inspired Treehouse: www.theinspiredtreehouse.com
Blog by pediatric occupational and physical therapists that promote development and wellness.

The Therapy Street: <http://therapystreetforkids.com/>
An extensive library of fine motor development activities.

Woodbine House: <http://www.woodbinehouse.com/Down-Syndrome.29.0.0.2.htm>
A continued list of books and resources about Down syndrome.

Gift List for Birth to Three Year Olds

- Cups, pails, and shovels
- Play kitchen with play food & pots or workbench with play tools
- Bean bags and balls of all sizes
- Blocks, Duplos,
- Snap apart beads
- Bristle block
- Peg boards
- Musical instruments, especially ones requiring both hands to play
- Play dough and accessories
- Finger paint
- Sand art
- Stuffed toys that vibrate when squeezed
- Play tent
- Tactile mats
- "Touch and Feel" books, board books, pop up books and flap books
- Puppets
- Bubbles, bubble machines, pinwheels
- Sensory bins
- Simple coloring books, blank paper, construction paper, white glue and glue sticks
- Child sized scissors
- Stickers with simple shapes
- Magna Doodle
- Mr. Potato Head
- Ker-plunk game
- Connect 4
- Slinky
- Play microphone to sing or vocalize into
- Pretend play toys, such as farm sets, doll houses, dolls and accessories
- Cars, trucks, planes and trains
- Infant play gym or tummy time mat
- Infant/toddler activity table
- Mini ball pit (or create your own with a baby pool and any kind of balls or sensory material)
- Infant/toddler slide or swing
- Push toy or grocery cart for practicing walking
- Variety of balls for throwing, kicking, catching
- Ride-on toy
- Tricycle or Strider Bike
- 4 wheeled "gym-class" scooter (ride sitting down)
- Mini-trampoline with handle
- Hippity-hop ball with handle
- Tilt board or balance board
- Balance beam
- Plastic or stuffed animals to practice making animal sounds
- Yoga Pretzel cards
- Outdoor play equipment for climbing
- Parachute
- Tunnel
- Play telephones
- Music CDs with preschool appropriate songs

About the Authors

GiGi's Playhouse thanks our amazing team of therapeutic experts!

Lyndsey Menning is a physical therapist working in the northwest suburbs of Chicago, Illinois. She completed her undergraduate degree in kinesiology and exercise physiology at the University of Wisconsin and her Masters degree in physical therapy at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. She has spent the last 13 years working in Early Intervention and private practice. She specializes in treating the birth to age eight population, serving children with a wide range of developmental delays and disabilities, including many children with Down syndrome. She enjoys bringing her clinical expertise into the home setting to make it accessible and practical for families in the early years of their child's development.

Chris Newlon is a former Board of Managers member for GiGi's Playhouse McHenry County for 6 years in a variety of roles. She is also a public speaker and outreach specialist for the National Association for Down Syndrome, with a focus in schools and hospitals. She recently became an NDSS- DS Ambassador for the State of Illinois. Chris worked in Adolescent Psychiatry and with people with Eating Disorders as a licensed OT in Ohio and Illinois. She is the mother of five children, ages 12 to 28, the youngest of whom has Down syndrome.

Lora White is a pediatric speech and language pathologist in private practice in the northwest suburbs of Chicago, Illinois. She has spent the last 35 years working with children with developmental disabilities and their families. Lora has extensive training in oral motor/ feeding issues and the communication development of children. Her practice consists of many children with Down syndrome.

Daniell Bargstadt is the National Programs Manager at GiGi's Playhouse. She conducts research and development to grow our programs, enhances program materials, and provides training, support and guidance to program staff and volunteers. Daniell has been with GiGi's for over 12 years, as a founder, a board President, a local program coordinator, and now a member of the national staff. On the personal side, she's the mother of 5 children, the youngest of which is Olivia, a teenager with Down syndrome shown at left. You can reach Daniell at dbargstadt@gigisplayhouse.org, or by submitting a Zen Desk ticket in the category of Programs. Daniell is honored to have worked so closely with our team of experts to complete this project!

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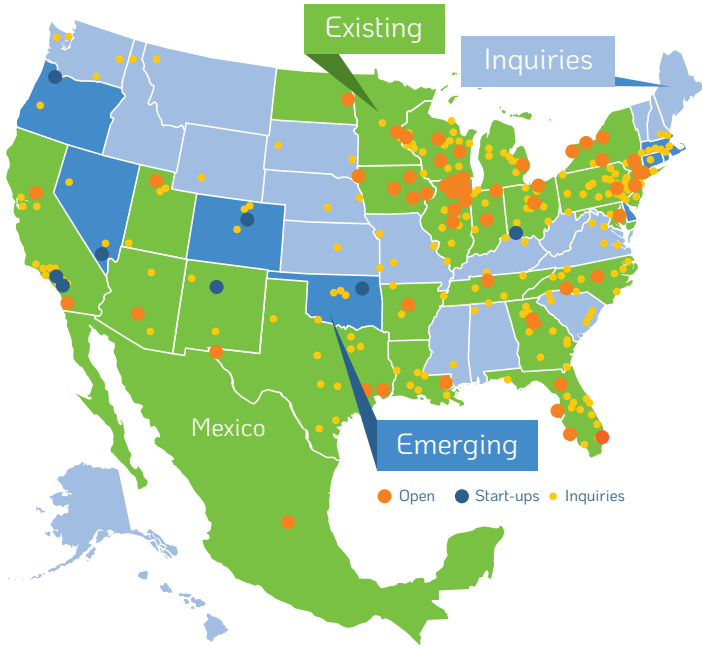
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Disclaimer: Please note that the activities and exercises within this book should not replace therapeutic intervention. It is best to consult your therapist or speech and language pathologist who is trained to individualize to the needs of your child. Their guidance will be important for successful development.



GiGi's Playhouse™

Down Syndrome Achievement Centers
educate. inspire. believe.

Locations across North America, including Mexico, and still growing!

Check our website for a location near you!

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