

# Toys, Play & Activities for Babies and Young Children who have Spinal Muscular Atrophy

Play is a child's main occupation. It is very important for developing gross and fine motor skills, speech, and language. Through play children learn:

- to explore the world around them
- to be imaginative and creative
- how to share and negotiate.

Play is also important for emotional development, building self-esteem and resilience.



We hope this short guide will:

- give you ideas about how to play with your child in a way that encourages their development
- help you notice if your child is not doing what is expected, so that you can ask your clinical team or health visitor for advice
- provide you with suggestions for when they get older.

# Our multisensory toy packs



We provide two different multisensory toy packs suitable for infants living in the UK who are:

- aged up to 12 months or
- 12 to 24 months of age.

Each family may have one of these packs free of charge.

To request a Multisensory Toy Pack, please contact The Support Team at 01789 267 520 or contact us at: [smauk.org.uk/contact-support-team/](https://smauk.org.uk/contact-support-team/). Let us know which pack you would like.

## 1. Toys and Play Safety

**Please always:**

- Follow the advice you are given by your child's clinical team about safe and comfortable positions for your baby
- If your child is a 'tummy breather', being in some positions may make breathing harder work. If you are not sure if this affects your child check with your physio.
- Follow your physio's advice on when your child needs to wear their spinal brace, if they have one.
- Read any instructions that come with the toy or activity
- Make sure it is safe and suitable for your child
- Supervise your child when they are playing
- Check toys regularly to make sure they are not broken or unusable.

## 2. Developmental Checks

All babies and children develop differently. Concerns about a child with SMA's ability to sit, stand, and walk are understandable. Their breathing, feeding and swallowing are all as important. So is the development of their understanding, speech, and social skills

**It is important to have regular check-ups with a doctor or child health nurse at ages:**

- **4 months**
- **8 months**
- **1 year**
- **18 months**
- **2 years**

**These check-ups should continue until they are at least 4 years old.**

## 3. Noise and Colours

Before babies learn how to grasp objects, they respond to things they can look at and listen to. Bright colours or high contrast colours like black and white are easiest to see. Babies particularly like objects that make a noise when moved.

### Some Ideas:

**Bubbles are great. We blow them over our daughter when she is lying on the floor, and she tries to catch them.**

**I tie different lengths and coloured ribbons to our washing line and lie my little one underneath. She really loves watching the ribbons float around on the breeze.**

- Brightly coloured musical mobiles
- Baby play gyms and mats
- Talking and singing with your baby
- Music – YouTube and nursery rhymes
- Lullaby projector lightshow
- Bath time fun with music and toys that make a noise or light up
- Wind chimes and coloured ribbons.



**One of my baby's favourite activities is exploring a sensory foil blanket. I cut it into thin strips and use them all over the house! I stuffed some into a silicone whisk, tied some around a toothbrush, let some hang from the baby gym and it's always a guaranteed hit. Lightweight, noisy, reflective and versatile.**

**I hold a circular rain maker toy under my baby's feet, as she rolls her feet back and forth her legs gently stretch and bend.**

## 4. Exploring Using Mouth and Hands

As babies develop, they learn to explore using their mouth and by grasping at their toys. Initially they grasp with the palms of their hands. If your baby finds it tiring to use their arms and hands, your physio or OT will advise you how to support your child comfortably and safely. Lying your baby on their side with support may help them to use both their hands together.

### Some ideas:

- Activity centre or play mat
- Lightweight rattles and bells
- Colourful board books with textured pages
- Simple action songs
- Lightweight and colourful finger puppets
- Small soft toys that are easy to hold
- Suitable teething toys.



**I couldn't find any teething toys that my baby could hold up to her mouth, so despite her being nil by mouth and currently Peg feeding, I offered her a lightweight weaning spoon. With practice, she is now able to hold the handle and chew on it.**

## 5. Holding Objects

Over time, your child may start to reach and pull objects towards them and pass them from one hand to the other. Later, your child may begin to pick up small objects between their forefinger and thumb. This is using a 'pincer' grasp.

They might enjoy having their toys in front of them on a tray with a rim so that they don't easily slide off.

Non-slip mats also help to keep toys in place.

### Some ideas:

- Building blocks e.g. Duplo. You can also get magnetic blocks/animals which make building easier
- Books with different textures to touch and feel
- Shape sorters
- Stacking cups or rings.



**Our son enjoys playing with small blocks and animals on a tray**

**The foam alphabet letters are a brilliant resource for my little one because they come in an array of colours. They are very lightweight and the different shapes make them easy to pass between little hands.**



## 6. Movement and Interaction

As they get older, your child may begin to imitate what they see around them, start to recognise words and the names of familiar objects.

**You may want to position your child so that they can explore. Check with your physio about safe and comfortable ways to do this. Follow their advice on when your child needs to wear their spinal brace, if they have one.**

### Some ideas:

- Movement and interactive games like peek-a-boo and pat-a-cake
- Toys that move or make a sound



- Storytelling, music or rhyme sessions at your local library
- Hide and seek games with toys
- Swimming or, if you have one, hydrotherapy pool activities. There are various floatation aids available if you need them. Check with your physio, OT or health visitor what would be best for your child.

**We play catch indoors with a balloon as this is much lighter than a ball.**

**Our daughter loves to move shapes along a string. It encourages her to stretch and makes her laugh.**

**Your phone is likely to have been noticed and be of interest!**

**Ipads and tablets can offer age-appropriate games that encourage play and learning. These can all be very positive but there are concerns about children having too much screen time. You may want to try different ways of positioning the screen so that your child can use it comfortably.**

**Talk to your clinical team or health visitor for advice.**

## **7. Cause and Effect**

As your child becomes interested in what happens when they do something, you can introduce new toys and ideas to provide fun and learning.

### **Some ideas:**

- Magnetic books, jigsaws or games
- Toys which are operated by a button and make a sound or move
- Playmobil and Duplo figures
- Messy play using sand, water or jelly.
- Play food to encourage imaginative play





- Drawing or painting. It can help to stick paper down with blue tack to hold it still. Try finger painting, light-touch thicker pencils, felt tip pens Crayola Twistables which glide on easily. Pencil grips can help.
- Wipeable drawing and doodle boards
- Helping with baking, mixing, and decorating cakes and biscuits
- Throwing and catching games using light sponge balls. Larger ones will be easier.

**We used pots and pans from the kitchen with a wooden spoon to create noise. And she loved working out which animal fitted where on a wooden shape puzzle.**

## 8. Hands On

Working with your child's current abilities can help avoid them feeling frustrated or upset if they find an activity difficult to manage by themselves.

### Some ideas:

- Playdough. Rolling, squeezing, and cutting out shapes.
- Trains and cars on tracks or slides. Magnetic trains are easier to join up
- Magnetic tiles or blocks and fishing games
- Large piece wooden jigsaws and puzzles
- Toys that use the pull of gravity like cars or marbles sent down ramps. This encourages reaching and stretching.



**We found dressing up in full outfits could be difficult, so we focused on using lots of wigs and hats.**

## **9. Becoming More Independent**

It is important for children to explore, take part in activities and begin to play with their friends more independently.

**Your child's physio or OT will tell you about powered wheelchairs if your child needs one.**

**Wizzybug is a popular small powered 'wheelchair' for children under the age of 5 and weighing up to 20 kgs. With adult supervision it can be used indoors and out and is easy to control. It may be suitable for children as young as 14 months. It is loaned to families free of charge by the charity Designability.**

**Find out more about [Wizzybugs >](#)**

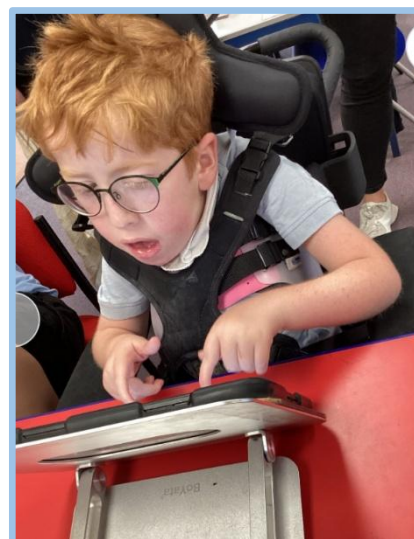


**Soft sponge balls are good for playing football. Our son goes in goal and uses his wheelchair to stop the ball when he is playing with his able-bodied friends.**

## 10. Computers and Assistive Technology

If your child wants to use a computer for games and schoolwork, they may need some adaptations to use it independently. For example, a light touch mouse.

Talk to your child's OT (Occupational Therapist) who will advise you.



## 11. Local Resources

Local libraries often run sessions for children and can tell you what's on offer in your area.

Toy libraries lend out toys at a very low cost. Your local authority website or your local library should have details of your nearest toy library.

- **Smart Play Network** – in Scotland, supports toy libraries, play services and play providers: [smartplaynetwork.org](http://smartplaynetwork.org)
- **Newlife Charity for Disabled Children** – loan toys through their play therapy pod service. Phone: 0800 902 0095. [newlifecharity.co.uk](http://newlifecharity.co.uk)
- **Sure Start Centres** – provide activities and play ideas for children under the age of 5. See if you have one in your area. [gov.uk/find-sure-start-childrens-centre](http://gov.uk/find-sure-start-childrens-centre)

- **The Portage Scheme** – is a national home-visiting educational service for pre-school children with additional support needs and their families. [portage.org.uk](http://portage.org.uk)
- **Local Children Hospices** – offer play facilities, including multi-sensory rooms and music rooms. Some children and families will be eligible for their support. [tinyurl.com/3ubvxemb](http://tinyurl.com/3ubvxemb)

## 12. Where To Buy Specialist Toys

Specialist suppliers include:

- **Dycem** – supply non-slip mats. [dycem-ns.com](http://dycem-ns.com)
- **Explore your Senses** – sensory toys. [exploreyoursenses.co.uk](http://exploreyoursenses.co.uk)
- **Hope Education** – educational resources. [hope-education.co.uk](http://hope-education.co.uk)
- **Liberator** – switch adapted toys. [liberator.co.uk](http://liberator.co.uk)
- **Living Made Easy** – information about play equipment and suppliers – from the tabs at the top, choose 'leisure and play'. [livingmadeeasy.org.uk](http://livingmadeeasy.org.uk)
- **Meru** – device holders, sensory and switch-adapted toys. [merushop.org](http://merushop.org)
- **Rompa** – sensory and developmental toys. [rompa.com](http://rompa.com)
- **Sense Toys** – sensory toys. [sensetoys.com](http://sensetoys.com)
- **Sensory Toy Warehouse** – [sensorytoywarehouse.com](http://sensorytoywarehouse.com)
- **Spacecraft** – sensory resources. [spacecraft.co.uk](http://spacecraft.co.uk)
- **Special Needs Toys** – range of toys. [specialneedstoys.com](http://specialneedstoys.com)

Charity shops, eBay and Facebook Marketplace can be good for buying second-hand toys.

The [Family Fund](http://familyfund.org.uk) > may be able to help with the cost of toys. [familyfund.org.uk](http://familyfund.org.uk)



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