

Activity Ideas for Early Services Children



The following activities are recommended for children aged 0–5 years. They should not replace your child’s individual therapy programmes. For advice about how to change the activities below to address your child’s needs, please contact your relevant therapist.

Psychology Top Tip

Managing Tantrums in the Early Years

What are tantrums?

Tantrums come in all shapes and sizes.

They can involve explosions of anger, frustration and disorganised behaviour – when your child ‘loses it’.



You might see crying, screaming, stiffening limbs, an arched back, kicking, falling down, flailing about or running away. In some cases, children hold their breath, vomit, break things or get aggressive as part of a tantrum.

Why tantrums happen:

Tantrums are very common in children aged 1–3 years.

This is because children’s social and emotional skills are only just starting to develop at this age. Children often don’t have the words to express big emotions. They might be testing out their growing independence. And they’re discovering that the way they behave can influence the way other people behave.

So tantrums are one of the ways that young children express and manage feelings, and try to understand or change what’s going on around them.

Older children can have tantrums too. This can be because they haven’t yet learned more appropriate ways to express or manage feelings.

For both toddlers and older children, there are things that can make tantrums more likely to happen:

- Temperament – this influences how quickly and strongly children react to things like frustrating events. Children who get upset easily might be more likely to have tantrums.
- Stress, hunger, tiredness and overstimulation – these can make it harder for children to express and manage feelings and behaviour.

- Situations that children just can't cope with – for example, a toddler might have trouble coping if an older child takes a toy away.
- Strong emotions – worry, fear, shame and anger can be overwhelming for children.

Self-regulation is the ability to understand and manage behaviour and reactions. Children start developing it from around 12 months. As your child gets older, she'll be more able to regulate her reactions and calm down when something upsetting happens. You'll see fewer tantrums as a result.

How to make toddler tantrums less likely:

There are things you can do to make tantrums less likely to happen:

- Reduce stress. Tired, hungry and overstimulated children are more likely to experience tantrums.
- Tune in to your child's feelings. If you're aware of your child's feelings, you might be able to sense when big feelings are on the way. You can talk about what's going on and help your child manage difficult feelings. You might also be able to distract your child.
- Identify tantrum triggers. For example, your child might have tantrums when you're shopping. You might be able to plan ahead or change the environment to avoid tantrums. For example, it might help to go shopping after your child has had a nap and a snack.
- Talk about emotions with your child. When your child struggles with a strong feeling, encourage him to name the feeling and what caused it. For example, 'Did you throw your toy because you were cross that it wasn't working? What else could you have done?'

How to handle toddler tantrums when they happen:

Sometimes tantrums happen, no matter what you do to avoid them. Here are some ideas for handling tantrums when they happen:

- Stay calm (or pretend to!). Take a moment for yourself if you need to. If you get angry, it'll make the situation harder for both you and your child. When you speak, keep your voice calm and level, and act deliberately and slowly.

- Acknowledge your child's strong feelings. For example, 'It's very upsetting when your ice-cream falls out of the cone, isn't it?' This can help prevent behaviour getting more out of control and gives your child a chance to reset emotions.
- Wait out the tantrum. Stay close to your child so she knows you're there. But don't try to reason with her or distract her. It's too late once a tantrum has started.
- Take charge when you need to. If the tantrum happens because your child wants something, don't give him what he wants. If your child doesn't want to do something, use your judgment. For example, if your child doesn't want to get out of the bath, it might be safer to pull out the plug than to lift him out.
- Be consistent and calm in your approach. If you sometimes give your child what she wants when she has tantrums and you sometimes don't, the problem could get worse.

Tantrums in preschoolers and early school-age children

You can use all of the tips above to help with tantrums in preschoolers and early school-age children.

At this age, children are also better able to understand that their actions have effects. This means that you can sometimes use consequences to manage your child's behaviour.

It's important to make sure you don't accidentally reward tantrums. For example, if your child has a tantrum because you say no to buying her a lolly but then you buy the lolly, this rewards the tantrum. Shouting or pleading with your child when she has tantrums can also be a reward, because it gives your child attention.

If your child has additional needs like autism spectrum disorder (ASD), he might have frequent or severe tantrums and you may need additional support to the tips outlined here.

Coping with tantrums

Dealing with tantrums can be very draining and stressful. You might feel you need to step in to end a tantrum straight away. But if it's safe, it can help to take a breather while you decide how to respond.

Here are ideas for staying calm and keeping things in perspective:

- Develop a strategy for tantrums. Have a clear plan for how you'll handle a tantrum in whatever situation you're in. Concentrate on putting your plan into action when the tantrum happens.
- Accept that you can't control your child's emotions or behaviour directly. You can only keep your child safe and guide her behaviour so tantrums are less likely to happen in the future.
- Accept that it takes time for change to happen. Your child has a lot of growing up to do before tantrums are gone forever. Developing and practising self-regulation skills is a life-long task.
- Beware of thinking that your child is doing it on purpose or is trying to upset you. Children don't have tantrums deliberately – they're stuck in a bad habit or just don't have the skills right now to cope with the situation.
- Keep your sense of humour. But don't laugh at the tantrum – if you do, it might reward your child with attention. It might also upset him even more if he thinks you're laughing at him.
- Don't judge yourself as a parent based on how many tantrums your child has. Remember that all children have tantrums. Instead, focus on how you respond to the tantrums. And remember that you're only human and part of parenting is learning as you go.

Talk to your Psychologist for further advice about managing tantrums

Early Years Education Top Tip

Play Time



Play time in early year's development is very important. Children learn through a variety of play while exercising their creativity, developing social skills and language skills. Play time enhances their overall learning while having lots of fun. Any play that encourages children to use their imagination and creativity is fantastic also for developing children's problem solving, turn-taking, and learning how to lead and follow. Completing tasks together is a life skill and great for children's self-esteem.

Fun Play Activities for Outdoors

- Gardening (clean up the garden for spring, planting and sowing seeds. Bird watching and caring for the birds and pets if you have them)
- Water Play (watering plants, washing toys, making bubbles, all kinds of messy play etc.)
- Music and dance with yoga for relaxation
- Pitch a tent and decorate it as an outside playhouse or pre-school
- Have picnics when possible. Eating outdoors is always more fun.
- Treasure hunts

Fun Play Time Inside Activities

- Play pretend pre-school, set up an allocated area for play and join in (who's Teacher)
- Arrange different play zones if possible (construction, home corner, zoo, farm). These can revive new interest in older toys.
- Play house, shopping, hospital and going on holidays (use whatever is available).
- Play puzzles and board games for challenge time
- Make a job chart to encourage children to participate in age-appropriate fun jobs
- Arts and crafts of all varieties, painting, playdough, colouring sheets (printed from internet). Try using recycled items to recreate sculpture making.
- Daily story time and follow up questions and re-enactment

- There are lots of educational programs on Netflix and YouTube which are fun and age appropriate.
- Allow time between activities for down-time and for children to recharge.

Talk to your Early Years Educator for further advice about play skill development

Occupational Therapy Top Tip

Prewriting Skills



Writing is a complex perceptual, motor and cognitive skill. Pre-writing skills are the activities children take part in to prepare them for writing instruction. The following activities can support your child to develop their prewriting skills.

- Try drawing on sandpaper, patterned wallpaper, in sand or mud.
- Draw in lotions, pudding, whipped cream, icing sugar, chocolate spread and shaving foam.
- Experiment with different colours of chalk, markers, crayons, pens, pencils and paints.
- Draw in shallow trays of sand.
- Practice dot to dots. Encourage your child to stop on each dot. Use arrows to indicate the next dot to improve forward planning and directionality
- Make shapes and lines out of rolled up play dough, noodles or spaghetti.
- Make scribble drawings with your child. After allowing time for them to make their own marks, demonstrate making marks such as – | O
- Draw on cakes with coloured icing tubes.
- Encourage making pictures out of shapes.
- Stencils
- Use of mazes to encourage development of pencil control. Start with getting the child to walk on large shapes/lines on the floor (masking tape or chalk) and drive toy cars through mazes, over crossing lines and diagonals. Then encourage drawing between a horizontal or vertical path. Gradually increase the complexity of the maze with curves, circles and dead ends. Gradually decrease the width of the maze to encourage increased control. These can be done with finger

paints, crayons, pencils or paints on a table, at an easel or on paper on the floor or pinned to the wall.

- Try outdoor activities such as such as rubbing over different textures e.g. concrete, brick or bark.
- Use thick paintbrushes and buckets of water to paint on outdoor surfaces.

Strategies:

- Praise your child if they look at the mark, as you make it. Praise any attempt they make that is approaching your example.
- Use short regular pencils, small pieces of chalk, felt markers and crayons, this helps the development of finger control.
- Encourage large movements when making marks, this encourages use of the muscles of the whole arm and shoulder against gravity and helps to reinforce the 'mental picture' of the pattern. This is recommended at the early stage of learning letter formation. Gradually reduce the size to smaller, refined movements.
- Encourage your child to experience a wide range of different mark-makers and surfaces on which to make their patterns. Materials used to stimulate the senses, are excellent to reinforce learning and will help keep your child's interest.
- Start to make a link for children between prewriting shapes and marks and letters e.g. A circle is the same as an 'o'.
- If your child struggles with attention and perseverance, try doing sensory activities before drawing with crayons or pens e.g. drawing in sand, play dough, as sensory input can help prepare a child to focus. If the child is attending, use directional words, e.g. down, across, round.
- Gauge how much help you give your child. Initially you may need to use a hand over hand approach but try to reduce how much physical and verbal help you give the child, so they become more independent.
- Don't focus too quickly on forming letters, try to make drawing fun!

Talk to your Occupational Therapist for further advice about pre-writing skill development

Speech and Language Therapy Top Tip

Supporting Early Communication Development



The best way for young children to develop their communication is through everyday activities and play with their family. The following strategies can help support early language and communication development:

- Get down to your child's level face to face with them when you are interacting with them.
- Observe how they are playing and join in by following their lead and interests.
- Wait for your child to start the interaction with you (e.g. by looking at you/showing you something/ saying something to you).
- Imitate how your child plays and the sounds they are making.
- Create opportunities for your child to take the lead/start the interaction by:
 - Offering choices of objects/activities (e.g. 'ball or bubbles?')
 - Giving them a little bit of something and then waiting for them to request more
 - Pausing during motivating familiar routines to give them the opportunity to continue it e.g. familiar songs
- Interpret their messages by making simple comments that are linked to what is happening (e.g. if your child points to a balloon and says 'ba' you could say 'balloon')
- Model words and short phrases about what is happening in the here and now (e.g. 'go car', 'big tower', 'teddy's sleeping').
- Expand on their language by adding on an extra word to what they say (e.g. if they say 'ball' you could say 'red ball').
- Try to model and expand using action words (e.g. eating, jumping), location words (e.g. in, on) and descriptive words (e.g. big, yellow, fast) as well as object words.
- Take turns to keep the interaction going.

Talk to your Speech and Language Therapist for further advice about early communication development

Physiotherapy Top Tip

Gross Motor Skills Activities for Early Services Children

The following are some activities that will help promote the development of your child's gross motor skills such as muscle strength, balance, bilateral integration and coordination.

0-6 Months

Tummy Time:

Tummy time helps with the development of neck, shoulders, back and core muscles which are needed to help meet motor milestones such as rolling, sitting, crawling etc. It may also help prevent motor delay, positional plagiocephaly (baby's head has a flattened appearance) and positional torticollis (muscle tightness on one side of the neck causing the head to tilt restricted movement in the opposite direction).



- Start by placing a newborn on your chest while you are lying down or sitting reclined. The baby should be held facing you. This is a great way to interact with the baby while they try and lift their head to look at you.
- Place a mirror, musical toys, rattles, bright coloured objects, moving toys etc. in front of the baby to encourage lifting of the head and visual tracking. If there is an older sibling, you can encourage them to lie down on the floor at the baby's level or you can do the same. Babies love faces. Singing songs during Tummy Time can help comfort the baby.
- Place favourite toys just out of reach and encourage the baby to reach for them (approx. 6 months). This will help the baby strengthen the muscles needed for rolling over.

Useful Tips:

- It is important to start tummy time from birth.
- Make sure the baby is awake and never left alone on his/her tummy.
- Always place the baby on a firm, flat surface like a mat on a floor.



- Tummy Time is recommended for about 3–5 times per day for 3–5 minutes then gradually build up to longer sessions.
- Tummy Time should be a normal part of baby’s daily routine e.g. after the baby has woken up or after nappy changes.
- Try doing Tummy Time when the baby is most happy.
- Avoid Tummy Time immediately after feeds.
- Ideally use floor time to play as an alternative to the baby being in a carrier or bouncer seat.

Make Tummy Time fun time!

Lying on their backs:

- From 2–3 months old encourage the baby to start reaching for their knees.
- From around 3–4 months encourage the baby to reach for their feet.

Useful Tips:

- Make the activities part of your daily routine e.g. after bath times or nappy changes
- Use baby activity gyms
- Practice pulling off socks
- Use velcro bells around ankles, baby jingle socks etc.

Sitting Practice

- Allow the baby to sit outside of supported sitting such as a car seat or bouncer for short periods. This encourages development of head and trunk control and helps stimulate the baby.
- For a baby to get stronger in sitting, practice sitting with reduced support for short periods so long as the baby can tolerate it.
- Around 3 months your baby may tolerate sitting practice with upper and mid trunk support (high up around the shoulder blades and at front of the chest)
- Around 4 months baby may tolerate sitting with just mid trunk support (midway below the nipple line)
- Around 5–6 months baby may tolerate sitting practice with low trunk support (around the belly button line/pelvis)

NB: Baby should be supervised at all times. Ensure that the seating system is on a flat/level surface on the floor.

6–12 Months

Rolling

- Play with the baby on his/her side. This helps to stretch out the neck, develop play skills and muscle control in this position.
- Allow the baby to roll from his/her side onto their back by stimulating them to follow a toy or your face with their eyes and head. This encourages the baby to turn his/her head and then begin to roll onto their back. Continue to encourage rolling from back to tummy and tummy to back.

Sitting

- As the baby gets older, they will gradually need less support in sitting. You can sit the baby on the floor with cushions around them or put the baby in a baby bath or baby donut ring etc. for added security.
- When the baby is able to sit by themselves on the floor encourage reaching for toys forwards and to the side. When the baby has achieved this move the toys further away to encourage more reaching.

NB: The baby may lose his/her balance so ensure that you practice this during supervised time and make sure the environment is safe.

Crawling

- Practice 4–point kneeling (being on hands and knees) with your baby to prepare for crawling position.
- When your baby has started to creep on their tummy or crawl, use cushions on the floor to encourage climbing over objects. This is good preparation for practising crawling upstairs. Play games that involve crawling under objects e.g. tunnels, chairs, tables etc or over slopes.

NB: Please note it is quite typical for babies to start creeping backwards first before going forwards. This is because it is easier for them to push back than to pull forwards

Useful Tips

- Dress your baby in comfortable clothing so it is easier to practice and improve crawling techniques.
- Keep off the socks if possible or if necessary, use very thin socks. This will help the baby integrate the soles of his/her feet and toes in the crawling process.
- Where possible give your baby wide open spaces free from dangerous obstacles to practice crawling.

- Offer toys that move forward or pull toys to encourage the baby to try and follow them
- Give your baby lots of experience of movement by playing movement games, such as singing songs with big actions

Standing and Cruising

- Practice standing with your baby at a suitable height surface e.g. couch or coffee table. Place their toys on the surface to make it interesting for them. When the baby gets good at this encourage cruising along the surface by using toys as a stimulant.



1-2 Years

- Practice crawling up the stairs and creeping back down.
- Encourage the use of ride along toys to help improve muscle strength, balance and coordination of movement.
- Squatting and bending to pick up toys/objects.
- Practice throwing the ball both underhand and overhand when sitting and kneeling positions. Encourage the same activity in standing when the child is stable on their feet.
- Push-toys and pull-toys are great for improving balance and independent walking skills.
- When your child is more mobile, provide lots of different opportunities to practice movement. Go to parks with playgrounds, different surfaces (sand, grass), walk on slopes and stairs.
- Practice running, kicking the ball, jumping with two feet together.
- Start playing animal walks i.e. walking like a bear, lion, dog



2-3 Years

- Continue to practice animal walks or postures such as flamingo stance, bear walk, lion, elephant, jumping like a frog etc.
- When the child is stable on their feet walking and running then you can introduce a balance bike to work on bike skills, scooter, tricycles etc.
- Rolling or throwing a ball to a target.
- Games with a therapy ball e.g. walking while carrying a therapy ball, bouncing, tapping the therapy ball etc.
- Playground activities.



3-5 Years

- Using a trampoline to improve balance, strength and get sensory input for some children.
- Hopscotch: Hopping and jumping help develop gross motor skills, balance and coordination.
- Walking beams and or lines to build up balance skills.
- Playground activities
- Learning to ride a bike, scooter or tricycle.
- Games in the form of obstacle courses.
- Dancing
- Martial arts
- Swimming



**Enjoy the above activities and have some family fun!
Talk to your Physiotherapist for further advice about gross motor skill
development**