

Little helpers may be messy, but hands-on learning is important



## AGES & STAGES

**0-1 YEARS** Play with pots, pans, and other safe items ★ Read books ★ Give baby a massage for relaxation and body awareness ★ Blow bubbles ★ water play (always supervised) with tipping, splashing, and floating toys ★ Snuggle time with songs or rhymes

**2-3 YEARS** Let them help with chores, copying mum with little brushes and cloths ★ Set up a tent (real or with blankets) inside ★ Play hairdressers/doctors/animal rescue/shops ★ Read books ★ Set up your own indoor gymnastics with sofa cushions and squabs ★ Water play (always supervised) washing doll clothes, filling containers, water paint with a brush on the fence ★ Sing and dance

# HOMEGROWN

# kids

From Playcentres to coffee groups, stay-at-home parents can access great community support and create their own unique family routine.

**Y**our first baby brings huge changes and decisions. One of the hardest can be choosing what kind of childcare you use. If you have opted to keep a parent at home for those younger years, there are some good reasons to support your decision.

In the first three years of your child's life many important developmental stages happen. Intellectually, emotionally, socially, and personally, your little person's brain is forming lasting patterns and impressions. They gain an idea of themselves and how others see them. Their self-esteem forms as they see their value and worth.

Being the primary caregiver in these years allows you the time to play a significant role in how they develop. In these years, they begin to work out emotions and empathy. With help, they can learn what to do when someone is sad, how to be kind and gentle with animals, and how a friend acts. As their language starts to develop, they need a safe environment to talk and ask questions about their world. You can help them understand why things happen and un-muddle this big, often confusing, place we live in.

**TRY IT:** In the first three years, children are also learning self-control. Delayed gratification is part of this. Try playing a game with your child that involves turn-taking. Go slowly on your turn. With practise, they will learn to patiently wait for you before having a go themselves.

## THE DOWN SIDE

Certainly every choice has its disadvantages, too, and staying at home is no exception. You may have given up a job you enjoy (at least for a few years) or put a hold on your own interests. After the initial crazy-tired baby months, you may

find you can manage both to some extent. Many at-home parents, like myself, work from home, work part-time, or even share working and childcare with their partners. Working from home is especially good in the first two to three years, when babies and toddlers still have day sleeps. When my kids started dropping naptimes, we introduced quiet time after lunch, and with early (7pm) bedtimes, there's still plenty of time to get projects done. Some early-bird at-home parents manage blogs, report writing, and other home-based work before their kids get up for the day. Loneliness and boredom can be a problem, so it's crucial to find something for yourself, whether that's exercise, crafts, or socialising with friends (or all three!). If you're happy, everyone's happier.

## AT HOME BUT NOT

Just because you're an at-home parent doesn't mean you're stuck within the walls of your house. I can always tell when I've had too much time inside with housework and kid mess, and so can everyone else! Getting out and about is important, even if it's just pushing the buggy around the block with another parent so you can get some adult company.

Most communities have a Playcentre where parents meet up and play with their kids, letting them paint, make a mess, and get wet and sandy in a place that's set up for it. There are music groups, playgroups, exercise groups, swimming lessons (from about four months), baby gym, coffee groups, toy libraries, and many more.

**TRY IT:** If there is nothing that suits you in your area, set up your own group. When my second daughter was young, I wanted to explore the outdoors with her, but not on our own. I invited a group of at-home parents to start a Thursday club

where we explored and made use of local parks, gardens, and forests. When the weather was bad, we visited museums and events happening in our area.

## HOME TIME

There are times though when staying put at home really works well. Many cultures encourage new mothers to stay home and rest for the first months after birth. Those early days can be surprisingly exhausting and, depending on how your pregnancy and birth went, you may just need that time to recover. Young children and babies also enjoy calm, routine-focused environments. They cry less and sleep better when they're not overtired or too busy. Even older preschoolers can get overtired and unsettled with too much activity. A quiet day at home is good for everyone. For new babies and mums, lots of time at home can also allow feeding and sleeping patterns to get established.

## SOCIALISATION

With all the activities available for preschoolers, most kids get plenty of time to practise social skills, but even in your family environment, your child will be learning what's appropriate and what's not, manners, and conversational skills. If you're worried about your shy child, try socialising with smaller groups or arrange play dates with one other parent and child. Remember, it's really the adults who are helping them to be socialised. Just because a child is in a group of peers doesn't mean they will know what to do.

*Kelly Eden-Clacott is an at-home mum of three, writer, and teacher who can be found snuggling up with her youngest daughters reading anything in sight, going on adventures into the bush, managing a calendar of social engagements, and regularly forgetting to cook dinner.*