All children play!

Parents and their child with a visual impairment

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Foreword

Playing with your child is a pleasurable experience. It's a great way of sharing a good time and forging a bond at the same time. It's a connection that goes back to the earliest communication between parent and child, when touching, looking, 'talking' and making sounds create a 'question and answer game'. It's a subtle exchange: your child makes a sound and you react by repeating it. The child feels validated: what I'm doing is fun, I'm seen and understood. The child also responds to you, he[1] looks at you, listens, laughs and moves so that you, too, feel validated.
That is how the emotional bond between you and your child grows. It is the foundation of your child's further development in which play is a vital element.
Play comes naturally to children. It is their way of discovering the world around them. By playing alongside and with your child you can follow him on his journey of discovery while at the same time validating him and strengthening your bond.

The playful exchange between you and your child can be less self-evident. It can be harder for you to 'read' or understand him, particularly at the beginning. You and he have to figure out a way to bond despite the lack of visual contact. It's not always easy to do this but don't let your insecurity get in the way of connecting and playing with your child.

Observe your child's small movements, his hand gestures, body language and sounds and mirror them in a playful manner. Take time to discover how he reacts to your voice, your movements and your touch. In time your understanding of each other will grow. Together you will find your way.

The tips we have gathered in this book are all aimed at helping you to connect with your child's play activities and make them even more enjoyable.

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1 For the sake of readability 'he' and 'his' are used in the text. 'He' and 'his' can obviously be read as 'she' and 'hers'.

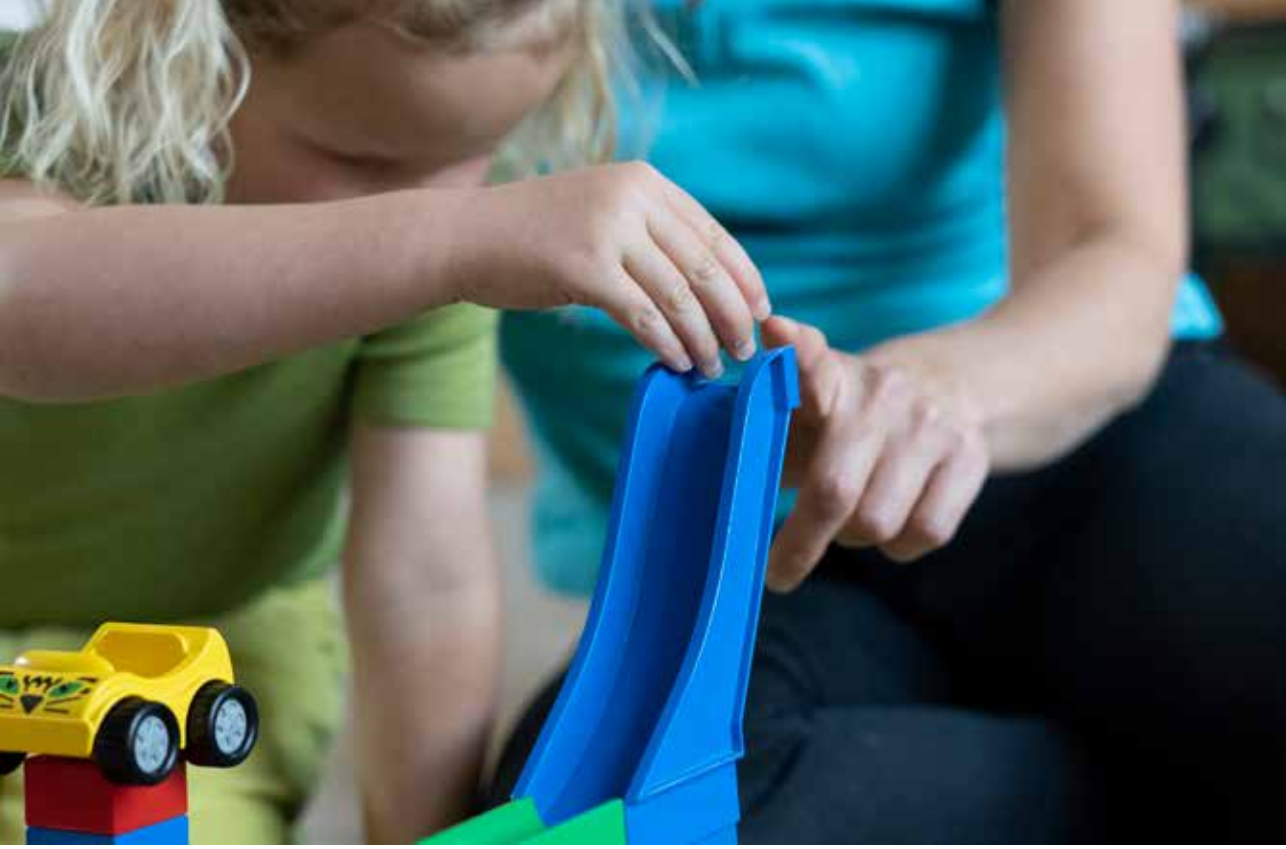
About this book

There are many books on play and toys but little has been written about the role of parents in their children's play. The message of this book is: all children play. By following your child's play activities, you are stimulating his development and, most importantly, forging a strong mutual bond.
This book is meant for the parents and caregivers of children with a visual or visual- and-intellectual impairment with a developmental age of 0 to 6 years.
In the first part of the book, we describe what the play of children with a visual impairment looks like and explain where and when your child will feel most inclined to play. Then we explore how parents can stimulate by closely following their children's play. The subsequent chapters are about shared play and solitary play. We then describe the different types of play, from the basic contact play between parent and child to sensory play, which focuses on physical perception, and object play. The descriptions of the types of play have a built-in age scale of 0 to 6 but most are not tied to a particular developmental stage.

The content of this book is based on play development theory, previous publications about play in children with a visual impairment as well as the experiences of play intervention with visually impaired children. The comments of the sounding board group have also been used in the text.

Each chapter contains information about the development of play in children in general and in children with a visual or visual-and-intellectual impairment in particular, with a number of practical examples for clarification.
We have chosen not to focus on toys but on how your child plays, and how you can best support and share his play.

Rule-based games can be great fun but, in this book, we are limiting ourselves to play without rules; play initiated by the child where the only rules are those he makes up himself.



Lotus and her mother have built a marble run out of Duplo. Lotus is about to release a marble at the top of the run. By touching her finger Lotus's mother shows she is following her daughter's actions.

Play develops in a number of fixed stages but each child goes through them at his own pace. We will come back to this later in the book. This book is primarily aimed at parents but it can also be a great tool for anyone who is involved with your child, including grandparents, other relatives, care professionals and teachers.

Introduction

What you can read in this chapter
All children play, and every child plays in his own way. To play is to fulfil a basic need. Playing with your child contributes to the forming of a secure bond (attachment relationship) with you. Play touches on all aspects of your child's development, including his development into a social being.

Playing is pleasurable and vital for your child's development
Children start to play from the cradle. As they play, they discover the world around them, develop motor skills, spatial awareness, thought processes and creativity. Play, alone and with others, promotes psychosocial development. Shared play with parents will go a long way to building a secure bond while play with other children will help to develop social skills. Children and play go together. It's a basic need, like food. It is important for their development but that is not what it's about for children. They play simply because it's fun and because it makes them feel good.

Children have a way of completely immersing themselves in play: repeatedly tapping against a toy, throwing clothes pegs into a bucket, exuberant movement play, focused construction play or imaginative 'make believe' play. Whether high-spirited or serious, your child is intent on his play and in his element. That makes you as a parent feel happy too. It is fascinating to follow your child as he plays, not in the least because play is also a language in which your child expresses himself.

What is play?
The most important characteristics of play are threefold: it is a source of enjoyment, it is initiated by the child and it has no other purpose than the activity itself. Play activities that are aimed at learning skills can still be pleasurable but their function is educational. In this book we define play as an activity initiated by the child himself. Our aim is to

encourage parents to follow and support that initiative so their child's play can develop and grow.

Recognising your child's play characteristics
All children play. The play of children with a visual impairment can be difficult to recognise as such. This may prevent you from following and stimulating your child's play. That would be a great pity because you and your child risk missing out on the joys of (shared) play. A lack of facial expression may make it hard to tell if your child is enjoying himself but you will perhaps notice that he is expressing his enjoyment by quick hand movements.

By observing your child carefully, you will see that your child is resourceful and compensates for his lack of sight. You will also notice that he is fascinated by aspects of toys or activities which do not immediately strike you as particularly interesting. A shiny toy is gleefully held up to the light, for instance, others are touched, rubbed or smelled. Structures are compared and sounds experimented with. Toys can be played with in a different way and sometimes they are hardly used at all, for instance during fantasy play when play may take place mainly in the child's imagination. If you know about and recognise these types of play you will be able to follow your child in his play activities, validate him, share in his enjoyment and play with him.

The children in the pictures
This book contains photographs of Fabienne, Cemal, and Lotus. In some of the photographs they are joined by one of their parents or a sister.

Fabienne is 5 years old and she is visually impaired. She goes to a school for children with a visual impairment. Her favourite toys are the Playmobil doll's house and Barbies. She also likes playing with clay, cutting, gluing and drawing.

Cemal is 8 years old, he has impairments affecting his sight, motor skills and intellectual ability. He is in special education and likes to play with sound toys. Supported by his parents, Cemal likes to explore the objects in his toy box in a playful way.

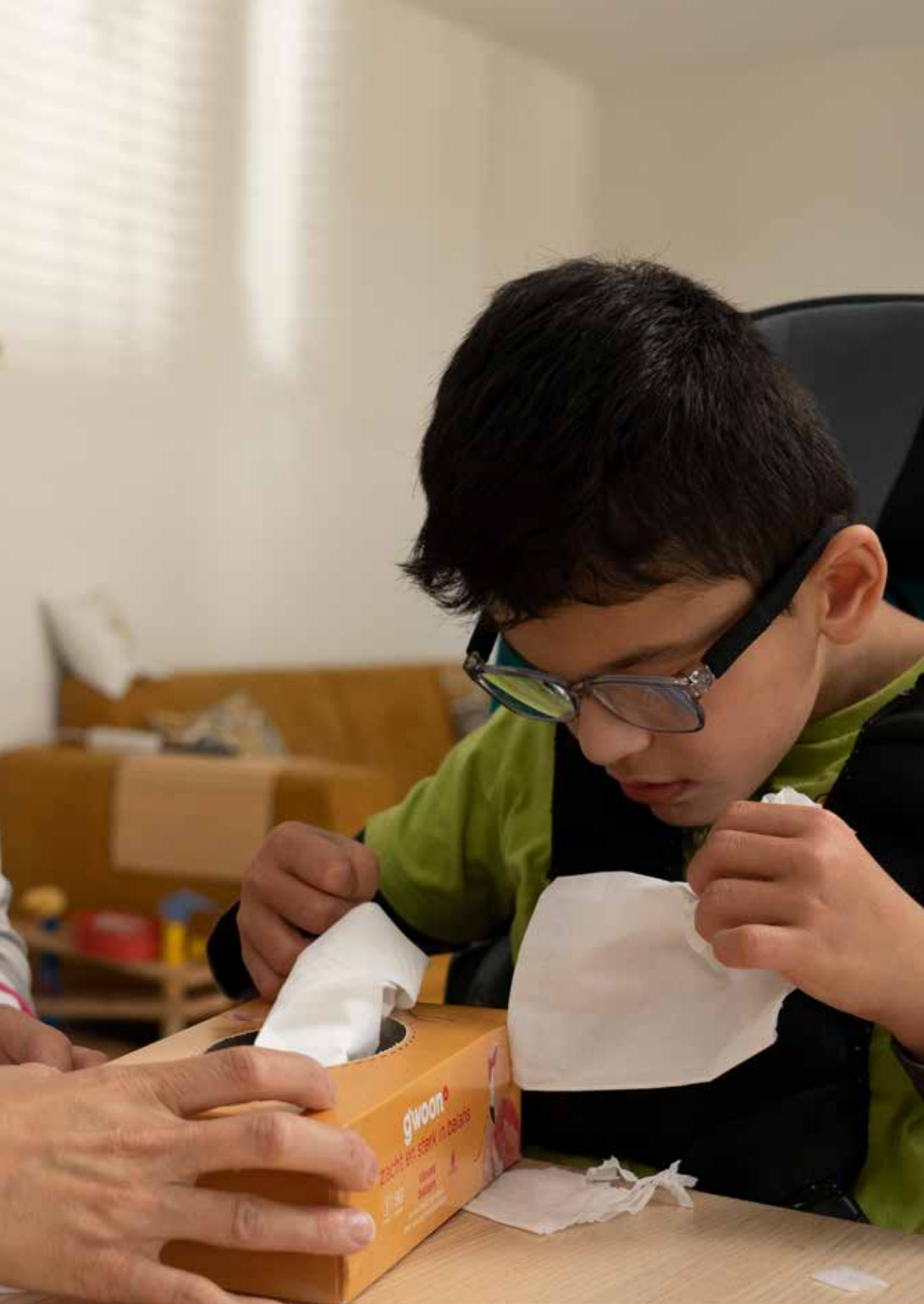
Lotus is five years old, she is blind. She recently entered a regular primary school. Lotus is an enterprising child and loves motor play, such as cycling and having a go on the swing. She also likes to immerse herself in fantasy play.

Fabienne, Cemal and Lotus also figure in the practical examples.
The other children mentioned in the examples have been given fictitious names.

In short

- Play is pleasurable and important for a child's development.
- Playing is a basic need.
- Children with a visual impairment have their own way of playing.
- Their play may look different and is perhaps not always recognisable as play.
- By observing and following your child as he plays you will discover how he plays, and so validate his resourcefulness and enjoyment.
- Playing together can forge a secure bond of the child with his parents/caregivers.
- Playing with other children will boost social skills.

The play of children with a visual impairment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The play of children with a visual impairment

What you can read in this chapter
The play of children with a visual impairment can look different because toys and materials are used in a different manner. They need more time to discover and get used to (new) toys and will often show repetitive play, which is their way of investigating what the toys/materials have to offer.

Different but just as meaningful
The development of play in children with a visual impairment takes longer and the play manifests itself differently. But that doesn't mean it's in any way inferior to sighted children's play. It is impressive to see how children use their other senses during play to compensate for the (partial) loss of sight.

↘ Cemal has discovered the tissue box. Using his whole hand, he grabs the tissue that is sticking out of the box. As his mother holds the box, Cemal pulls out the tissue with all his might and puts it to his face and mouth. 'You're feeling the tissue with your mouth, it's nice and soft', his mother says. Cemal rubs the tissue on his face and mouth, tastes it, and tears it into a thousand tiny pieces with his mouth and hand. Soon there is nothing left. Cemal lets out a sigh of contentment and discovers that another tissue is peeping out of the box. The tissue game can start all over again.

How your child experiences the world
To help you follow and connect with your child's play try stepping into his world. By imitating his body posture, for example, and experiencing the effect this has on you, you can gain an insight into what your child is hearing and feeling. Squinting, or closing your eyes altogether, can give

you an impression of how he experiences objects, light sources, smells and sounds. It will also enable you to avoid sensations your child may not like, such as unexpected noises or the glare from a bright light source.
Touching a toy in the same way as your child will give you an understanding of why he thinks the toy is interesting and fun. An awareness of the way your child experiences the world will enable you to share in his play even more.

Toys are often used in a different way
Children who have a visual impairment tend to focus on the non-visual properties of toys, such as textures, shapes and sounds. That means they develop their own way of playing.

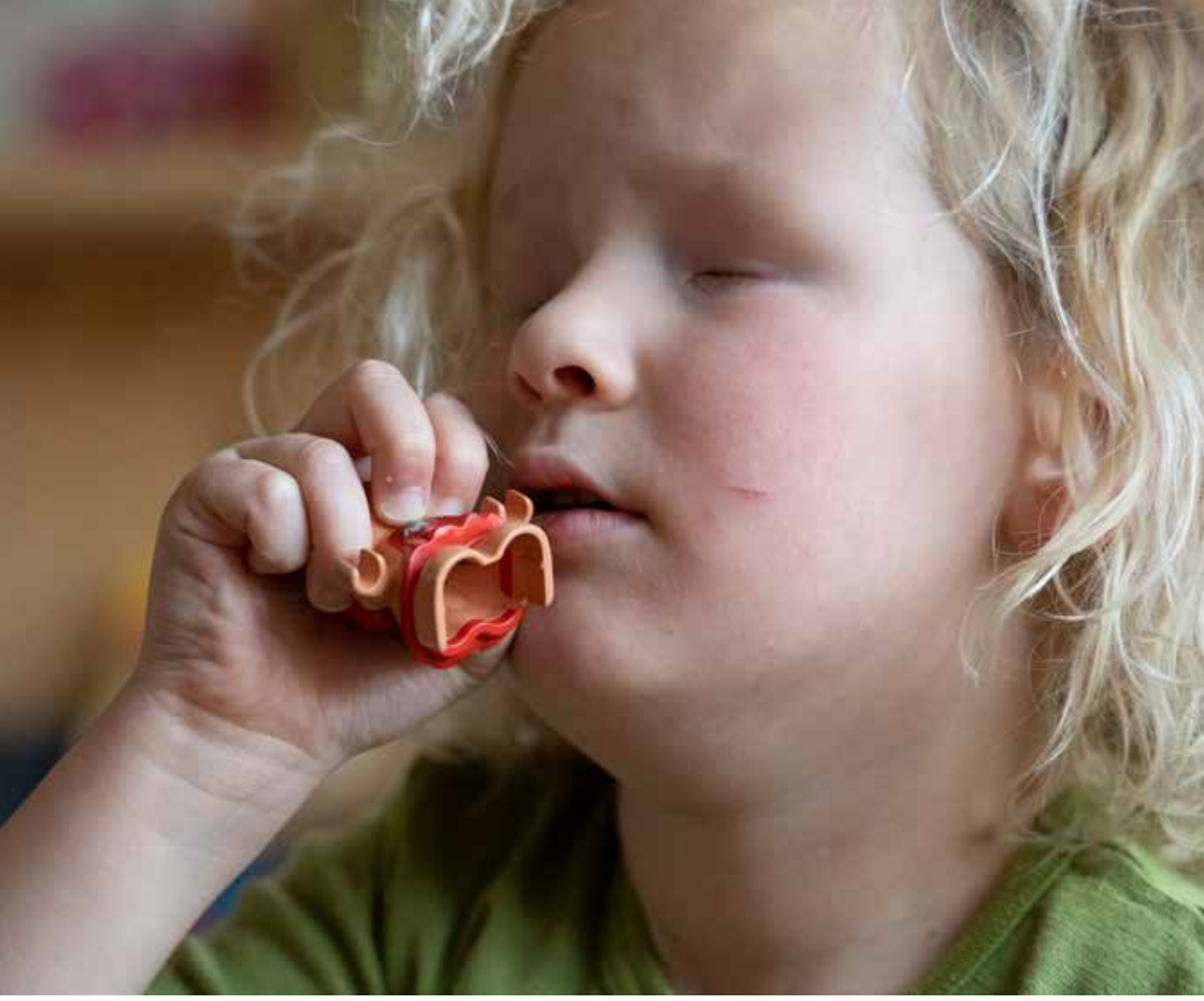
↘ Eloy is 2 years old, he is blind. Eloy uses his Duplo block not to fit onto another block but to tap the table, the chair and the floor with. It makes a nice sound when he puts it in a box and shakes it. Moving his nail over the four knobs of the block makes a scraping sound.

↘ Ahmed is 3 years old, he is blind and he has an intellectual impairment. Ahmed is sitting in his adapted wheelchair. His father puts a jingle ball on the wheelchair tray. Ahmed grabs hold of it, puts it up to his mouth and then throws it to the floor, crying out in excitement. His father picks up the ball and puts it on the tray again. 'Here's the ball is again,' he says. Ahmed picks up the ball, puts it up to his mouth and takes a quick bite. When Ahmed has thrown the ball on the floor a couple of times his father tells him that he will attach the ball to his wheelchair on a piece of string so Ahmed can pull up the toy himself.

Specific toy preferences

Some children's choice of toys may strike you as a little unusual. They may not like soft toys, for example, preferring instead a specific hard plastic sand mould. Why? The mould offers resistance when you push into or bite it and there is a distinct sound when you tap the table with it.

Where other children may like a toy for its colour, children with a visual impairment often do not. The toys may be colourful but they all feel the same: nothing but plastic and rounded corners. Toys and utensils made from different materials are much more interesting. Different materials enable the child to vary the sounds he can make with them. He will find, for instance, that tapping on metal is not the same as tapping on wood, plastic, stone or cork. This type of toy may even be more attractive to children than designated 'sound toys' with their buttons and mechanical toots and bleeps. The different materials not only offer a variety of tactile experiences, they also establish a more direct relationship with everyday utensils.



↘ As a toddler Lotus liked her hard Duplo figure more than her soft knitted toy. She has been neglecting her former favourite toy lately but immediately recognises it when she happens to come across it in the toy box.

More time, and more repetition

Children with a visual impairment need perhaps as much as three times the amount of time to explore their surroundings and process all the information they encounter. Toys are subjected to a lengthy and careful examination. If you close your eyes and do the same (see chapter ‘How your child experiences the world’) you will find it will take

some time and extensive exploration before you have discovered all the toy has to offer, how it feels when you bite it, tap with it or hit it. As a parent, you will have to ‘sit on your hands’ for a long time and not intervene too quickly. You will help your child enormously by giving him the space he needs to investigate and familiarise himself with the toy before playing with it. If your child has not yet learned that objects still exist even if he cannot feel them, make sure to put them back where he can get at them.

↘ Eloy’s father accidentally discovers that he has a delayed reaction to the question ‘Shall I roll the ball towards you again?’ Eloy is 2 years old, he is blind. It looks as if he has lost interest in the ball and is busy touching the carpet. His father, not expecting a reaction to his question, is temporarily distracted. But when he looks at his son again, he sees that Eloy has stopped exploring the carpet and is holding out his arms as if expecting the ball. ‘Oh, you were waiting for the ball, what was keeping that ball? Here it comes, yes, there it is!’

Repetitive play

Children like repetition and can play the same ‘game’ over and over again. Moving a shiny toy in front of their eyes, tapping on every object around, throwing toys, going on the same train ride, telling the same made up story are all examples of repetitive play.

Children who are visually impaired or blind seem to like repetition even more. Don’t let that worry you. Repetition, doing what is familiar, is part of the joy the child is experiencing when playing. And if you look closely, you will see that his play shows more variation than you originally thought. The shiny toy may be held up to different light sources and the Duplo block is being tapped on a variety of surfaces. The toy bouncing off the floor may produce different sounds with every throw, and the made up story is never quite the same. Children who have a visual impairment need lots of repetition before they can make an action their own and perform it with playful assurance.

As a parent you can contribute to your child’s play by introducing small variations. The shiny toy can be fitted with a little bell so it makes a

noise as well, and a change of block or tapping surface can be fun too. Give your child time to react to your suggestion and see if he likes it. Don't force it. If you are really worried about your child's repetitive behaviour you can always consult with your care professional.

↘ Aysa is 4 years old, she has a visual-and-intellectual impairment. Aysa has a box full of tops, containers with different objects and cylinders with a plug-in board. By offering a variety of challenging and surprising putting-in and taking-out games Aysa's attention remains engaged.

New is not necessarily pleasurable at first

A new toy is not immediately interesting. Blind children in particular tend to reject a new toy by pushing it away when offered the first few times. You can reassure the auntie who so carefully chose her present: it simply takes time. The toy needs to be in the child's immediate vicinity for a while so he can encounter it from time to time until, after a few weeks, he will start to explore it. The most interesting toy is one that is both familiar and contains one new element. The chapter 'What type of play does my child engage in? Object play' contains some tips on how to introduce your child to new objects.

↘ Mauro is 3 years old, he has a visual impairment. Mauro has two or three toys that he plays with constantly. New presents usually disappear into a drawer for that reason. Every couple of days his mother exchanges an old toy for a new one. In this way Mauro can play with a toy he is familiar with and explore something new.

In short

- It can be hard to understand your child's toy preferences.
- Toys made from different materials with different textures (hairy, smooth, prickly or lumpy) are often more interesting than plastic toys.
- A new toy is appealing if it combines familiar features with a new element.
- It can be difficult to recognise your child's activities as play. They may look like repetitive movements but a closer look often reveals variation. The repetitive actions may be an accompaniment of fantasy play which – with or without toys in hand – happens mainly in the child's imagination.
- Before your child engages in play, he will want to discover all the toy has to offer. That takes time and a lot of repetition. Your child will want to explore every possibility every single time.

Where does your child play?

Where does your child play?

What you can read in this chapter
As a parent your role in supporting your child's play is crucial. To start with, your child will stay close to you while playing but gradually you will be following his play from a greater distance. To be able to concentrate on his play, the child needs an environment that feels safe and is well understood. He will also need your support and encouragement.

From your lap and away from your lap
Contact play is the most basic form of play. You and your child are literally 'in touch' with each other. You can read more about this in the chapter 'What type of play does my child engage in? 'Contact play'. Later on, your child will play from your lap, where he can rely on your supportive and tangible physical presence. Once the child feels safe, he will be confident enough to increase the distance between him and you and play with other children in an unfamiliar space. But even then, he will need to be assured of his parent's presence. He will also need to be encouraged as he plays.

Children with a visual impairment

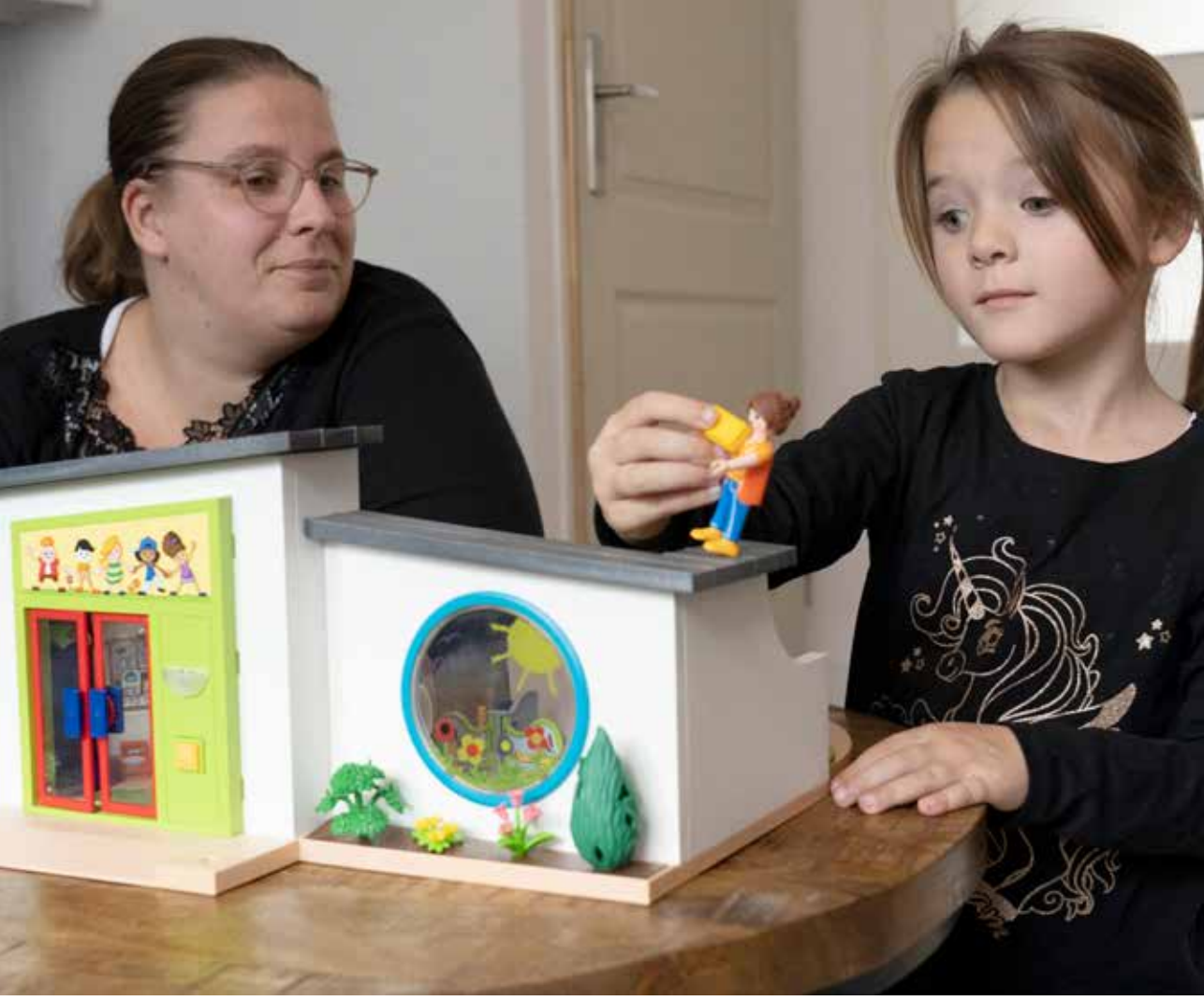
A child with a visual impairment is unable to take a quick look to see if his parent is still around. It means that he will need to hear and touch them to be sure of their presence for a longer period of time.
Your child needs a rich, varied play environment to encourage him to take on new challenges. The environment needs to feel safe and familiar but it must also offer something new for the child to discover.
If you are carrying your young baby in a sling, you can introduce variation by moving your baby to different places on your body, for instance from your stomach to your hip or back.
If your child needs your tangible presence and will only play when on your lap, you can vary the play environment by posture changes, such as turning towards or slightly away from him, or alternating which elbow you use to lean on, or moving from your chair to the floor.

If your child wants you near but does not necessarily need to feel your physical presence he will, for instance, talk to you a lot or regularly call out your name. That is the time when you can move your child's play area into the space where you need to be to do work, or other activities. Your voice and the noises you make during your activities will be enough to reassure your child of your presence. Put objects in every room of the house for your child to discover and play with, for instance a container with an empty tube of toothpaste and a nail brush in the bathroom, a little basket with clothes pegs in the garden, or a pan and ladle in the kitchen.
Gradually your child will learn to play at a greater distance from you. You will find, however, that in busy or unfamiliar situations he will find his way back to your lap or want to hear your voice - even when he's older.

↘ Payria is 3 years old, she is blind. Payria played on her mother's lap for a long time. She then liked to play sitting between her mother's legs. She now plays on the floor while her mother sits on the sofa. She makes contact by talking to her mother at regular intervals. She also touches her mother, almost imperceptibly, by leaning her toe against her mother's foot.

↘ A big play mat in the corner of a room is a safe and clearly defined space where Ilse can play. Ilse is 2 years old, she has a visual-and-intellectual impairment. Her parents are close by. She can hear them and, when she signals she needs them, they can hear her. She has a variety of play materials which she can play with independently for short periods of time.

A noisy or a quiet environment?
Although some children enjoy being in a noisy environment, they often need the presence of a safe place or secure person to have a break and 'recharge their batteries'. Orientation by means of sound is often difficult, particularly for small children who have not yet learned to distinguish between background noise and sounds that are directed at them. By turning off the tv or radio your child will be better able to hear the environmental sounds that will help him determine his place in the space.



↘ Fabienne has a favourite spot where she plays with her Playmobil doll's house. Instead of the mat in the corner of the room, she prefers to sit on her knees in front of the low sitting room table. Her mother understands why Fabienne likes this spot: she is in close proximity to her toy and can put in and take out the figures, open the windows and doors at eye level.

Children with a visual impairment

Many children with a visually impairment feel safest in a quiet space in which they can orientate themselves and know where everything is. A place whose boundaries are clearly marked and where the acoustics are such that the child can tell where sounds originate. It's a space

they are familiar with and where most things have a fixed place so orientation is not a problem. Children orientate themselves by moving around in the space, by exploring surfaces with their hands, and perhaps by distinguishing dark from light, colour differences and big shapes. Sound sources can be a beacon, such as a ticking clock and traffic noise. But sometimes the sound source varies: a little sister walks into a room, the cat's feet padding the floor as it makes his way to its bowl, mama who announces she is taking you outside.
The noise made by radio and tv can distract children with a visually impairment from their play. Sudden sounds can be frightening and can also put them off playing. It's not always possible to prevent this from occurring but by describing what has happened – 'that was the vacuum cleaner. It gave you a fright. Next time I will tell you when I'm switching it on' – you can help your child cope with it.
Some children have trouble processing multi-sensory impressions simultaneously. They can only focus on one impression, be it visual, tactile or sound based. For them, a quiet and familiar environment is even more important for focusing attention on play.

↘ Aysa is 4 years old, she has a visual-and-intellectual impairment. For Aysa play with her favourite bear always starts with the sound it makes. Her mother knows that the bear's 'buh buh' sound will make her laugh every time. Then her mother turns off the sound and Aysa starts feeling the bear's curly coat with her fingers and rubbing her cheek against its snout.

↘ It's a busy day at the day-care centre. Parents and children are arriving. Fortunately, there's a play corner which can be separated from the rest of the space by means of a play nest. The sounds the parents and their children make reaches the play nest from a single direction. Jan is 2 years old, he is blind. Jan can feel all the toys in the nest. He likes the jingle ball best. He rolls it away and retrieves it using his hands and feet.

↘ Mauro is 3 years old, he has a visual impairment. Mauro is sitting hunched on the edge of the sandpit, his head between his knees and his hands covering his ears. Suddenly the sand is not so interesting to play with anymore. The noise made by a rubbish truck is overwhelming. He needs his mother to reassure him that everything is fine: 'That was the rubbish truck, what a loud noise it makes, it gives you a fright, doesn't it?' but he keeps covering his ears with his hands until the rumble of the rubbish truck dies down.

↘ Fabienne loves to bounce on the trampoline in the garden. There is enough space and it's quiet. She has become proficient enough to hold her own on the trampoline in the playground.

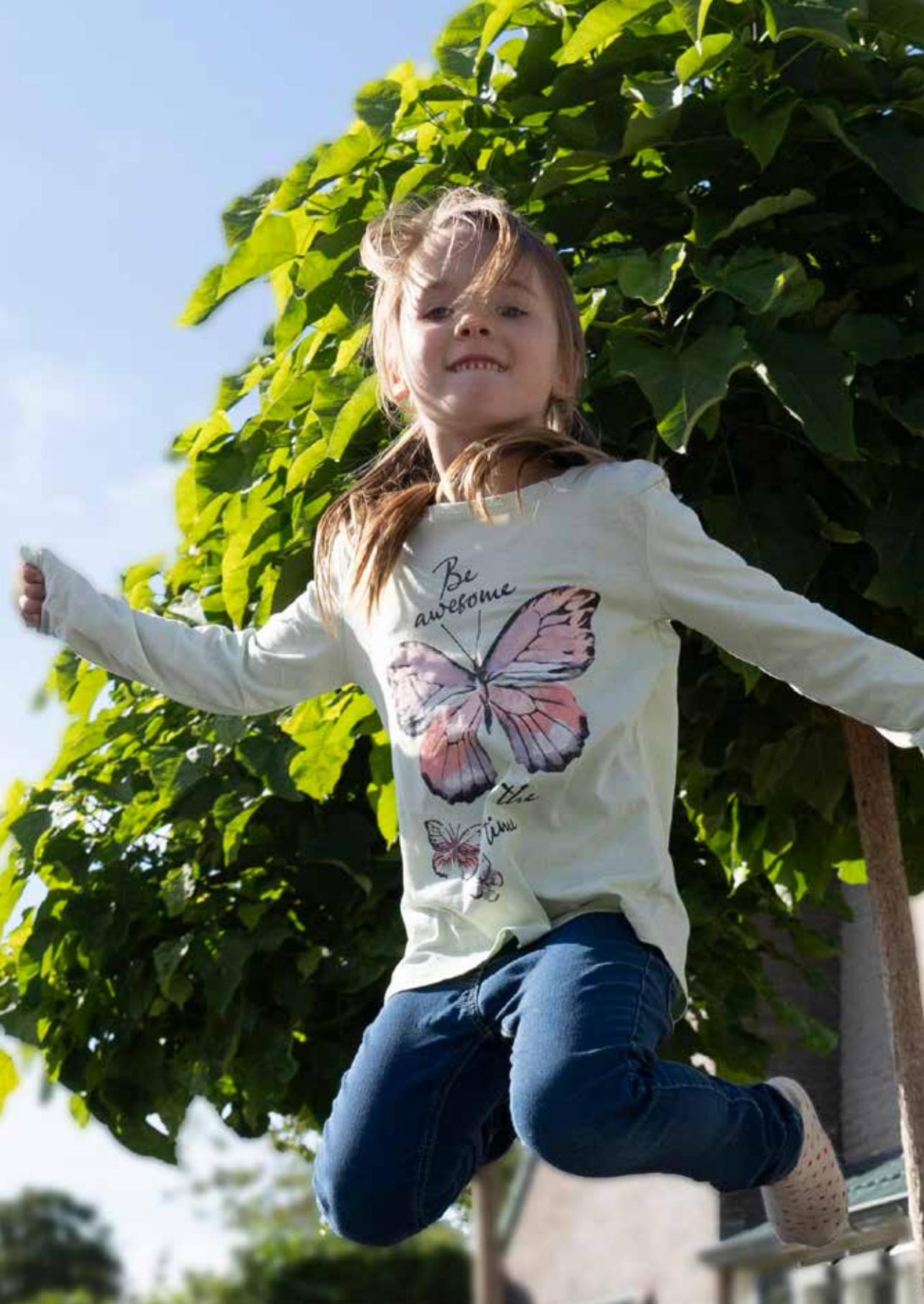
Getting used to a new environment

The first day at playgroup, day-care or school can leave a profound impression. It's an enervating experience for children, often resulting in a regression in their development.

Children with a visual impairment

Big changes are challenging for all children, but for children with a visual impairment they can be twice as difficult. Not only do they have to cope with a new situation without a parent, they are also faced with new impressions to process and understand. You can help by discussing this with your child's future caregivers and by letting your child explore the space in the absence of the other children in the group. But no degree of preparedness will prevent the experience from having a profound impact. Even children who feel safe enough to play in familiar surroundings in the presence of familiar people may lose the urge to play when confronted with a new situation. They may flop down on a mat, exhausted, ignore the other children, or show repetitive play or behaviour.

Your child must be given an opportunity to recharge his batteries and sometimes that can only be achieved by shutting out the world for a while. Explain the signs that mean your child needs to be left alone for a bit to caregivers so they will understand. Slowly but surely your child will get used to the new situation. Eventually he will feel comfortable enough to participate independently.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In short

- Your child will need your presence to be able to play for a long period of time. He will play on your lap to start with so he can feel your presence.
- Later it will be enough to see and/or hear you.
- Put some play materials in each room so he can play near you.
- By describing (‘subtitling’) sounds in the environment you can help your child recognise them as well as let him know you understand what his attention is being drawn to.
- Most children prefer a quiet and uncluttered space where they are not distracted by too much ambient noise.

When does your child play and when do you play together?

When does your child play and when do you play together?

What you can read in this chapter
Children play all day long but not always with the same intensity. Like other children, children with a visual impairment play on their own and together with others. The only difference is that in order to play, they need the support of a parent more often. Play sessions with your child do not necessarily last very long but they do require a certain level of alertness on your part and that of your child so you can both focus on the same thing. As a parent you are not always in a position to give your child your undivided attention. If sitting down and playing together is not possible at some point, you can always interact by describing what is happening.

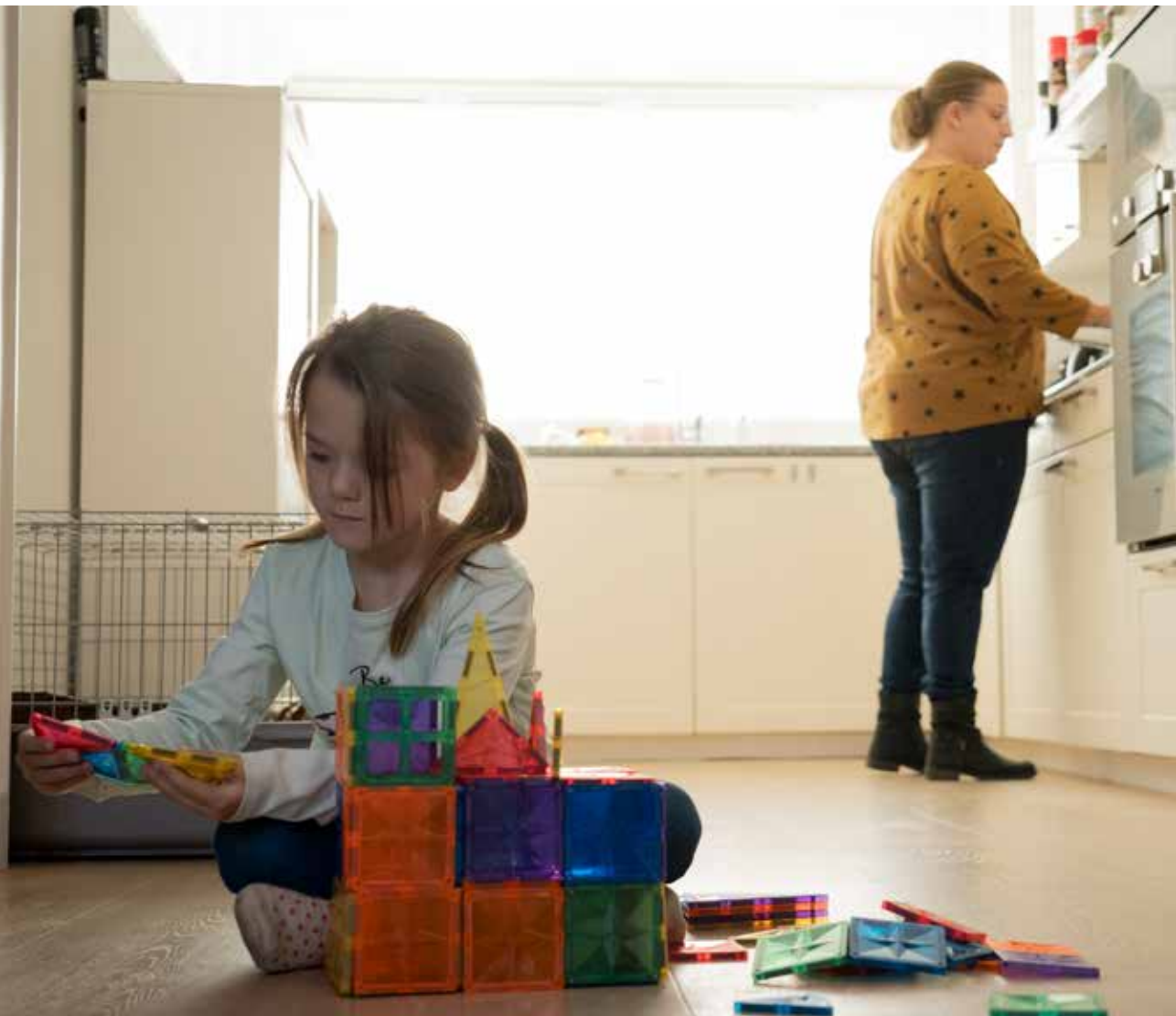
When does your child play and when can you support his play?
Every child has moments in the day where he is more open to new impressions and new experiences. The attention span of young children is quite short, and they tend to switch from one activity to another. As a parent you may not always be in a position to give your child your undivided attention. If you want to play with your child you will have to pick a moment when both you and him can focus on each other and the play activity. That means you will have to spot and understand your child's signals – a challenge in itself – while deciding at the same time if the circumstances are right for you as well. If your mind is occupied with getting the other children off to school it is definitely not the time for play.

Children with a visual impairment

Children with a visual impairment often need support from a parent to engage in play, to help finding a favourite toy, make sure the toys are close at hand, pick up fallen toys or attach some small elements to a toy. As a parent you are often a participant in your child's play but play sessions are not necessarily very long. Your child's attention span is

short and playing often and for limited spells will suit him just fine. It is important to have an insight into when your child is most alert and focused on his environment and when you yourself are in a position to give him the attention he needs. If there is too much ambient noise to enable play you can interact with your child by describing what is happening in the room until, at some point, you can find a quiet moment to play together.

↘ Fabienne's mother alternates moments of shared play with moments when Fabienne plays by herself. She doesn't go very far so she can help Fabienne if necessary.



↘ Before breakfast Jan has been given his favourite shape sorting box. Jan is 2 years old, he is blind. His mother has helped him on his way but he's not very interested. He repeatedly asks his mother what she is doing. She is, in fact, busy preparing breakfast and has no time to help him play. In the end she decides to ignore the shape sorting box and engage Jan in what is happening in the kitchen: 'We'll get to the box in a minute, but first mummy is making breakfast. Do you hear the kettle boil? It's almost done and then we put it in the teapot. And that was your brother running down the stairs, there he is..'

In short

- Play and supporting play work best if you and your child are relaxed and focused on each other.
- Play for short periods of time but play often.
- Engage your child by describing what he hears and what is going on around him.

Closely following your child's play: mirroring and 'subtitling'.

Closely following your child's play: mirroring[1] and 'subtitling'

What you can read in this chapter
Follow your child as he plays but leave the initiative with him. It is enough to show your involvement by mirroring his behaviour and experiences and putting them into words, or 'subtitling' them.

How can you closely follow your child's play?
Closely following your child's play means you follow what your child is doing. You put yourself close to him, let him play, look at him and describe what he is doing. You do not intervene. You can let him know you're following his play by mirroring small movements or sounds. Connecting with the play also includes putting into words, or 'subtitling' what you see and what you think your child is experiencing. Try not to overinterpret, simply follow and let your presence and attention stimulate and validate his play.
If you don't immediately understand what your child is doing just wait and don't ask any questions. Engaging him in conversation will only distract him from his play.

If you are not sitting down next to your child as he plays and he is playing by himself, you can still support him by describing what he is doing from time to time. So he knows that you are still following his play.

1 In literature the concept of 'mirroring' has a broader definition but in this book we use the word mirroring for the imitation of sounds and movements of your child. For putting into words of what your child is doing (without giving an interpretation) and also of what you think your child is experiencing we use the words 'verbalizing' or 'subtitling'.

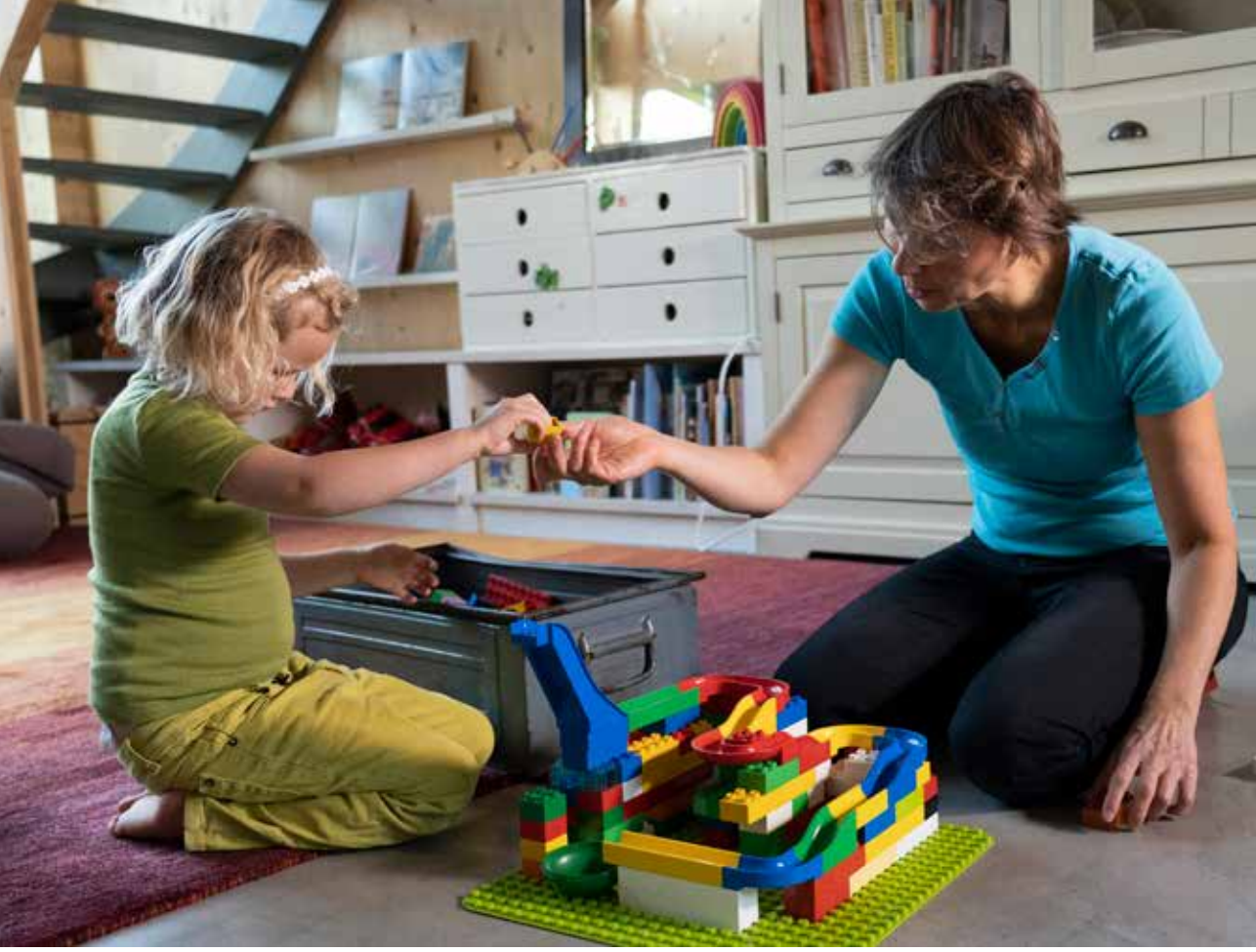
If your child shows little initiative and seems to do very little, you as a parent may feel inclined to intervene and become more active yourself. Try to 'sit on your hands'.
You may not feel comfortable mirroring and describing actions at first. We are used to contribute or be active during play, or to ask questions. But children with a visual impairment need more time. Mirroring and describing your child's play is a simple way of following his play and experiences as closely as possible.

Children with a visual impairment

It can be difficult to closely follow the play of children with a visual or visual-and-intellectual impairment. Their play tends not to last very long and does not always clearly manifest itself as play.
Children with a visual impairment, particularly those who have an intellectual impairment as well, need more time to process information. For them it is even more important to follow their play behaviour and play activities closely. With some children you can try placing a hand over theirs so they can guide your hand towards something that they are focused on at that moment.

In order to be able to mirror and/or subtitle your child's play, you need to have some inkling of what your child is doing. Taking the time to observe his actions will help you discover what it is he is playing or is fascinated by. If that proves too difficult it can help to imitate the sounds he makes, or to touch what he is touching. Filming your child is also helpful because it will give you an opportunity to observe his play behaviour in more detail at a later date.

Mirroring and/or subtitling starts by putting yourself in your child's place (see chapters 'The play of children with a visual impairment' and 'How your child experiences the world'). Lower yourself to your child's eye level and mirror or describe your child's actions as objectively as possible. You can do this during both short and longer play sessions. When you mirror you repeat the sounds, words, movements and reactions of your child. You can let your child know what you are doing by handing him an object, making him feel it or by making the same movement together. When describing/ subtitling you put into words what the child is doing (actions) and what you think he is



feeling (experiences). This will help your child recognise his emotions as part of himself and label them. A child who doesn't talk can still feel 'heard' by your tone of voice and be able to link certain words to certain experiences.

↘ Your child is moving his hands back and forth in front of a light source. Describing the action: ‘there you go, your hands are going back and forth…back and forth..’
Describing the experience: ‘how pretty…the light…it’s different every time…’

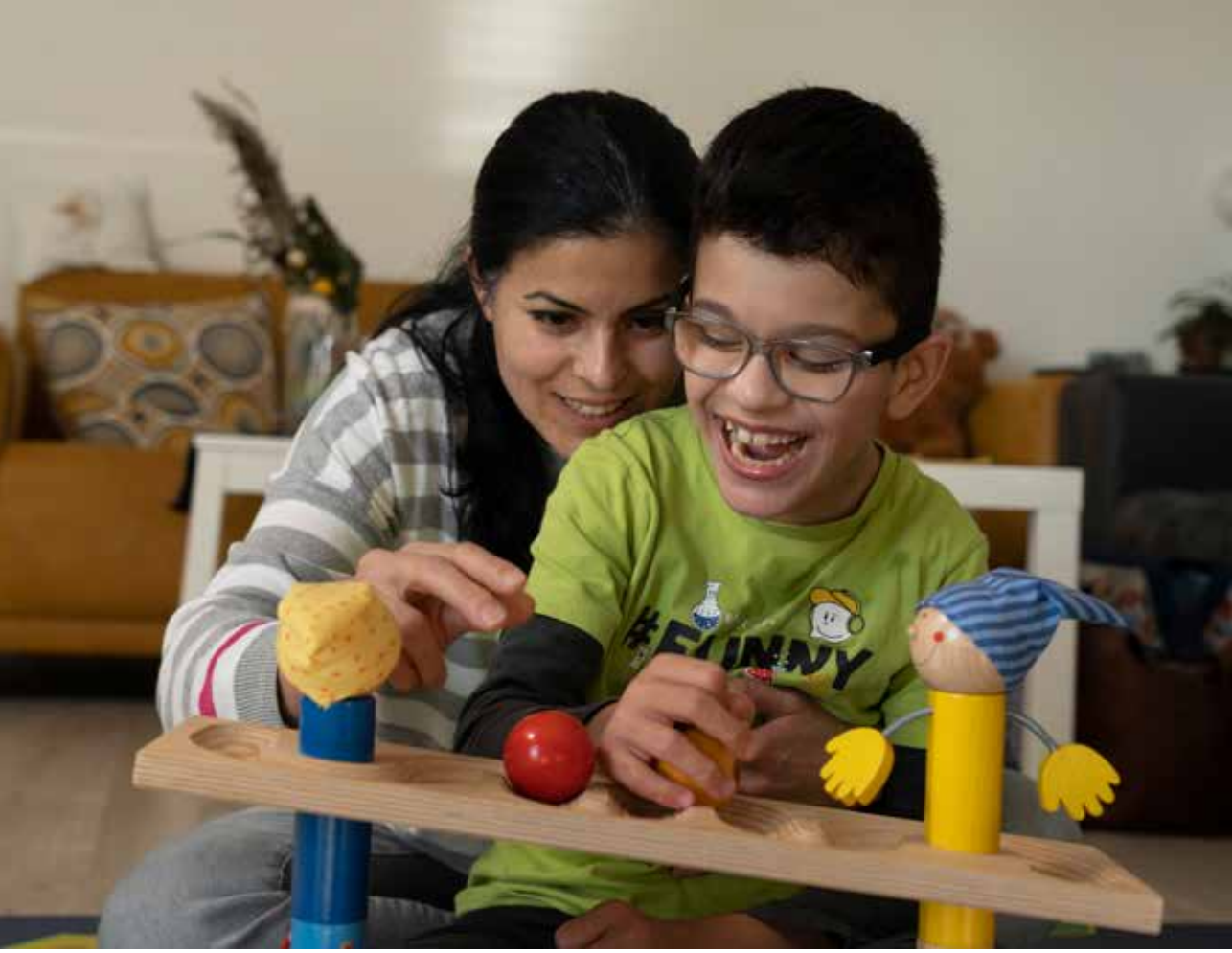
Your child is rocking his body back and forth.
Mirroring the action: you imitate the rocking movement.
Describing the action: ‘back and forth…back and forth…back and forth…’
Describing the experience: ‘…it feels so nice..’

Your child is rubbing his cheek with a piece of wool fabric.
Mirroring the action: you put the fabric against your own cheek.
Describing the action: ‘….you are rubbing your cheek with the little piece of fabric…again ..and again..’
Describing the experience: ‘..that feels nice and soft…”

Repeatedly throwing toys away.
Description of the action: ‘…you’re throwing the spoon on the floor… again….and again…’
Describing the experience: ‘…that was a loud noise…or (with feeling) ..bang!..’

Repeatedly opening and closing doors.
Describing the action: ‘Open…close…open…close…it’s a bit squeaky..’
Describing the experience: ‘it’s nice to feel the door moving’…or…’it makes such an interesting sound..’

Squeezing a toothpaste tube.
Mirroring the action: squeeze the tube yourself
Describing the action: ‘yes, you’re squeezing the tube and you can smell the toothpaste..’
Describing the experience: ’.. the tube feels so smooth.’. or ‘..doesn’t that toothpaste smell good?’



Making sounds.
Mirroring the action: You imitate the sounds '..Crrrro..codile' or 'vroom'
Describing the action: 'yes, a car goes vroom'
Describing the experience: '... what a funny sound'... or 'it tickles your mouth'

Stirring the soup with a toy ladle in a toy pan with obvious enjoyment.
Mirroring the action: you imitate the stirring action with a spoon and pan of your own
Describing the action: 'you're stirring the soup in the pan'.
Describing the experience: 'that's lovely....it's lovely to stir the soup in the pan....again...and again...'

Frustration at not being able to fit the train tracks together.
Describing the action: ‘those tracks just won’t fit together’
Describing the experience: ’it’s really difficult, isn’t it? or ‘it’s not as easy as you thought, is it?’

Playing with the marble run.
Mirroring the action: release a marble on the marble run yourself
Describing the action: ‘and we’re letting the marble go!’
Describing the experience: ‘there the marbles go…what a great sound.’

In short

- Observing what sort of play your child is engaged in makes it easier to follow his actions.
- Leave the initiative with your child, forget about your own plan.
- By mirroring/subtitling your child’s actions you follow him in his play.
- Don’t just follow your child’s action but subtitle his experience as well.
- You don’t have to literally translate the action into words. It is enough to use key words in the appropriate tone of voice.
- It is not a problem if you don’t immediately succeed in following your child’s play. Be patient. Avoid asking questions because that will only distract him.
- By watching and describing your child’s actions carefully you will discover how your child plays. He in turn will feel seen and heard and vindicated in his creativity and the pleasure he derives from his play.

Joint attention

Joint attention

What you can read in this chapter
Your child's ability to focus both on you and his environment at the same time emerges during the first twelve months. The ability and desire to share with you what attracts his attention is important for his social development. As parents of a child with a visual or a visual-and-intellectual impairment, you can support the development of joint attention, with or without words.

How does joint attention develop?
Infants are not yet capable of focusing on both the environment, a toy and you all at the same time. Older children, too, need to have a clear picture of what the environment and the play object look like before they can share the experience with you, and to alert you to something they see, hear or feel or find interesting. The willingness and ability to share attention is an important milestone in a child's social development. By the end of the first year, children will start to engage your attention by pointing, looking at you and shifting their gaze from you to the object. By putting into words your child's experiences, actions and play you can help him share what he is focused on with you.

Children with a visual impairment

Children with a severe visual or visual-and-intellectual impairment are not capable of pointing or shifting their gaze from you to a toy. Instead, they have other, less obvious ways of making clear what it is that attracts their attention. Their signals, interest and enthusiasm may not always be noticed in the bustle of day to day activities. Some children become very still when they see, hear or feel an interesting toy, or turn their head in the direction of a sound that attracts their attention. Other children react with subtle body movements or a brief squeeze of your arm, or show their interest by a quick clenching of their hands into a fist, or, conversely, by opening their hands to show they are experiencing something that excites them. An alert response

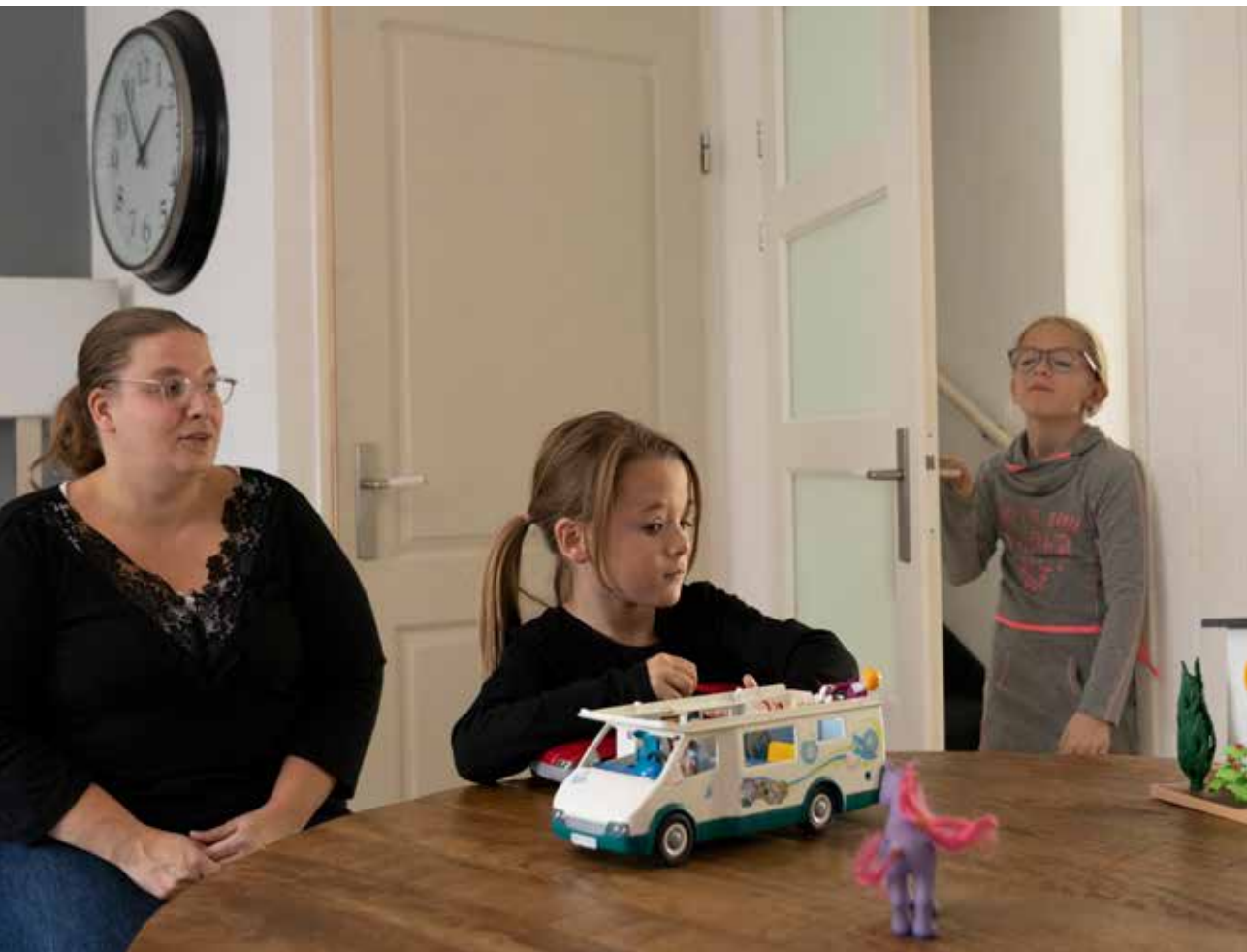
to your child's body language will strengthen the bond between you and your child. Your interaction will become all the more meaningful if you can read and subtitle your child's subtle body language.

Joint attention

Subtitling

By mirroring and/or subtitling you are telling your child you are aware of what he is doing.

↘ Fabienne is playing with a toy car and her mother is letting her know she is following her play: 'and now the door of the car opens..' Here the play stops. She sees that Fabienne's sister is standing in the doorway. 'Now your hear Daphne coming in...maybe she would like to play too..'



↘ Rick is 1.6 years old, he has a severe visual impairment. Rick is sitting in his highchair and is picking up pieces of bread from the plate in front of him. He inadvertently touches a spoon next to his plate. He doesn't look at it but stops eating, grabs hold of the spoon and starts to babble. His father attempts to put another piece of bread in his mouth but Rick turns his head away. His dad thinks Rick is no longer hungry until he sees the spoon in his hand. 'Ah...you found the spoon...that's interesting. He puts his hand on the hand that holds the spoon for a brief moment. 'Daddy feels it too...smooth and cold...' Rick responds by babbling more loudly. He then opens his mouth to eat the next piece of bread.

↘ Iris is 3 years old, she is blind. She is standing by the door to the garden, ready to play outside. She stops, one foot inside and one on the threshold. Her mother sees her and says: '..you can feel the threshold, can't you...one foot is higher than the other...one foot is still inside...the other is almost in the garden...'

A car approaches and stops. Your child turns his head in the direction of the sound. Subtitling: '..you hear a car coming, now it stops.'.

Your child becomes still and stops playing because you have moved into the (open plan) kitchen. You put his confusion into words: 'where's mummy gone?... Has mummy gone away?'.. You then reassure him: 'I'm still here... just making a cup of coffee...I'll be back in a jiffy..'

Joint attention without words

By putting your child's feelings into words, you show you are focused on the same play object as your child. You can also do this without words, for instance by making your child feel that you are both holding the object and that you are following his hand movements you make clear to him that you are both interested in the same object.

↘ Play involving a jingle ball.
Joint attention: gently cover your child's hands and let him guide you. That lets him know that you are both touching the jingle ball and that you are paying attention to what he is doing.

Pulling the string that makes the ball jingle.
Joint attention: by holding the string and helping to pull it your child feels that you and he are playing with the toy together.

The sound box mat.
Joint attention: your child is sitting on the mat and is touching one of the coloured boxes. The mat is designed so that every colour makes a meaningful sound when touched. This time it's the oink oink of a pig. You are sitting next to your child, touch his hand briefly and then touch the same box, which produces the oink oink sound again. You then wait for your child's reaction.

Much talk and no play
Too much talking can stand in the way of play and joint attention. Some children like to talk while playing or have a chat about something unrelated to the play. They may want to know when you are going to have supper, or what you will be doing later. Their attention is no longer focused on the activity or object in hand and you are no longer intent on the same object. Try to keep your answers short and continue to put your child's actions into words.

↘ Child (holding a doll): are we going out in a bit?...and will we be buying a present?
Parent, paying attention to the play: ' .. yes, we are!' Immediately followed by: '.....you can put the doll to bed now.'
Or: 'yes, we are!' Immediately followed by '...let's find out what this doll is wearing.. I can feel a skirt...'

Tell your child what your attention is focused on
If you let your child know what you are looking at, you can help him give meaning to the things he sees, the sounds he hears and the smells he smells and share his experiences with you.

↘ You and your child are playing with building blocks at the kitchen table. You are distracted by the sound of footsteps on the gravel.' I think that's the postman coming. I'm just going to the door to see him, back in a minute'.

In short

- Young infants are not yet able to take in the environment, toys and you all at the same time. It's a skill they learn in the first year of life.
- The way children with a visual impairment try to draw your attention to something they find interesting or fun can be difficult to recognise.
- Use your hands and voice to show your child you are attuned to his body language, to what he is doing and experiencing.
- Try to avoid chatting with your child and help him remain focused on his play.
- Don't ask too many questions.
- Tell your child, or let him know in other ways, what your attention is focused on.
- Joint attention is a milestone in your child's social development and a valuable experience for you and your child.

Shared play

Shared play

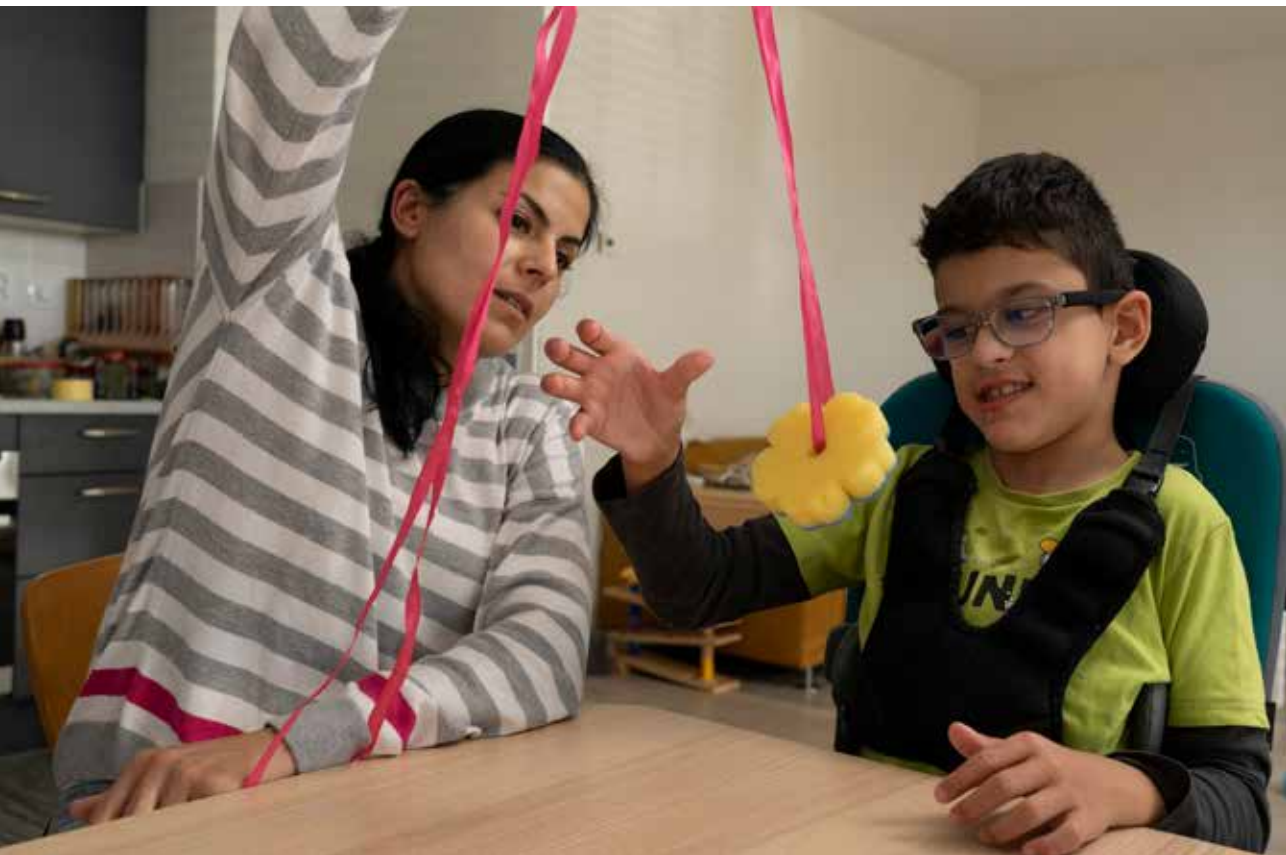
What you can read in this chapter
Parents and children play together from the very first days of life. That means you know your child and the way he plays like no other. Children also play with relatives and other caregivers, and you as an experienced parent can explain to them what your child needs.
Playing with other children usually comes naturally but children with a visual or visual-and-intellectual impairment and their siblings and peers need a parent's helping hand.
You can help get play underway without actually taking part yourself. And you can also encourage sighted siblings and other children to put themselves in the place of their visually impaired playmates. You will need all your creative powers to promote these moments of shared play.

With parents
As a parent you have the most varied and extensive interaction with your child. You are the most important person in his life and have played with him since he was born. You know what he likes, what he can do independently and when he needs help. You know your child best.
The same goes for your partner, even if his or her way of playing with the child differs from yours, which is a good thing in itself. Your partner may be more into wild physical play while you prefer sensory play activities. In that way you and your partner complement each other.

Children with a visual impairment
If your child has a visual impairment, you are even more attuned to your child. You are often the first to notice and interpret small changes in posture or sounds. Playing together is an excellent way to learn to recognise all his signals and so forge a bond.

↘ Anna is 2.6 years old, she is blind. Anna and her dad are playing with a ball. Every time Anna grabs hold of the ball, her dad protests and holds on the ball as well: 'wow, you are pulling so hard, I want the ball too'. As they are both holding the ball, Anna and her dad know exactly what the other is doing. Anna turns the ball to the left and her father follows the movement. Then he turns it to the right with Anna following him. Anna and her dad are attuned to each other's movements. They are aware and respond to the slightest change. Anna pulls the ball towards her and her father follows her movement, putting in a bit of counter pressure. She pulls even harder (her father sees the tension in her arms and the tell-tale frown on her face) and he protests even harder. Then he lets go and they both burst out laughing. 'Again!' Anna cries.

↘ Cemal and his mum are playing with a sponge tied to a ribbon. Cemal holds the sponge while his mother gently pulls on the ribbon. Cemal feels the movement, opens his mouth and says 'aaaah'. 'Yes, that was me pulling on the ribbon. And now you are squeezing the sponge even harder. You are still holding on to the sponge,' his mother says.



With other adults

Apart from parents, other adults also play a role in your child's life. Grandparents, aunts and uncles, the babysitter, staff at the day-care centre, play group or school will all enter your child's life at some point.

Children with a visual impairment

Most adults will want to help your child with a visual impairment While that is a good thing in itself, too much help will make him less independent. Of course it is necessary for him to be confident that the adults around him will provide a secure environment, particularly in a new situation. But other adults often don't know what your child needs in order to initiate play. You will need to explain to them how your child plays and what he plays with. It is not always easy to imagine how children respond to certain play materials. You are an experienced parent and you know. But for others it is not so straightforward.

↘ Anna is 2.6 years old, she is blind. Anna adores her babysitter. She loves to sit on her lap. The babysitter makes sure Anna's toys are within reach. If one of the toys falls Anna has only to open her hand and the babysitter picks the toy up and hands it to her. Anna's mother has noticed this and shows her how she would react in the same situation: 'Oops, it's fallen...where did it go to? Yes, it's on the floor, we heard a little 'thump' on the floor...come, let's pick it up together.'

↘ 'Here' grandma says, 'a little rabbit'. She gives the plastic toy to Mauro. Mauro is 3 years old, he has a visual impairment. Mauro is confused and gives the toy back to his grandmother. His father says that their neighbours have a rabbit and that Mauro is sometimes allowed to stroke it. He realises that Mauro possibly expected a real rabbit. 'Did you think it was a real rabbit and was the toy a bit cold? I understand. It wasn't what you expected, was it?'

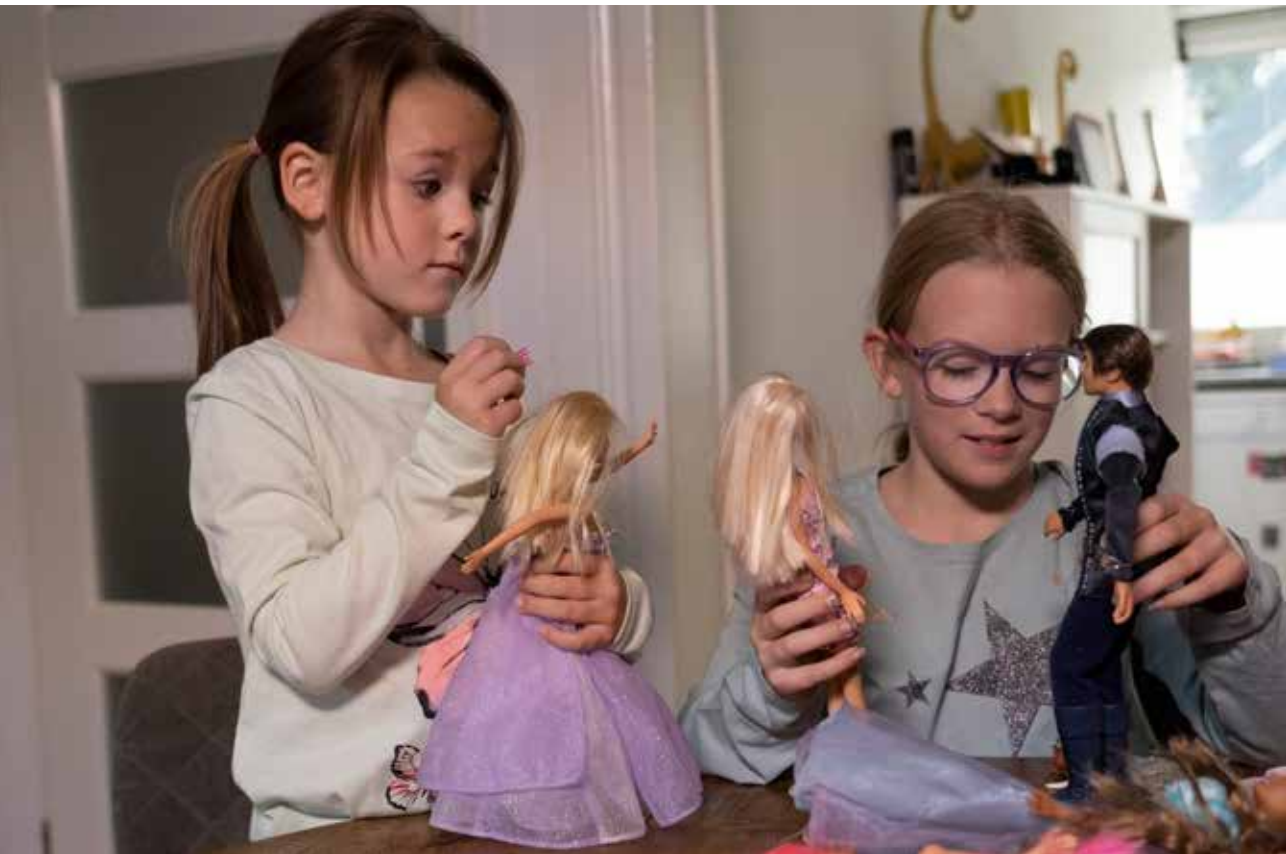
With brothers and sisters

If your child has older siblings it may well be that their play is too difficult for him to participate in. But your child will enjoy the experience and learn from the interaction between his siblings. They may use different play materials, or play in a different way, but as time goes by he will start to follow their play more and more and become curious about what they're playing and their toys. Play with a younger brother or sister is perhaps easier although the behaviour of a younger child may be a bit too unpredictable for his visually impaired sibling.

Children with a visual impairment

Subtitling is a great tool to help your child follow the play of their siblings. Shared play doesn't happen from one day to the next.

↘ Fabienne and Daphne are playing with their Barbies. Daphne makes up a conversation between mum and dad and then the mum cradles the baby before putting it to bed. All the while Fabienne is engrossed in combing Barbie's hair.



Your child will play alongside of the other children and not really join in for quite a long period of time. It is special to see how the other children will devise the kind of play that is suitable and fun for all. Sometimes it takes a parent's helping hand to stimulate shared play by suggesting play activities but it is almost always better to leave the initiative with the children.
The brothers and sisters of a visually impaired child don't always take their sibling's needs into account, and nor should they have to. They might not always have positive thoughts about their brother or sister, and that, too, is understandable. Parents need much understanding and tact to give each child the space, attention and support they need as they play together.

Playing with other children
To really share play, children need to be able to play and enjoy the same type of play activities. They can then decide what and how to play.

Children with a visual impairment
Many parents worry their visually impaired child will have difficulty playing with other children, both at home and in school.
When children are very young they play alongside each other and do not engage in shared play yet. When they become toddlers their play with other children is often supported by parents or by the staff at the day-care centre and the child with a visual impairment is helped to join in. Once children reach pre-school age it will become much more difficult for children with a visual impairment to join in their sighted peers' play. At that age play sessions are longer, and no longer supervised and the visually impaired child may have difficulty visually following what is going on. Pre-schoolers' play is very active and fast-paced. They are not yet able to put themselves in other children's shoes and therefore don't take each other's limits into account. It's very disappointing for parents to see that their child is having a hard time joining in the play of other children. That doesn't mean visually impaired children shouldn't mix with other children when they play. They may play on their own and not join in with the others. But they are still part of the group, even if their ideas and suggestions are not immediately adopted, or rejected.

↘ Mark and Mauro are playing in the sand pit. Mauro is 3 years old, he has a visual impairment. Mark is making sand pies. 'Look Mauro, here's a nice pie!' Mauro fills a bucket with sand and then empties it. He enjoys the sensation of the sand running through his fingers. When Mark again offers him a pie Mauro reaches for the sandy mound on the edge of the sandpit. He tastes the sand and pulls a face. 'That's not very nice, is it,' his mother says. 'You thought it was a real pie. But Mark's pie was made of sand. And sand doesn't taste nice.'

↘ Aysa is 4 years old, she has a visual-and-intellectual impairment. Aysa is sitting in her wheelchair in the playground surrounded by playing children. She can hear their enthusiastic shouts and sees their movements. She is really enjoying the spectacle. Her dad notices that Aysa is moving her arms more as she crows with pleasure. 'Yes, the children are playing with each other. They are running and making happy noises. And you are moving, too, and also making happy noises, just like them.'

Supporting shared play

Shared play is not something that happens spontaneously. Parents can support and help make play happen in the following ways:

- Ask your child's friend to come on a playdate at your house. Shared play is much more likely to happen when your child does not first have to familiarise himself with his surroundings.
- Invite a playmate who has about the same level of play and who likes the same toys. Ideally, that would be a child with a little bit of an understanding of your child's wishes. Young children up to preschool age are not yet able to take other children's wishes into account. That will only happen when they are (much) older. If your child's playmate suddenly decides to do something entirely different it's not a sign of unwillingness on his part, or a rejection of your child's play. Try to influence the play from a distance but leave the initiative with the children. Don't insist they play together because that will have the reverse effect. If the children are bickering, try to steer them in the direction of a compromise and get them to make peace. You do this by putting the emotions of both children into words. You could,

for instance, say that your child wasn't able to see very well what was happening, and that his friend wasn't aware that your child was still doing something else. Say that it is important to make up and that they can then go on to play something else.

↘ Roger is 6 years old, he has a severe visual impairment. Roger is playing at Duplo with Ruben. Together they have built the walls of a house. Ruben then makes holes in one of the walls and starts to look for windows to put in. Roger discovers the empty spaces and starts to look for blocks to fill them up. But when he wants to put his blocks in he finds Roger got there before him and put the windows in. That makes him angry and they have a fight. Roger's mother follows what is happening from a distance, and puts it into words. '...you were having so much fun building and then things went wrong. That can happen. Roger didn't see that Ruben had made holes and was looking for windows, and Ruben didn't see that Roger was looking for blocks to put in. Both of you had a different plan...perhaps you two can have a chat about what to do with the walls.'

› Children with a visual impairment like to be in control when playing and that can make them look bossy. Participating in and moving along with their playmates play is still a challenge for them. They much prefer to play according to their own rules and perhaps also play in a certain order. The other child may go along with this for a bit but his attention will soon flag and he will go off and do something for himself. You can help your child by subtitling (see chapter 'Closely following your child's play; mirroring and subtitling'), or putting into words what is being played so your child knows what is happening and understands what the other child is doing and how he can join in.

↘ After having played with the Duplo blocks, Roger and Ruben are playing with trains. Roger is 6 years old, he has a visual impairment. Roger is the conductor and Ruben the driver. Roger insists on making the train go round three times and then stopping at the

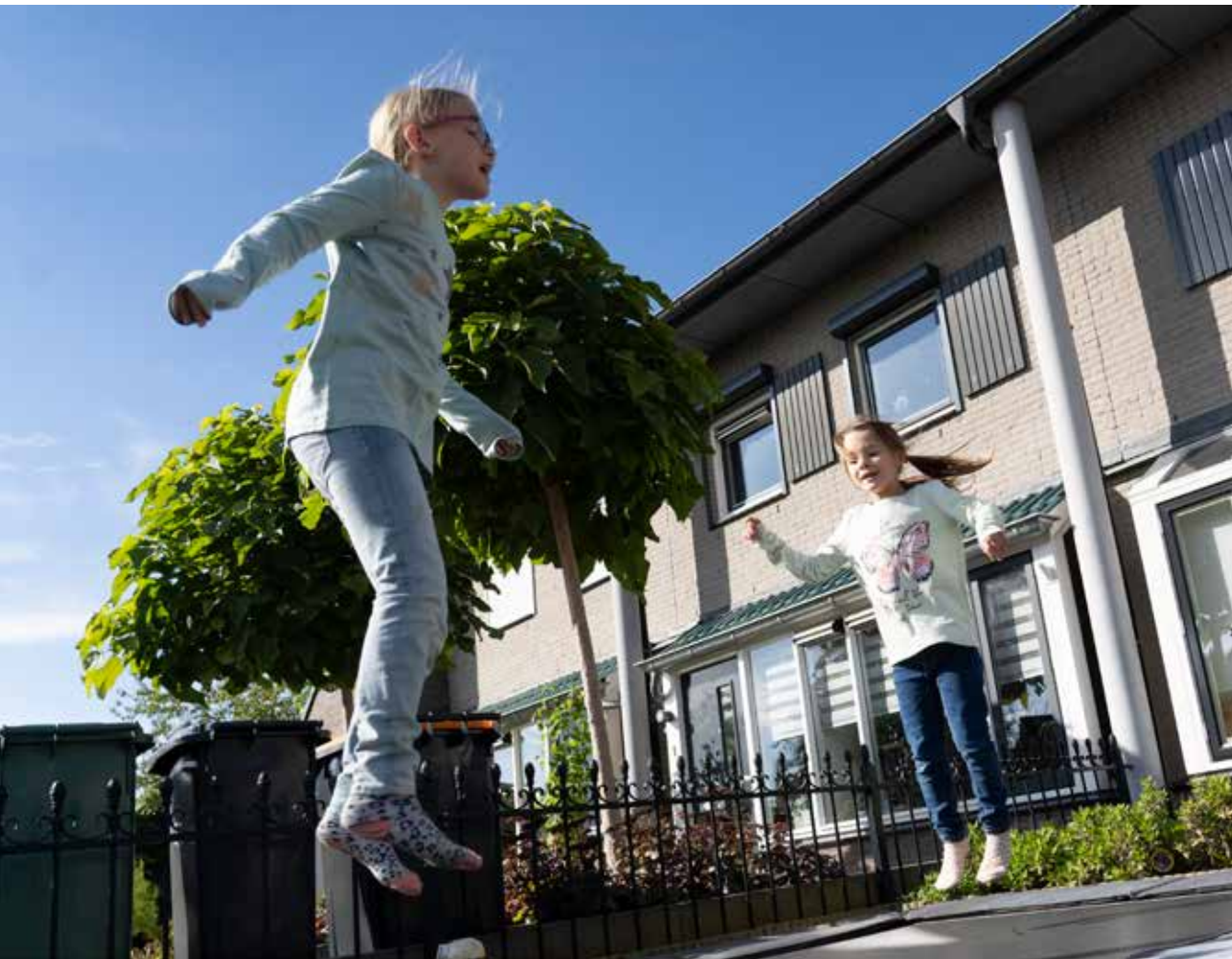
same station. Ruben, the driver, suddenly decides to stop the train and do some repairs on the engine. Roger is having trouble following the sudden interruption and he protests vehemently. He doesn't understand the train will, in a little while, continue and then stop at the same station. By subtitling briefly what Ruben is doing, Roger's mother is helping him to regain control over the situation. Roger is reassured and the boys can continue their play.

- When you play with your child, explain that playing with another child means that sometimes he will have to give in a little. There's still room for what he wants to do but every now and then things may not go completely his way.
- With a little help most of your child's playmates will be willing to adapt to your child's different play behaviour, to some degree at least. However, young children are not really capable of understanding other children's needs and wishes. So if they, or younger siblings, are unwilling to completely give up on their own play ideas they are not being unkind or dismissive. A little cooperation is not too much to ask but too much will cause resentment and scupper any attempts at shared play.
- Some children tend to talk a lot during play without waiting for an answer or a reaction. They are not really attuned to their playmate. It's their way of remaining in contact and/or it may have become a habit. At some point you can have a chat with your child explaining that sometimes the children he plays with don't really like it if he talks so much. Perhaps the next time they play he can try to remember that.

↘ 'I can tell you really like to talk to Bart when you're playing, perhaps because you are trying to find out what he is playing, or if he likes playing with you. But Bart finds it a bit difficult to play and listen at the same time. He prefers to play without talking too much. If you listen carefully, I bet you can follow what he's doing really well and feel how nice it is to play together like that. Of course you can ask him a question every once in a while but not every two minutes.' If necessary add: 'Would you like me to help you with that?'

You could, for instance, agree to put your hand on his shoulder briefly to warn him he is talking too much.

- It may be that the play of younger children is a better match for your child. It may also help if his playmate is a child who likes to describe his own actions as he plays.
- For children who have good motor skills, movement play, like jumping about and having fun on a trampoline is a good choice. Age, or the level of play are of less importance in this type of play.



- Big play material, such as big blocks, are easier to handle and better suited to shared play.
- Keep playdates short: one hour is plenty to start with. It is an intense experience, both for your child and you as a parent.
- Be available during the whole of the session. Don't think the presence of a playmate means you 'have your hands free'. Your presence is required for play throughout, following the play from a distance, making suggestions for play activities and, at times, getting it back on track.
- Don't expect the children to engage in long shared play sessions. Ten minutes is usually the limit. Then they'll do something for themselves or run around. After a while you can put down other play materials that invite shared play, such as clay, blocks, kitchen utensils, or a train set.
- Go for toys your child is familiar with and enjoys playing with.
- When you introduce new play material start the children off by playing with them briefly and then remove yourself from the play.
- If the shared play seems to get stuck you can always play a game with them. A sensory game, where touching, hearing and smelling play a role, could give your child a head start. Try a scavenger hunt in the (semi) darkness.
- Make sure the play session has a positive ending. If necessary, think of a concluding activity that is attractive for both children.
- If your child is invited to a friend's house on a playdate, take the time to first familiarise him with the house and the play area. Tell the other parent about your child's play behaviour and what his favourite play activities are.
- Arrange playdates at times when your child is not too tired, so preferably not after school, for instance. A better option might be a free afternoon or the weekend.
- At school shared play will also be an important issue in the discussions between the teacher and the care professional.

↘ Mary is 5 years old, she has a visual impairment. Mary is playing with the little boy from next door. She is doing most of the talking. 'And then I was the mother, and you came home from work. Here's your briefcase.'

Her mother sighs. Mary seems to turn into a proper little bossy boots when she is playing with other children. She is the one who decides what the others should do and how the play develops.
Mary's mother decides to talk to the boy's mother. As they discuss the matter they discover that this may be a way for Marieke to keep control of the events. As long as she decides what will happen, she won't have to consider other children's suggestions which may have passed her by. When the children play with clay some time later, they notice that Marieke is more open to suggestions. She seems to feel more in control in this type of play.

↘ Lotus is playing cops and robbers with two of her friends. Lotus has been given the task of warning the others in case any thieves are coming. But after a while the two friends are playing with each other and Lotus is left alone to watch for thieves. Her mother discusses with Lotus what she can do: 'how about you pretend the thieves are coming? What did you hear? Was it a creak? Shuffling? Lotus likes it and calls out to her friends. 'I hear shuffling, the thieves are coming! That is enough to engage the attention of her friends again and for a while at least, their play becomes shared play again.

↘ Mauro is 3 years old, he has a visual impairment. Mauro is playing with his toy kitchen with two boys his age. He is having fun stacking plates, stirring his spoon in all the cups and putting the lids on the various pots and pans. His friends play that they are cooking together, tasting imaginary soup and setting the table. Mauro's play lacks the fantasy element of the other boys' play but although they play differently, they sometimes coincide. 'Supper's ready, Mauro', the boys call out to him. Mauro comes to the table, where he continues to play with his spoons and cups.

In short

- Shared play offers an opportunity to have varied and comprehensive interactions with your child.
- Other adults can learn from you how to play with your child.
- By playing among and with other children and siblings your child will learn much about shared play.
- Playing with children who have some awareness of what their visually impaired playmate's wishes are, will often be more successful, as will playing with younger children whose play preferences are similar.
- Parental support, such as creating the right conditions for play and occasionally steering play in the right direction from a distance, is helpful but try not to intervene in the play too much.
- Shared play is preceded by parallel play, where the child plays alongside other children.
- Introducing play which is focused more on hearing and touch will give your child a better chance of participating in the play successfully.

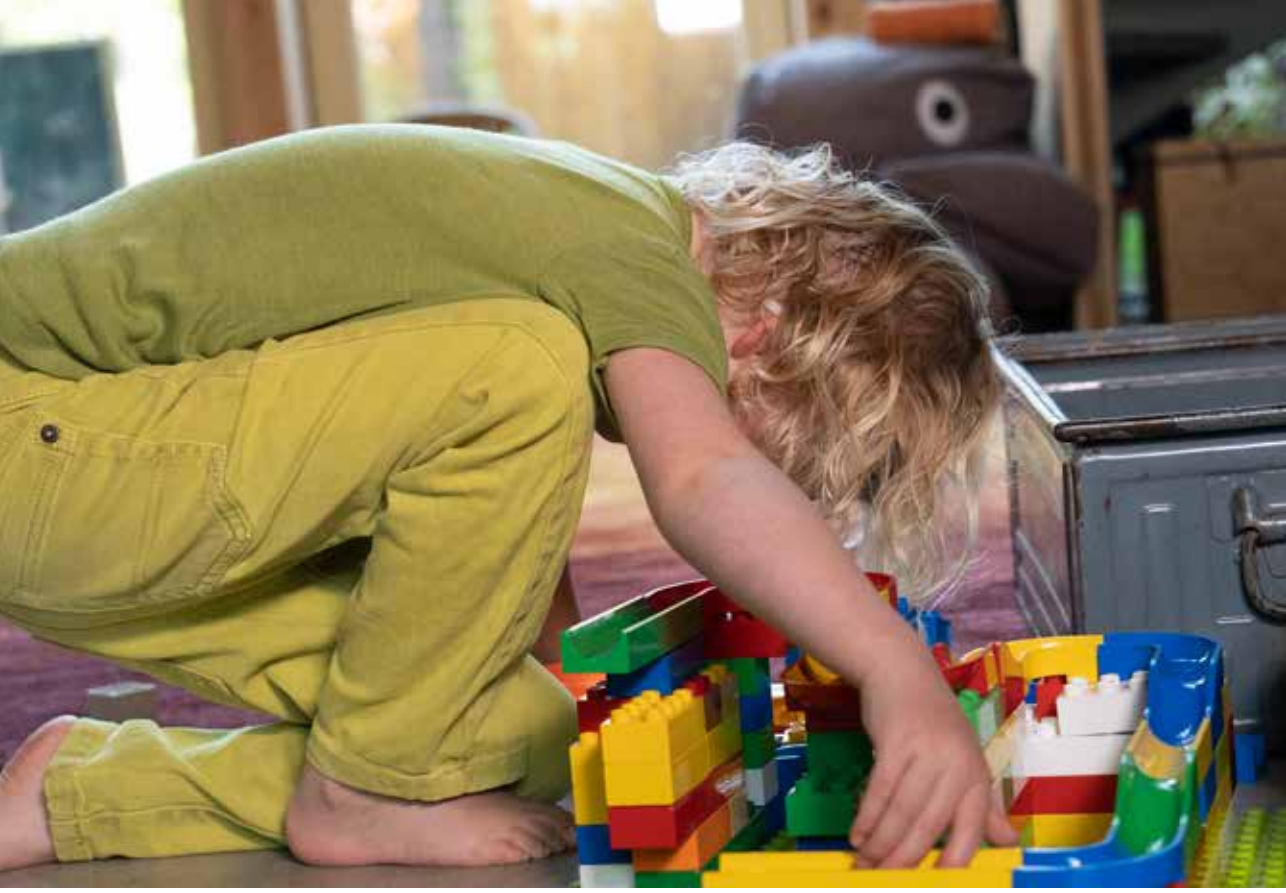
Solitary play

Solitary play

What you can read in this chapter
Children not only learn to play together, they also learn to play alone. A child without a visual impairment will see where his parent is going and learn that he/she is still there even when out of sight. Children with a visual or visual-and-intellectual impairment need more time to learn this. They may also have trouble locating their toys and that will also prolong the time it takes them to learn how to play alone. This means parents need to be more aware in their approach and communication.

Children can learn how to play alone
Children like to discover things independently but they can only do this if they feel safe. By coming back at regular intervals your child will become confident that you're still around even if you have left the room. Just as he has learned to walk and talk, your child will eventually learn through experience to play by himself.

Children with a visual impairment
In order to play, children with a visual impairment need the support of adults for longer and to a more intensive degree, and that goes for solitary play as well. You can help your child choose a toy, for instance, and put the play material he needs for his play close by. Often you will have to judge how long he will be able to concentrate on his play. Very young children often won't play for more than a couple of minutes at the time. The chapters 'Where does your child play' and 'When does your child play and when do you play together?' will tell you more about this.
In order to play alone, children need to feel secure. Your child is not always able to follow your movements very clearly, so remember to always tell him if you are planning to leave the room for a little while. Playing alone is a learning process that develops in small steps from infancy.



Tips

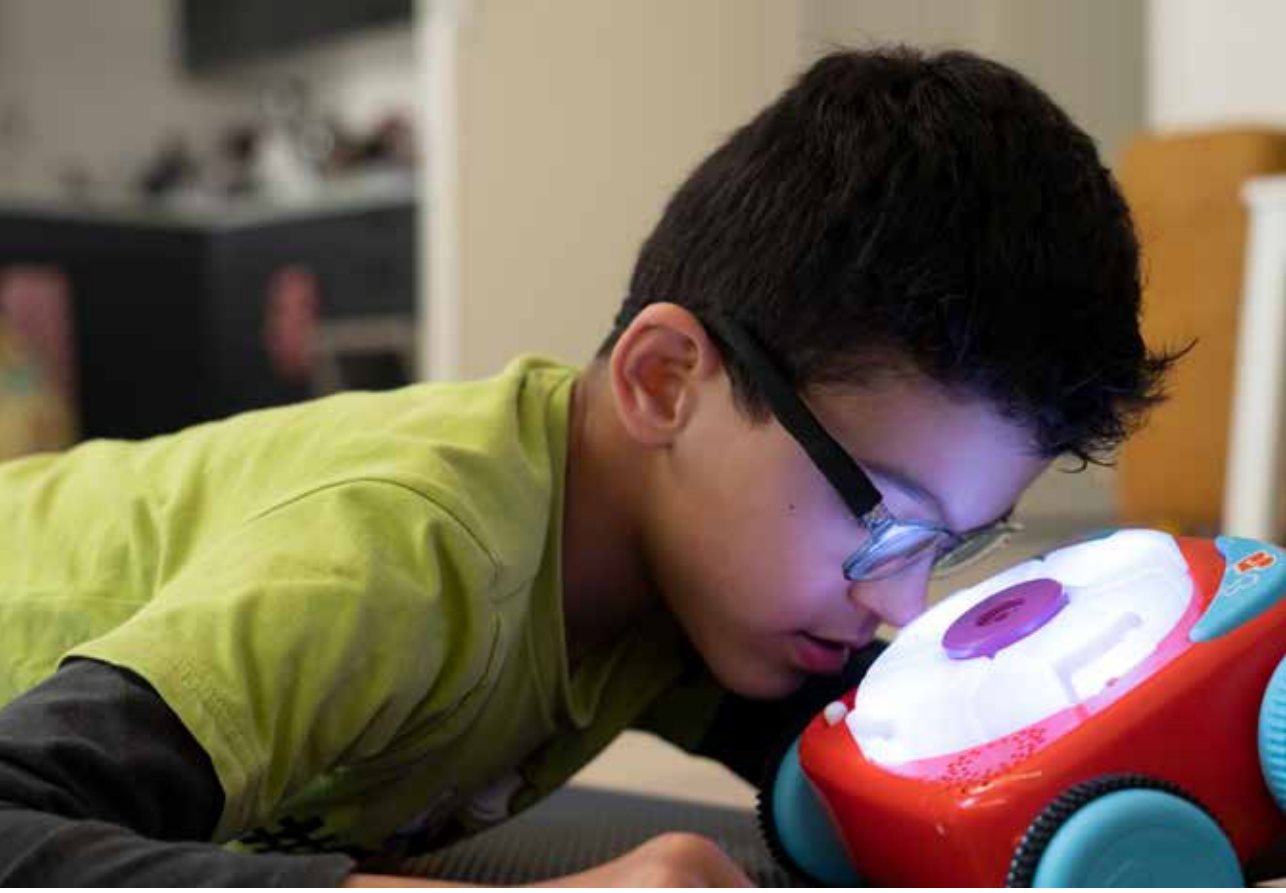
- Start by playing together with play material your child is interested in.
- After a couple of minutes explain clearly to your child what you intend to do and that you will be back once you have done it. For instance: ‘I am going to get a cup of tea and then I’ll be right back’. If your child tries to make contact with you let him know you’re not far away by humming or clearing your throat or making a noise during your activities.
- Increase the time your child is playing alone by spending short periods of time in another room. Explain clearly what you are going to do and that you will be back. For instance: ‘I’m just going to put the washing in the machine and then I’ll be right back.’

Don’t be surprised if your child reverts to simpler or more repetitive play when playing by himself. He may even stop playing altogether. If that is the case, playing alone is too stressful and is taking up too much of his energy. Don’t give up, and praise him every time he attempts to play alone. Like walking and talking, he won’t learn to play alone from one day to the next. It is best not to push him and to take his needs into account. It can take longer than you may hope before your child feels secure enough to play independently. By keeping your confidence your child may feel that you know he can do it. He needs you to feel confident in his abilities.

A motor disability can cause a discrepancy between what your child can play with independently and his actual play level. By finding a balance between moments of supported play and independent play your child will learn to play by himself.

Every parent wants his child to become independent. Children want to be in control too: saying ‘I do it’, or ‘no’, or stubborn behaviour are all healthy expressions of wanting to become less dependent on parents and relying more on themselves. Your child needs your help to become independent. Instead of making demands he can’t fulfil, you can build his confidence by asking him to do the things he’s already mastered.

↘ Arjan is 2 years old, he has a visual impairment. Arjan follows his mother every time she pops into the kitchen, including when he’s having fun with his toy tea set. Every time his mother takes a step in the direction of the kitchen he starts to cry.
His mother realises her absence makes him uncomfortable. They agree that he can come with her if she stays in the kitchen for a longer period of time. If she will only be away for a short while she will tell him so clearly: ‘I am just going to put the kettle on and then I’ll be back and we’ll play some more.’ She also announces her return: ‘I’m back again…I see that while I was in the kitchen you stacked all the saucers. Are you collecting all the spoons now?’



↘ Cemal often needs the support of an adult when playing alone except when he is playing with toys that produce a sound or light up when he presses a button. The buttons are big and easy to operate and Cemal can entertain himself without assistance. He can choose from different kinds of sound play so there is plenty to keep him occupied. His sound toys come in a variety of shapes and operating modes. There are musical activity boards, sound toys, talking books and playlists of his favourite music on an iPad or laptop.
Cemal plays on his own for a short period of time and lets his mother know he needs her by making a sound.

In short

- Your child may need your presence for a long time before he feels secure enough to be able to play alone.
- Even if it takes a long time, every small step towards more independence counts.
- Your child needs your help to become independent. You can build up his confidence by asking him to do things he can do and avoiding activities he is incapable of fulfilling.
- Help your child play alone for a little while by being clear about what you are going to do. Tell him you will be away for a bit but that you will come back - and keep your promise.

What type of play is my child engaged in? Contact play

What type of play is my child engaged in? Contact play

Different types of play

There are different types of play, such as contact play which is characterised by one-on- one interaction, sensory play which centres on physical sensations, and object play. The way children play depends on their age, development and, most of all, their preferences. Your child's play may differ from that of his friends or other children his age. Try not to make comparisons. It's the enjoyment your child derives from his play that matters.

You can support, stimulate and facilitate your child's play but you can't teach him to play. The most you can do is to help get him started. Play comes naturally to children and as they play their playing skills develop. As soon as you offer your child play material that he is not ready for, or that he doesn't like, you will find that his attention flags and he loses concentration. He may play along but according to your plan. You may be having a good time but your child has not initiated the play.

What you can read in this chapter

Contact play is the most intimate form of shared play, enabling you and your child to follow what the other is doing very closely. This type of bonding play will make your child feel safe in your presence and secure in himself. We will be describing various forms of contact play. By engaging in contact play you and your child become more aware of each other's feelings. By naming these feelings your child will learn to recognise them.

Children with a visual impairment

Parents often encounter obstacles when trying to engage with their child with a visual impairment. There may be little or no eye contact and sometimes the child's face shows little emotion, making it hard to 'read' his behaviour.

Contact play is particularly important for children with a visual impairment because it opens up the way for parent and child to explore alternatives for visual contact. Your child may be trying to connect with you in ways that are not immediately obvious. He will use not only his face but his hands and his whole body to show you how he feels. By naming his emotions you can teach your child to recognise them.

↘ Anna is 2.6 years old, she is blind. Anna is aware her father has walked into the room. He can tell because she has turned her ear into the direction of the door and is flapping her hands enthusiastically. 'There's my sweet girl! Let's have a cuddle, I have missed you.' She is moving her hands even faster and that tells her father she is looking forward to the cuddle. 'That makes you happy, doesn't it? I'm really happy to see you too.'

Your child can also tell something of what you are experiencing from your body language, your pitch and your speech rhythms.
Contact play will give you a chance to learn about each other's behaviour and understand and recognise its meaning. By imitating and complementing each other you learn to become attuned to your child during the interaction. You learn when to take the initiative but also when to wait for a response, as well as to give off signals yourself which your child can perceive.

↘ Bram is 6 years old, he has a visual-and-intellectual impairment. His father sees that Bram is hitting his jingle ball increasingly fast and hard. The game had started out well and Bram had been pleasantly surprised at the noise every time he hits the ball. But he is no longer enjoying himself, he is over stimulated and tense and his breathing becomes audible. His dad lies down next to him on the mat and talks to him in reassuring tones. He moves his hand along with Bram's towards the ball but slows down the movement. Bram soon adopts the same speed

until the movement stops, ‘We played with the ball together. Let’s listen to a little music now. Then we can both relax a bit’.

Cuddle play

Children love cuddle play, starting from infancy. They feel secure when they are close to you, hearing your heartbeat and breathing. They feel their own body in relation to yours and it makes for a relaxing and pleasurable experience. You can feel if your child is relaxed, tense, happy or angry. By naming these feeling you can help your child handle his emotions and express them.

Look at me

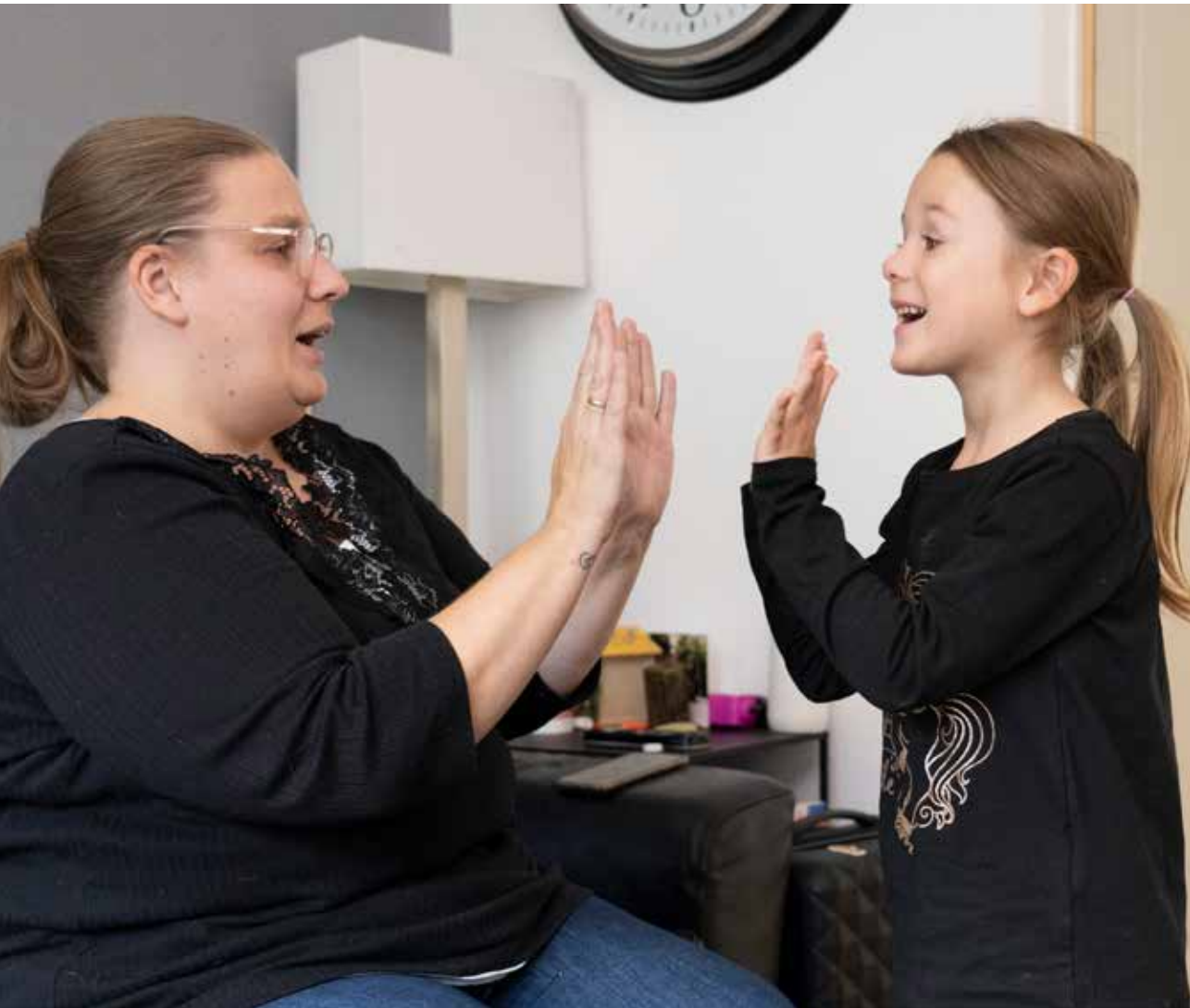
If you are very near to your visually impaired child and your face is lit up by the sun or the light of a torch, try to see what it is your child is responding to. Maybe he responds when you laugh and show your teeth, or when you wear lipstick. Maybe you make eye contact, or perhaps he is intent on your hairline which offers a clear contrast between the colour of your hair and your face. Keep talking to your child while showing him your facial expressions and enjoy the interaction. Your child may try to imitate your facial expression. By slowly exaggerating a facial expression it will become easier for your child to see and imitate.

Getting to know each other

Helped by the playful rituals which surround everyday activities such as bathing, dressing and undressing, eating, sleeping and waking up you and your child will get to know each other better and better. Take the time your child needs to familiarise himself with you, his surroundings and what happens there. By and by the repetitive nature of the activities will enable him to recognise smells and sounds, such as: your smell and the sound of your voice and your footsteps as you walk up to him while talking and prepare him for what is coming. Some parents use a particular rhyme or song to announce a certain activity, such as bathing, eating or changing a nappy.

Vocal play

Vary your voice pitch and speech rhythm as you talk to your child. It's almost as if you're singing to him. Maybe your child makes sounds that you can imitate. (See chapter 'Closely following your child's play; mirroring and subtitling'). If you listen carefully you will hear your child respond to your sounds with sounds of his own in the same pitch, or complement your pitch and rhythm. You're making music together!
The next stage is singing together. Children's songs with a repetitive chorus are particularly good for vocal play. Every time you come to the end of a line, wait and let your child provide what's missing, in sound, melody or words. Vocal play is another great way to interact with your child.



Contact play using hands

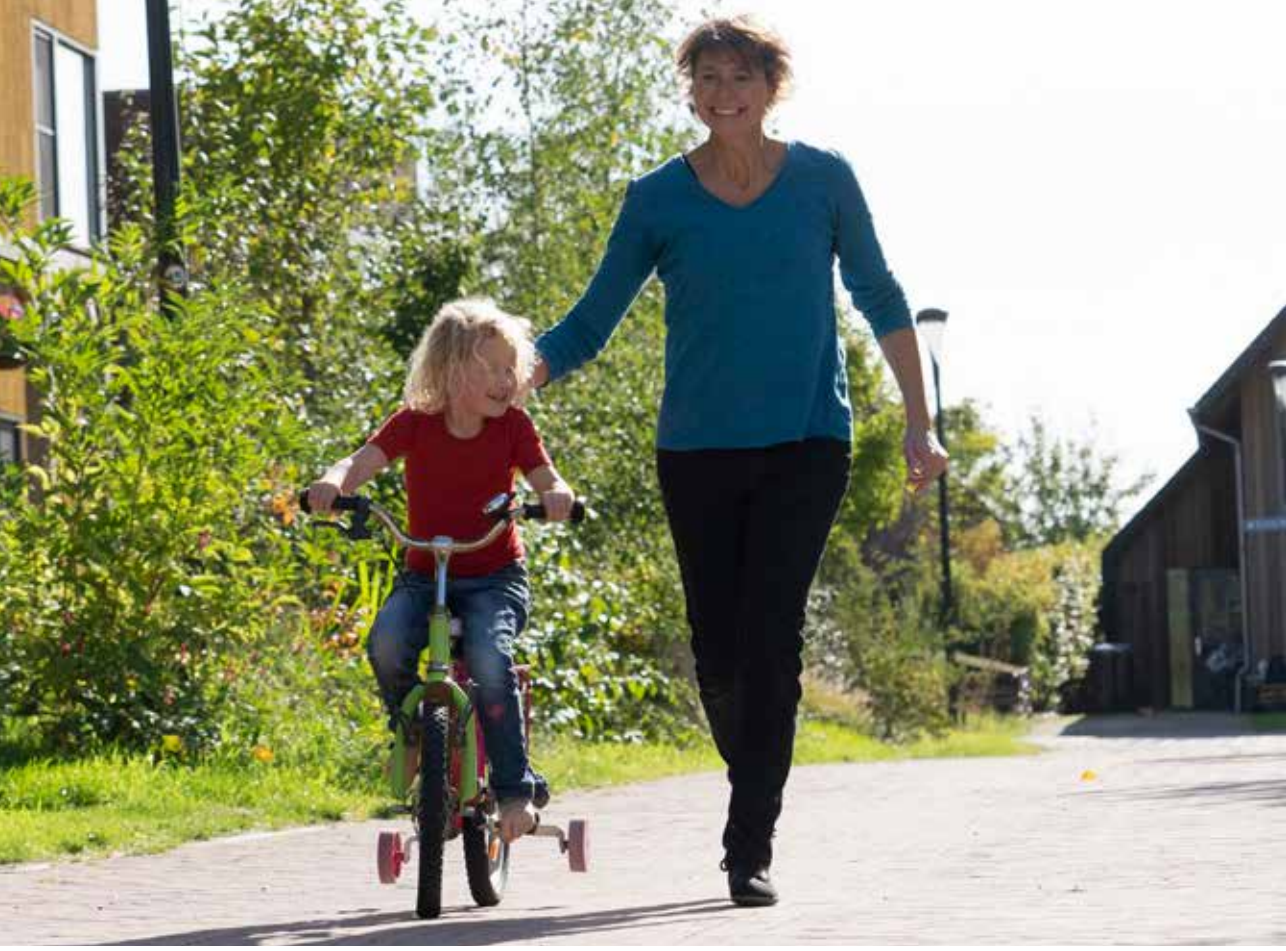
Slide your hand over your child's hand and follow the movements he makes. What is he moving towards? Is he relaxed? Then slide your hand underneath your child's hand and slowly move your hand. Is he following your hand movement? Is he relaxed? By stopping your movement and waiting to see if your child initiates movement, your game can develop into a turn-taking game.

↘ Jerry is 5 years old, he has a visual-and-intellectual impairment. Jerry is playing a contact game with his mother. She is rubbing his left lower arm. His hand is on top of his mother's hand. She is aware of tiny differences in pressure and does exactly what he is doing: if he increases the pressure, so does she, and vice versa.

Movement play

One example of movement play is dancing to your or your child's favourite music, while holding him tightly in your arms or in a sling or baby carrier. Feel how he is adapting to your movements, and look out for signs that mean you need to move faster or slow down. Try to find out which music your child likes to move to. Some children love pop songs, others enjoy classical music. Choose songs which you and your child can move to together, such as the lap song 'Row, row, row your boat'.
Running, crawling, jumping, sliding and ball play will make your child experience speed, height and exertion.
As your child becomes older and stronger, he will enjoy these boisterous activities even more. Having a good romp sometimes looks a bit like fighting, with attacking and defence, but of course the one big difference is that no one gets hurt.

↘ Lotus is going faster and faster on her bike. Every once in a while her mother removes her hand from Lotus's back. It's exciting for Lotus and great fun. The harder she pedals the more the wind blows through her hair, and the lighter the pressure of her mother's hand feels on her back.



↘ Arjan is 2 years old, he has a visual impairment. Arjan is sitting on his father's back as he is crawling up a sand dune. He holds his father tightly around the neck and can hear and feel his breathing. Once on top of the dune he quickly puts himself between his father's legs for the downward slide. Arjan shouts for joy. The game continues until his dad is exhausted and it's time for ice cream.

Contact play not only helps your child develop a sense of feeling secure and of trusting others, it also lays the foundations for various cognitive processes, such as understanding the concept of action-reaction and the concept of permanence: the knowledge that persons and objects still exist even if they are momentarily out of sight or touch.

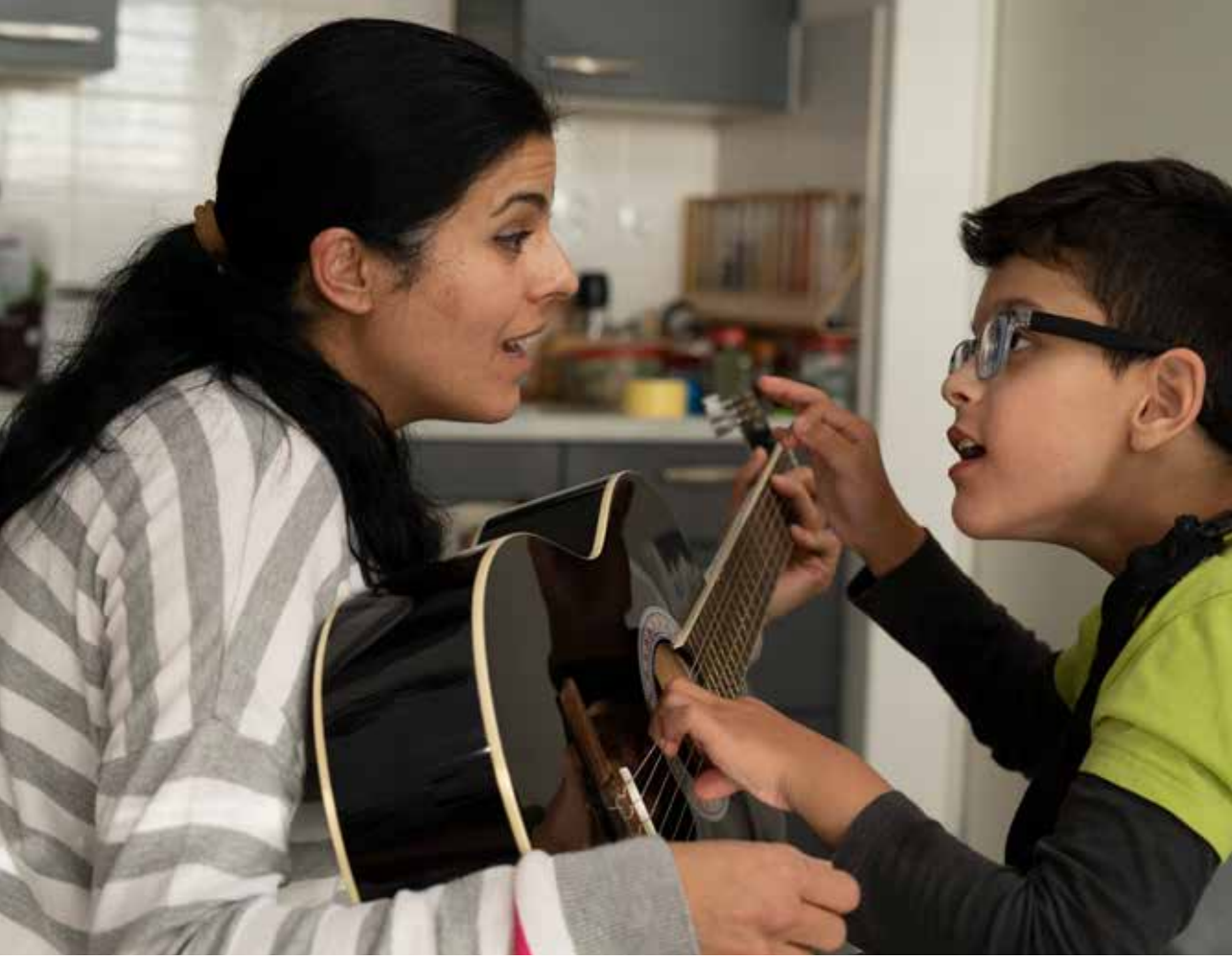
Action- reaction

The first time you slowly let your fingers walk over your child's body to end up tickling his neck, can be a slightly unpleasant sensation for him but once he becomes familiar with the game and knows what is coming it will be a guaranteed hit. Experience has taught him that once he hears the words 'here comes the little mouse' the fun and exciting tickly moment isn't far off.

↘ Cemal enjoys making music and singing popular songs with his mum. She sings: 'Live as if it's your last day...' She sings the first words of the chorus:' and go, go, go, go...', then stops and waits for Cemal's reaction: 'o, o, o, o'. He moves his hands over the strings of the guitar, enjoying the sound it makes.

Hide and seek

Like hiding and seeking objects, peekaboo games, such as putting a tea towel on your own or your child's face and then waiting for it to be pulled off to an enthusiastic greeting, helps young children understand the concept of permanence: you are still here, even if they cannot hear, feel or see you. Next to this it also teaches your child to handle emotions; the tension he feels when you 'disappear' followed by the happiness that comes when you appear again.
When playing peekaboo, you only disappear for a very short while. Once your child is able to be alone for longer periods of time and the circumstances are such that he can feel safe, you can replace the peekaboo game with hide and seek. And nothing is as much fun as a good hug when you find each other again. 'Ahmed, Ahmed, where are you? I can't find you...Oh thank goodness, there you are, behind the curtain. I'm so happy I found you again.'



In short

- Through contact play you and your child can get a good sense of what the other is experiencing and learn what various behaviours mean.
- Contact play is a type of play both parent and child can enjoy.
- Contact play provides your child with important experiences. He will realise, for instance, that people still exist even if he cannot hear, see or feel them.
- Contact play teaches children to recognise their own and other people's emotions.
- Contact play provides the basis for important emotional and cognitive developments.

What type of play is my child engaged in? Sensory play

What type of play is my child engaged in? Sensory play

What you can read in this chapter
Sensory play is about your child's physical experiences. Play involving the senses can be played at any age or developmental stage. Sensory play has a soothing effect which most children enjoy. By using words that describe what your child is feeling you are adding to his store of experiences.

Windows on the world
Our senses are the windows on the world. Through them we learn about ourselves and the world around us. Sensory stimuli are combined in our brain to form a single perception. A round, orange shape with a lumpy skin, a fresh scent and a typical, bitter tasting skin magically transform into an orange as your child explores, tastes and feels the weight of the object.

Sensory play is about enjoying physical experiences. If you have ever seen children having a good splash in the bath, or running their hands through sand, beans or foam, playing light and dark games, or rocking back and forth blissfully, you will know how much enjoyment they derive from these activities.
Sensory play is not limited by age or developmental stage. It is a type of play which focuses on what your child perceives, feels, hears, smells and tastes, as well as the sensations produced by posture changes.

Even if the play is centred around a specific sense, the other senses still have their role to play. The child's sense of balance, for example, is stimulated by being rocked in his mother's arms, or while sitting on a rocking horse or a swing. But when you rock your child in your arms he also feels your embrace, hears your voice and sees your face. On the swing, he can feel the movement of the air, sees your shape become

bigger then smaller and hears how your voice is louder, then softer. If your child is not actively seeking sensory stimuli he may enjoy a massage. And a trip outside also provides a multitude of sensory thrills: the wind, the warmth of the sun, the rain on his face and the sound it makes on the roof of the shed, the smells of autumn and spring, the smells of the cars and the bakery, the sounds of the trains and the birds.

When your child is older he will actively incorporate materials from in and around the house and from nature in his sensory play. This type of play is not about learning to sort objects according to shape or structure. It is purely concerned with the enjoyment produced by what the child feels, not just with his hands but also with other parts of his body, for instance his feet. It's not about finding a figure or an object in a search-and-find picture but about enjoying the contrasts between colours and light and dark. It's not about learning to distinguish and recognise sounds but about enjoying the sounds and the music. The same goes for experiencing different tastes and textures, postures and smells.

Children with a visual impairment

Even more than other children, children with a visual impairment are drawn to sensory play. It is soothing and they derive enormous enjoyment from it. It's a type of play that appeals to children regardless of their stage of development, including children who have both a visual and an intellectual impairment. Children with a visual impairment are masters of sensory play. In a society geared towards the visual, in which feeling, smelling and tasting are not as prominent, children with a visual impairment are using them to their advantage in their play.

Lost for words?

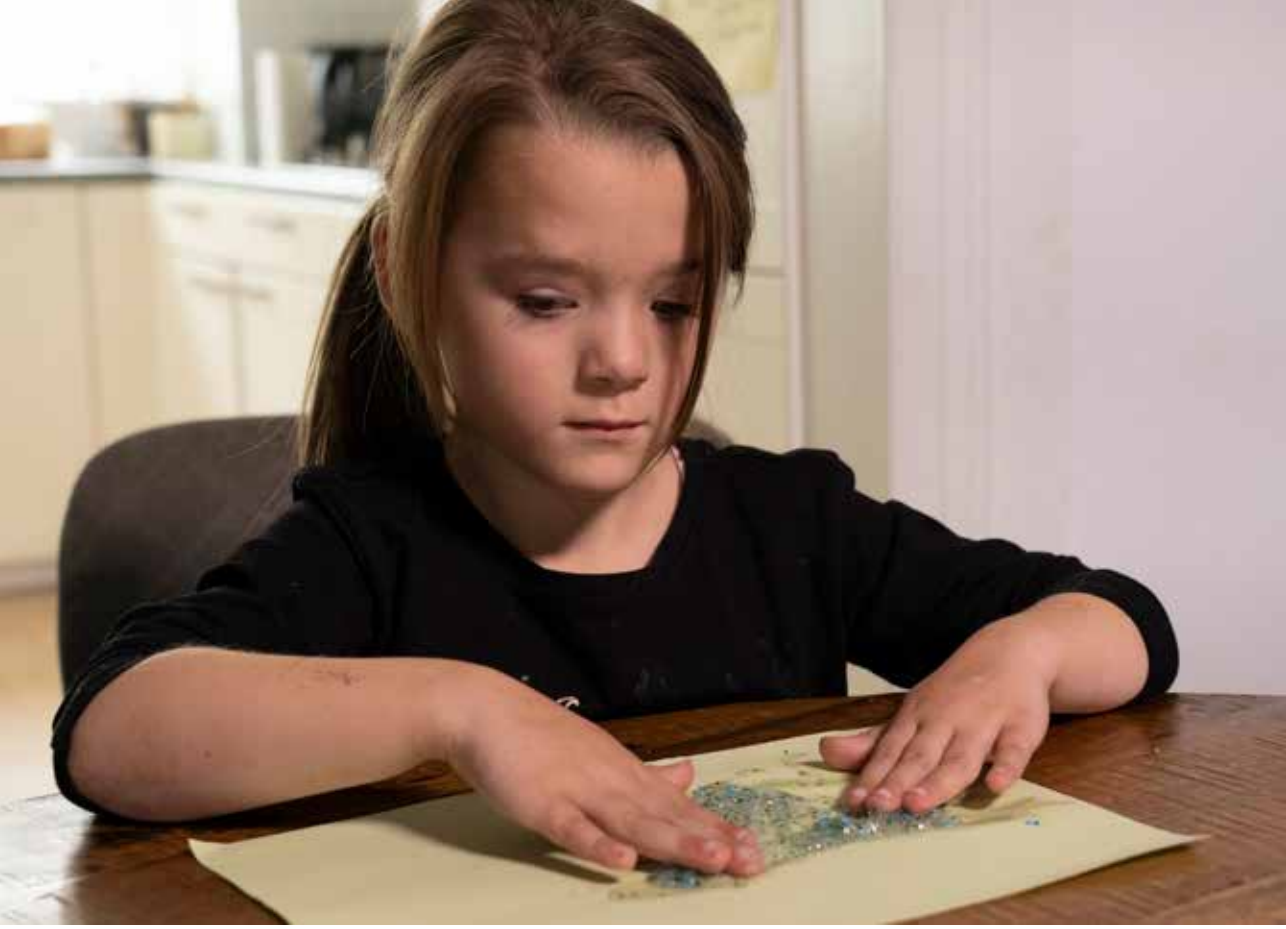
Our language has plenty of words to describe what we see. It's not so easy when it comes to finding words to express what we feel, hear, smell and taste. That means you will have to expand your vocabulary and learn how to use words that may not be on the tip of your tongue. Here are some of the words that you can use to describe what your

child feels: soft, smooth, rough, ribbed, grainy, greasy, slippery, hairy, bristly, lumpy, cool, warm, cold, hard.
To describe sounds, you can use the following words: hard, soft, shrill, deep, high, low, dull, sparkly.
Words for smells may include: sweet, salty, fresh, minty, fruity, spicy, like pine trees, smoky, earthy, metallic, floral, nutty, woody, stale, sharp.
The words to describe taste are sweet, salty, bitter and sour but these allow for a lot of variation, from slightly sweet to cloyingly sweet, slightly salty to briny. And don't forget to describe the textures when you chew on it: crunchy, soft, tough...

Tactile defensiveness
Not all children like to touch materials such as sand, flour or food. They don't like the shapelessness of them and seem to prefer solid objects. Some children are particularly sensitive, or, conversely, not sensitive at all to certain stimuli. Tactile defensiveness will make some stimuli very unpleasant for children. Soft materials in particular seem to trigger them. To offer your child a similar experience to playing with sand you can use raw beans, rice, macaroni or pasta shells.
Children can also be over sensitive or under sensitive to sounds, visual stimuli or smells.

↘ When Fabienne was younger she didn't like the feel of glue on her hands. But then she tried some on her fingertips and started to like it. It still feels a bit strange to start with but then it feels really good to rub both hands in the glue.

↘ Jerry is 5 years old, he has a visual-and-intellectual impairment. Jerry is lying on a mat in the garden, sunshine and shade on his face as the wind blows through the leaves. The mat has different textures and sounds. Sometimes Jerry lies still to feel the sun and the wind. At other times he moves his hands or his feet over the different sections of the mat. His father describes what Jerry is feeling: 'there's a scrunchy noise under your foot, scrunch, scrunch. And this feels really soft under your

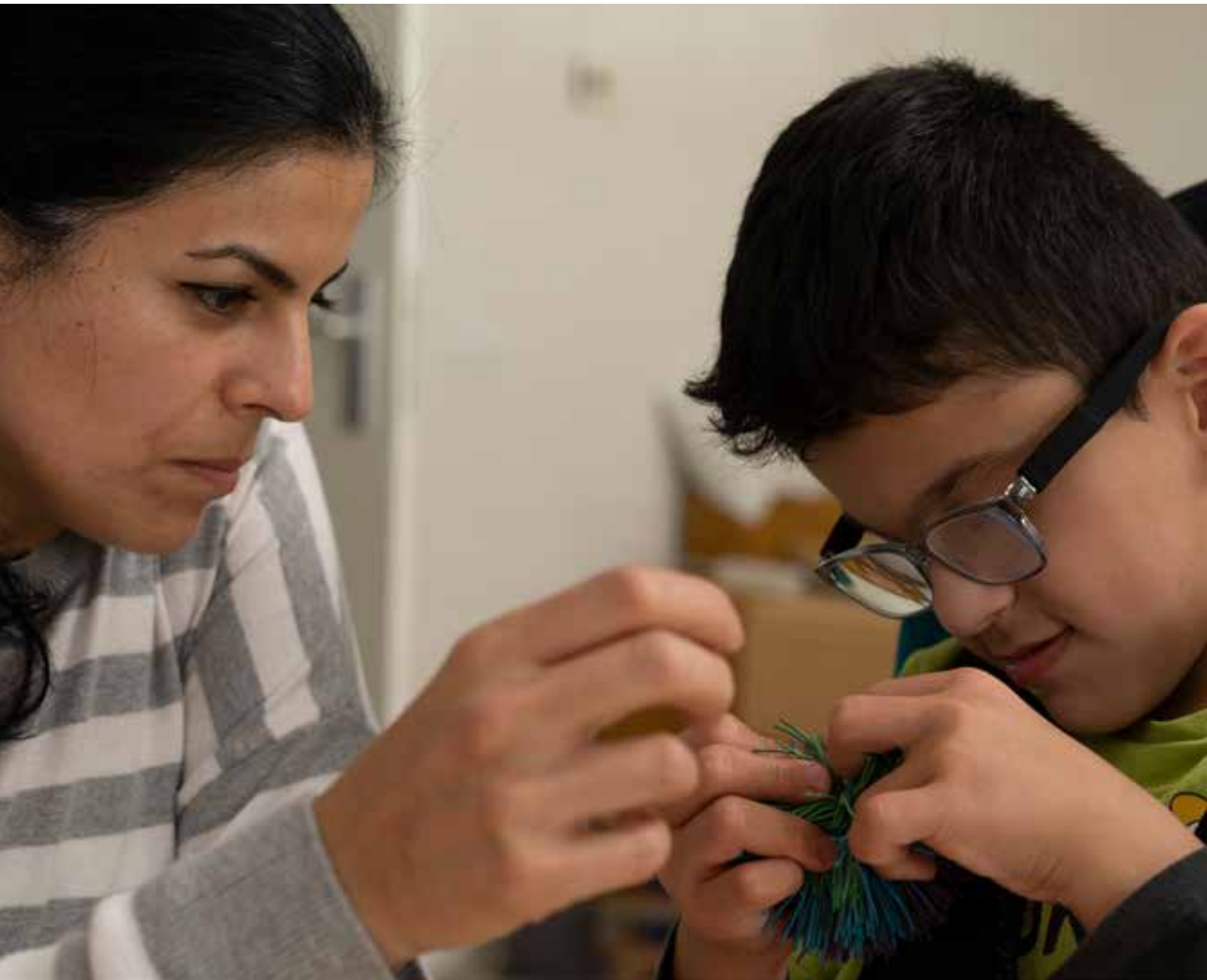


hand and that feels cool and smooth, back to soft, and back to smooth again.'

↘ Anna is 2.6 years old, she is blind. Anna is standing in the doorway to the garden. She keeps stepping into the garden and back again. It may seem a little stereotypical but the contrasts between the warmth and shade of the room and the fresh air and light of the garden, the sounds of the house and the birdsong make for a fascinating experience for Anna which she can enjoy for a long time.

↘ Cemal is sitting at a table with a box in front of him filled with sponges, tactile rings, teething toys, bits of rope and tassels. His mother holds the box as Cemal takes out the toys one by one. He explores every object with his hands and mouth,

he squeezes it, bites it and turns it around. Every toy evokes a different sensation in his hands and mouth; rough, smooth, soft, woolly, solid. His mother describes what he does and what the material feels like. When he is finished with one object Cemal throws it on the floor and goes on to the next one. His mother puts a scrub glove on his hand and, placing her hand on his hand, gently moves the glove over his arm. ‘That feels a bit rough, on your arm. Up and down, up and down.’ Cemal goes along with her movement but then pulls off the glove. ‘Not too long, it’s not so nice anymore,’ his mother says. ‘Do you want to try the other hand? she asks. Cemal makes a little affirmative sound and holds out his hand.



↘ What can be more exciting than going really high on a swing? There's the sun shining on your face when you come out of the shade of the tree, and your mother's voice that is near and then far, and your body that moves forwards and up and backwards and down. Lotus loves it.

In short

- Sensory play is about the experience of hearing, seeing, touching, tasting, and balance and posture.
- The point of sensory play is the enjoyment the child derives from it.
- Sensory play often has a calming influence on children.
- Use the appropriate words to subtitle the various sensations your child is experiencing and the emotions that come with them.

What type of play is my child engaged in? Object play

What type of play is my child engaged in? Object play

What you can read in this chapter
Object play develops in the same fixed order as in other children but because of the (partial) lack of sight, perhaps combined with other disabilities, it takes longer and may look different. The same toy can offer different possibilities for play. How children play depends on what they are capable of and, first and foremost, on what they like.

The development of object play: a quick summary
Babies will focus on the toys in their crib when they are just a few weeks old. Sometimes they will inadvertently touch them. At around ten weeks they will play with their hands and explore them with their mouth. Around that time they will also start to reach for toys and, a little later, tap against them. The tapping becomes more playful and develops into grasping, shaking and squeezing. As their play develops they will combine certain objects and start taking things in and out, stacking and building. They will then start to play with the toys in the way they were intended to be played with. This is followed by the beginnings of fantasy play which will develop into extensive fantasy play at toddler and pre-school age.

Children with a visual impairment

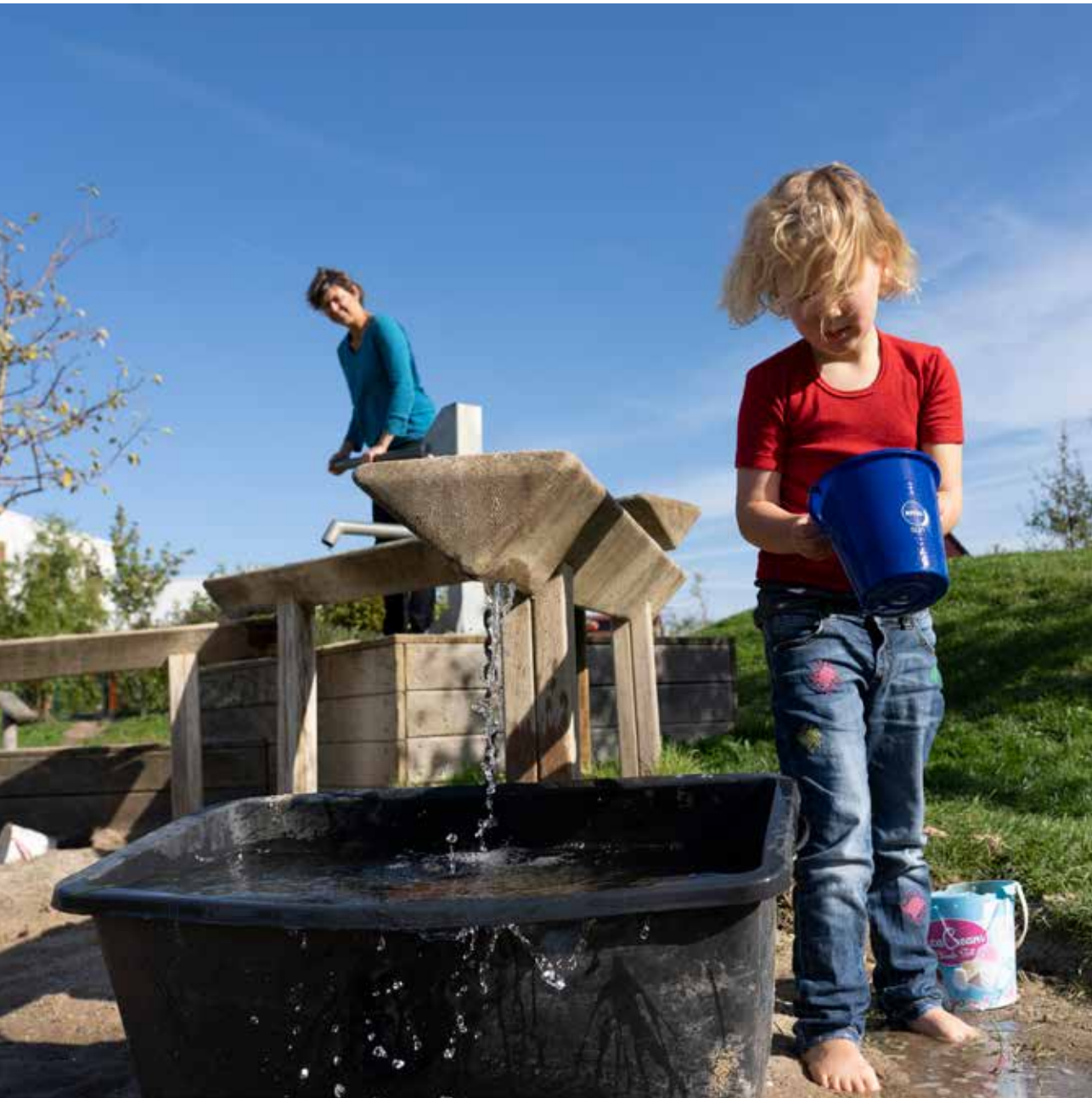
Children with a visual impairment will go through the same stages of play development as other children but because of their impairment their play develops at a slower pace. They lack the full array of visual stimuli that will induce play and are less able to imitate the actions of the other children. They need more time to discover the world and their toys through sight, touch, and smell. That means the stage in which they investigate objects with their hands and mouth (touching, licking, throwing) lasts longer. Children with a visual impairment not only use their hands and mouth to explore but very often their feet and body as well. This manipulation using hands, mouth, feet

and body will remain typical of their play. Not only do they need more time to familiarise themselves with their toys, they will always be attracted by play which includes these elements (touch, sound effects!). Their play may therefore look different from that of similarly aged children.

One toy, several ways of playing with it
Play material can lend itself to all sorts of play. A piece of a puzzle, for instance, can be used to tap on something, or be part of a tower. It can be taken out of the box and put back in again. It can be a little car taken out for a drive, or, simply put into the puzzle. Children make up their own minds about how they will use a toy. Much depends on their developmental level and preference.
Play develops in stages, with one stage following the other in a fixed order. The tempo in which this happens varies from child to child. Pay attention to your child's preferences and don't compare his play to the play of children of the same age. It's about the fun your child derives from playing, not about a right or wrong way of playing, or age level. If your child enjoys using a Lego brick to tap other objects with, don't try to persuade him to use it for building. You can make suggestions but leave the initiative with him. Follow his tempo, and share his enjoyment.

The investigative and explorative stage
Veryyoung children are mainly engaged in investigating and exploring: they grasp objects and toys, put them in their mouth, squeeze, shake, tap and throw them. This behaviour slowly becomes more playful. The tapping, squeezing and throwing becomes a fun experience.
Brightly coloured and shiny objects which feel and smell nice are a popular choice, as well as objects that make a crunchy sound and toys with other sound effects. Many children use their feet to explore so it's nicer for them to play barefoot.

↘ There's so much you can do with sand and water. The bucket gets heavier and heavier as it fills up with water. You have to use both hands to lift it. And when you pour the water out on the sand it becomes light again. And then you are standing in a muddy pool of water.



Tips

- Colour, contrast, sound, smell, touch. Opt for toys that offer good colour contrast and bright colours for your child with a visual impairment If you child is blind choose toys that make an interesting or beautiful sound. Whatever toy you choose make sure it feels and smells nice.
- Taking the toys to your child. Where other children reach and grasp the objects they can see your child will have to be made aware of the toys in another way. You can help by putting toys he might enjoy, such as shiny toys, sound toys, soft toys or pieces of fabric, into his hands or close by, or better still, by placing or attaching them – for instance to a bar – in such a way that they move when accidentally touched by hands or feet.
- Locating toys. Play stops when the toy is lost. A fixed place for toys in the playpen, play nest, play corner will help your child locate their toys. Favourite toys can be attached to a chair or play apron. An activity table with a raised edge, or toys fitted with suction pads or Velcro will keep things in place.
- An adapted, safe environment. In the chapter 'Where does my child play?' we explained the importance of the right play environment for children with a visual impairment. We described what it takes for them to feel safe, their need to understand the space, the stimuli support you can provide to enable them to play. Lilly Nielsen's 'Little room' is a very special example of an adapted play environment. It makes children feel safe and because every action is followed by a reaction it encourages them to explore as well
- Lilly Nielsen's 'Little room' is a play house closed off on three sides and topped by a clear plexiglass sheet. Inside this little house the child is shielded from distracting outside stimuli. The inner walls are lined with a variety of materials. You can suspend objects from the walls that are interesting for your child, such as objects that are visually attractive, smell or feel nice or make a sound. Even the most minimal movement made by the child will produce an effect. The child will interpret this response as a reward and feel encouraged to repeat the action.
  See www.activelearningspace.org

In the chapter 'The play of children with a visual impairment' we explained that toys and other play material are often used in a different way. Your child needs more time to explore a toy and get used to new ones. Often his play will become repetitive as he tries to discover what he can do with a certain toy.

Tips

- Don't give your child too many toys at once. Your child needs to be able to form a clear impression of how an object or toy looks, feels, sounds and smells. Having too many toys around will distract him from focusing on that.
- Give your child time to explore his toys. Once your child has familiarised himself with the toys, he will start to play with them.
- Unknown makes unloved (at first). It may take a while before your child is willing to play with a new toy. If he pushes the object away, or freezes, don't persist but put into words what you think he is feeling: '...this is new...you don't know what this is yet, it feels strange, (or: too soft, too hard, too slippery)..you need some time to get used to it..' Give your child time and help him get used to the new toy step by step.
- Toy preference. As soon as your child has formed an impression of his toys he will start to develop preferences for certain types of toys and will start looking for them if they are not around.

The stage of tapping, out and in, open and close
Once children have explored objects/toys sufficiently they will start to combine them.

Tapping
Your child will repeat the tapping game endlessly. Every object produces its own particular sound, and that will engage your child's interest for a long time.
Children usually find out for themselves that different surfaces produce different sounds when tapped. You can help by tapping the same surface or an entirely different surface. Vary the tapping rhythm,

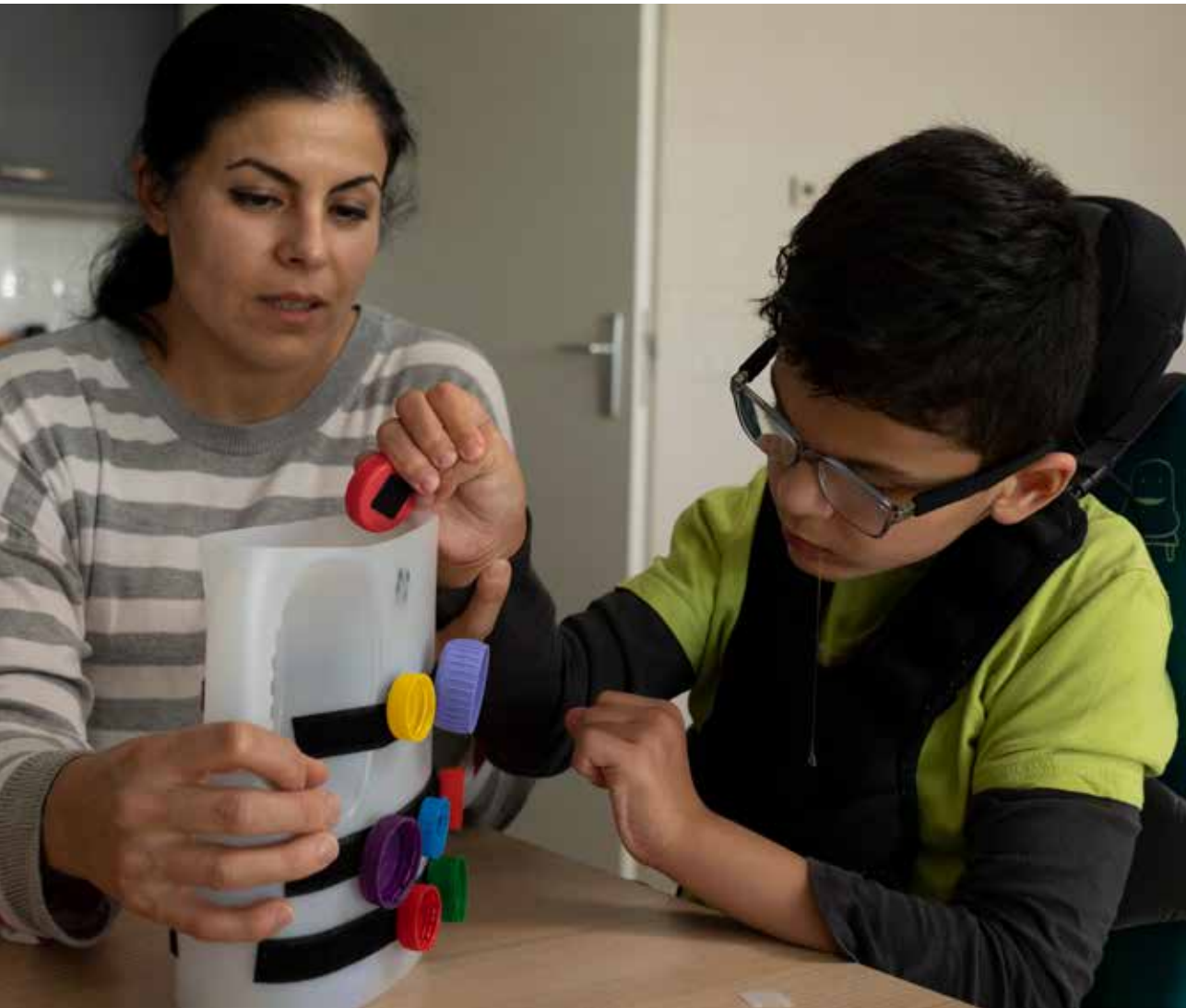
and wait for your child to imitate it. That will make it into a turn-taking game.

Out and in
Emptying and filling cupboards, boxes and baskets is a favourite pastime at this stage.

Tips

- You can add a little more fun to this play adding something unexpected to the objects, such as small ball to clothes pegs in the basket.
- Emptying cupboards, drawers and boxes makes a mess. Your child is not yet able to put things back without your help and it can be a bit wearying. But don't worry, it will pass and soon your child will reach the putting in stage.
- Children not only enjoy putting their cuddles and toys into boxes, they also like to sit in a box themselves, or under the table. Putting things in is even more fun if it involves sound such as throwing a Duplo block in a tin or box.

↘ Cemal is playing with a plastic container which has pieces of Velcro across it to which tops of different colours and sizes have been attached. Every time he pulls off a top there is an interesting sound. His mother holds the container. As soon as Cemal pulls off a top he puts it into the container. His mother accompanies the action with enthusiastic comments: 'The side of the green top is ribbed and the top is smooth,'...'There's the Velcro, soft and warm....Now pull hard...and scrrrtch, off it comes...Now the top goes into the container...there's the sharp edge and over it goes...what a funny sound'. Cemal doesn't stop until he has made all the tops disappear into the container. He sighs happily and likes nothing better than to start all over again.



Open and close
Opening and closing a door produces a nice sensation, and so do the noise and the change in lighting. It's also exciting because you can step into another room and back again.

Children can spend a lot of time playing with cupboard doors and room doors. Always make sure they can do so without getting their fingers caught. A wall with lots of small doors is bound to be a success, particularly if there's a different object or soft toy hidden behind every door.

The stage where toys are used in the appropriate way
Once children have explored an object or toy thoroughly and understand their use, they will start to play with it in the appropriate manner. They will make the toy car go but are not yet associating it with a car journey. The ladle is used to make a stirring movement in the pan but without the aim of making a make believe meal. The building blocks are stacked but not with the purpose of building a house.
Real objects, such as kitchen utensils, are always a firm favourite. Miniature version are often not immediately recognised and are also more difficult to handle.

Tips

- Explaining: by involving your child in your daily activities as much as possible and by explaining them in a way that is playful and interesting, and by letting him experience how things work you will expand his knowledge of the world: how do you stir with a ladle? How does a tea pot work? When does the water flow from the spout? How do you use a dustpan and brush?
- Naming: by explaining and naming the objects, your child will find it easier to remember them and use them in his play.
- Building: children usually start by building horizontal structures: they will fill a box with building blocks until everything fits neatly, for example. They will then begin to stack, using blocks that click together or Duplo blocks.

- Magnetic blocks are a good option because the structure will not fall down so easily. Building a tower with smooth blocks is not easy but is all the more fun when you topple it together.
- Big, easy to handle blocks: Duplo is more attractive for children with a visual impairment than its smaller cousin Lego, including when they are a bit older. Duplo blocks are easy to stack while the other parts, such as doors, windows, and figures can be distinguished and handled without great difficulty.
- From real to miniature: children with a visual impairment can enjoy playing with real objects for quite a long time. Once they understand the miniature toys are in fact smaller versions of the real thing (the toy pan is a smaller version of the pan in the kitchen, for example) these toys can be gradually introduced.

↘ Lotus is playing with the ball run. With her arm she measures the space between the point where she releases the ball land the exit point. With her right hand she releases the ball while keeping her left ready at the exit. She can hear the ball but it's making its way down too quickly for her to follow the movement with her right hand. She catches the ball with the left hand as it exits.

↘ Ilse is 2 years old, she has a visual-and-intellectual impairment. Ilse loves play involving a pan or a cup, stirring movements and her mother's 'yum yum' sounds. Ilse does not have the motor skills to perform these actions independently but she laughs out loud when she and her mother perform them together.

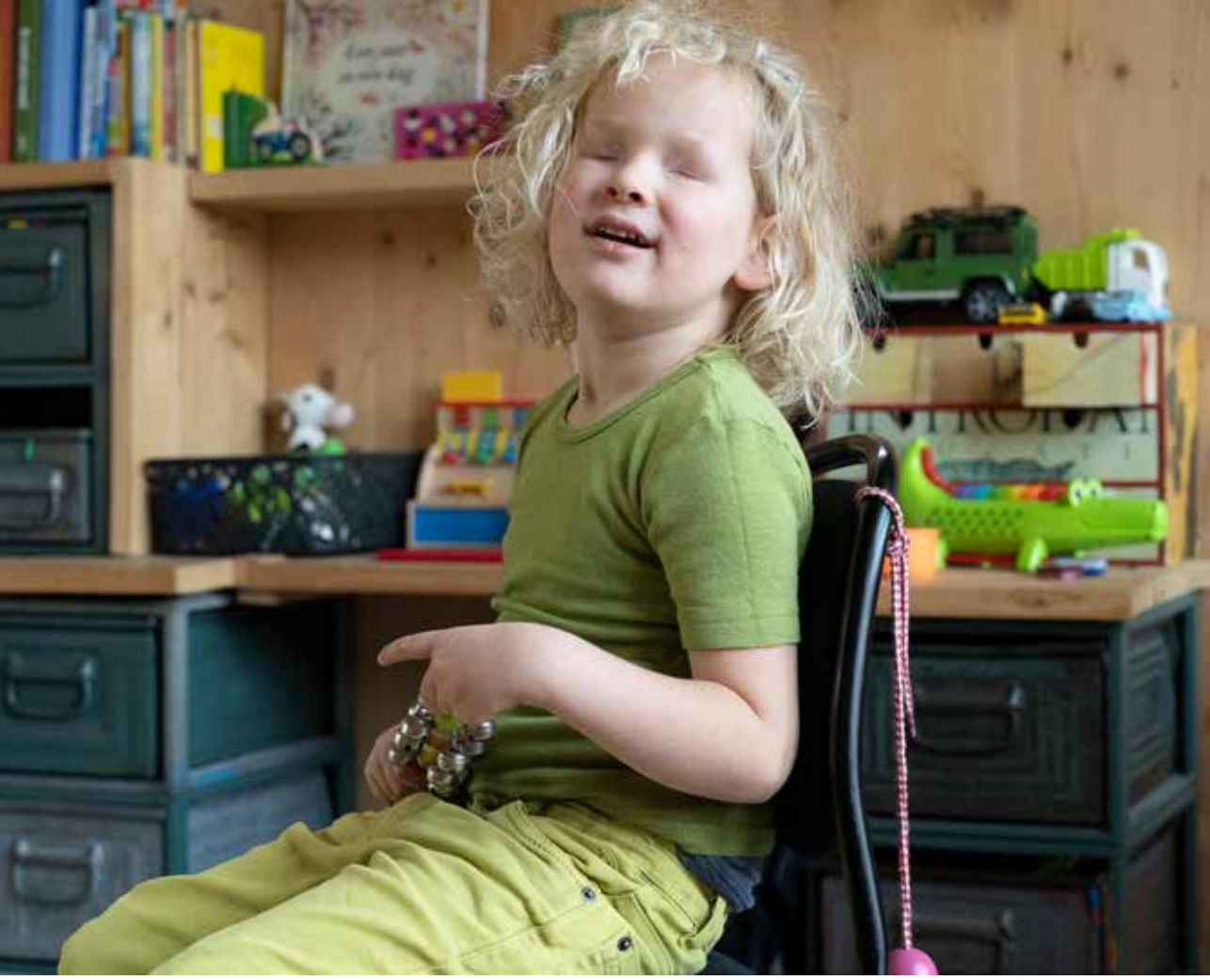
Fantasy play

After having played with the toys in the appropriate way for a while, the time has come for the next play developmental stage: fantasy play. The ladle is used to stir make believe soup and daddy is offered a spoonful to taste it. The building blocks are used to build a school.
Fantasy play is important for children's emotional development. Through play they show what they have experienced and what their feelings

were at the time. It's their way of processing the events of the day, from everyday experiences, such as going to school, shopping and eating (nice or not very nice) food to stressful events such as falling off a chair, a swimming lesson, a storm or seeing the doctor. Children with a visual impairment can experience many stressful moments in their lives. By playing out these experiences and talking about them they can process them and put them in place.
Fantasy play also boosts social development: by playing out make believe stories the child learns empathy. Young children are not very good at distinguishing fantasy and reality and their fantasies may frighten them. A quick look around is usually enough to show them what is real and what is not. Children with a severe visual impairment and blind children do not have this possibility and fear may impel them to cling to reality and avoid fantasy play altogether.
By stimulating fantasy play and explaining to your child that it's make believe and not real he will eventually learn the difference between fantasy and reality.

Tips

- Toys. Not all children need (a lot of) toys to engage in fantasy play. A single pan can be enough to cook a make believe meal and one truck will turn your child in the driver who is cleaning up all the sand. Sometimes no toys are needed at all and your child will tell a long made up story about visiting granny, holding just a soft piece of fabric that feels just like granny's jumper.
- Silent play. Some children don't say very much while playing and show little facial expression. This can make it difficult to see if they are silently engaged in fantasy play. Your child may hold a car in his hand while at the same time making up a story about a car journey in his head. Or he is rocking his upper body because he is pretending to be on a swing. You as a parent can help by subtitling what you think is happening: '..that looks like you're on the swing in the playground?' Wait for your child's reaction. You may be completely wrong, but perhaps you guessed right and he will tell you about it.



↘ The sound of the jingle bell is enough for Lotus to conjure up a scene from the classroom. She plays that the bell rings and it's break time.

- Radio play. If your child is playing without the aid of toys you could suggest an object, such as shoes with heels that make a noise when walked around in, or a nice smelling shampoo to wash the doll's hair. Don't insist too much. Your child may prefer story telling because having to manipulate objects interrupts his train of thought.
- Monsters and scary animals. Children love to play at monsters, robbers and scary animals. A glance at their surroundings is usually

enough to separate make believe from reality. Children with a visual impairment do not have this control mechanism at their disposal. They can become frightened during fantasy play because it feels real to them and may then avoid it altogether. You can help them by putting their fears into words: '...the way that tiger is roaring is pretty scary, isn't it...!' and follow that up by saying: '. .but it's not a real tiger, is it?...we're just playing...it's only make believe...'

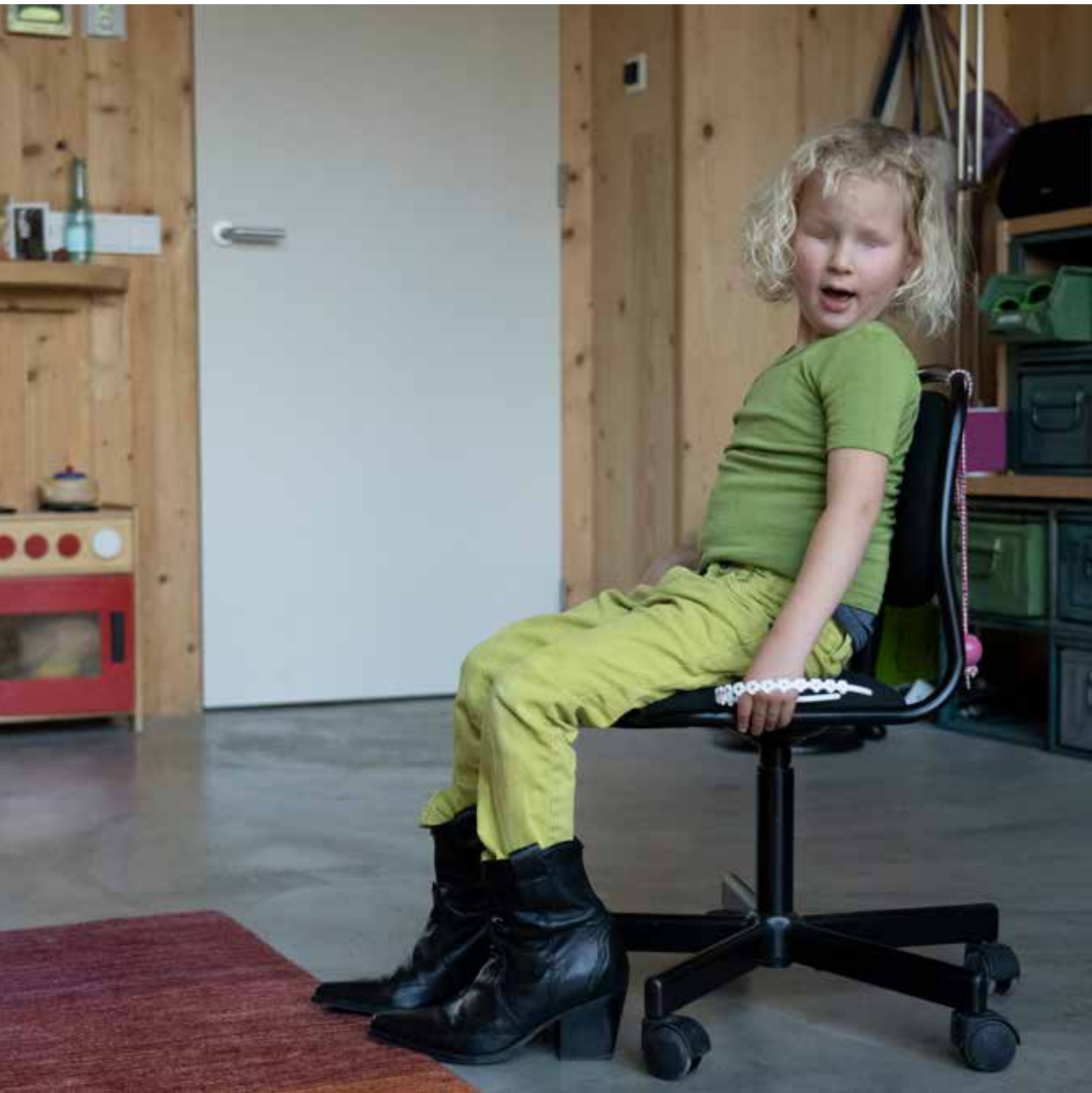
- Helping your child. If you find that your child's play slows down because he has trouble manipulating small parts, for instance the buttons of a doll's cardigan, you can intervene for a minute to help him do it so he can carry on playing.

↘ Tim is 5 years old, he is blind. Tim is holding three Playmobil figures in one hand and a fourth in the other. He has been tapping his cheek with the figures for a while not saying anything. It looks a little puzzling. His mother asks him what he is doing with the figures. It turns out each of the figures has a name and Tim knows exactly who is who. The figures are four friends who go to school together, do school work together, sit next to each other in the school circle and play together during the break. He fantasises about this in his head, without any outward clues.

Tim is sitting in the box with the construction toys. He is putting a screw into a long slat. While he is turning the screw he says it's like turning the saddle on the home trainer. He lifts up the slat (as if it's the wing of an airplane) and while he continues to turn the screw he starts to tell a convoluted story about the adventures of a flying home trainer.

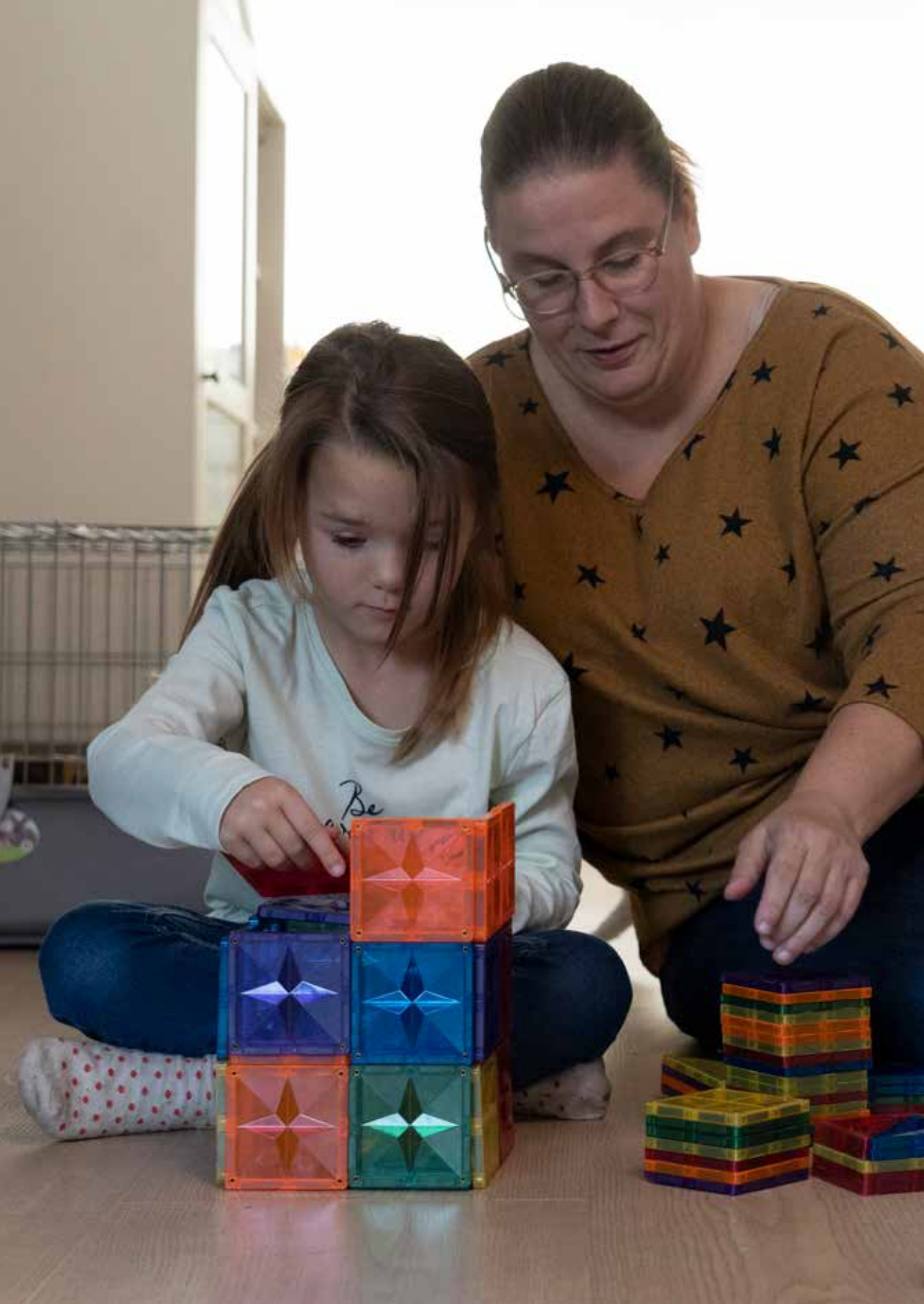
↘ Lotus is wearing her mother's boots. Sitting on a revolving chair she's playing at being 'Miss Joyce', the teacher. Miss Joyce is telling the make believe circle of children what they are going to do today. The children go outside to play during the break. When the bell rings (Lotus has asked her mother for a bell) they have to come inside again. After a short while there is another

break and the bell rings again. It’s a type of radio play: Lotus doesn’t leave her chair. The boots and the chair are all the props she needs to become Miss Joyce. The bell supports her play, making it even more fun.



In short

- Play development in children with a visual impairment follows the same stages as in other children. The (partial) lack of sight means they take longer to progress from one stage to another, and their play may look different.
- Toys can be played with in different ways. How children play depends on their developmental level and, most importantly, on what they like.
- Children with a visual impairment need more time and explanation to explore objects and toys. They have fewer opportunities of observing and imitating the actions and play of other children.
- Don’t compare your child’s level of play with that of children of the same age. Play is about having fun. There is no right or wrong way of playing.
- Fantasy play plays an important part in the processing of children’s experiences. This type of play may manifest itself in ways that are not obvious. They may also experience some fear because they cannot tell the difference between reality and make believe. You can help by subtitling what they may be feeling and explaining that what they are playing is not real.



Finally

Playing together is having pleasure together. Your child may play in a way that looks different but that certainly doesn't make it any less meaningful. By playing with your child and following what he is doing you will learn about the obstacles in his way, his preferences and how you can support his play. You can do this by making sure his play environment is safe and easy to understand and by giving him time to explore all the possibilities the play material has to offer.

Playing together is an intimate experience in which you and your child can build up an understanding of what the other is thinking and feeling. Following your child's play and putting into words what he is experiencing will make him feel understood. You are then able to focus on the same thing. There are many different ways you can play together. There is contact play, sensory play, play without objects and play with objects. How your child plays depends on his developmental level, but is determined first and foremost by what he likes. It doesn't matter if the toy he plays with is not used in the prescribed manner. There is no right or wrong way of playing. Leave the initiative with your child. The awareness of being able to take control will help him become more independent and make him feel confident in his abilities.

For you as a parent the joy is in discovering which activities you both like and in the bond that develops between you and your child as you play together.

You may also like to read

Yolanda Moleman, Ellen van den Broek, Ans van Eijden (2009). ‘Playing is growing. Play development and facilitating play in visually impaired and blind children’. Royal Dutch Visio, Huizen.

Paula Sterkenburg, Ellen van den Broek, Ans van Eijden, (2022). ‘Promoting positive parenting and attachment in families raising a young child with a visual or visual-and-intellectual disability’. International Journal of Birth and Parent Education.

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We are very grateful to Cemal, Fabienne and Lotus whose photographs are a good illustration of how much fun it is to play and to play with their parents, who support and validate them.
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Special thanks to Yolanda Moleman for her involvement in the initial stages of this book and its writing. The book 'Playing is growing' (Huizen 2011) a translation of 'Spelontwikkeling en spelbegeleiding van slechtziende en blinde kinderen' (Huizen, 2009), co-written with Ellen van den Broek and Ans van Eijden, has been an inspiration throughout the writing of this book. It is the fruit of over 25 years of studying and promoting play in children with visual impairment.
We would also like to thank Bartiméus colleagues Bernardien Marskamp-van Apelo, Marian Rohaan and Marianne Pietersen for their valuable feedback.
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We hope this book will boost the enthusiasm of parents and caregivers of children with a visual or visual-and-intellectual impairment, and hope that they will enjoy, support and take part in their children's play even more enthusiastically than they do now.

Amsterdam, Doorn, 2023
Ans van Eijden
Ellen van den Broek
Paula Sterkenburg

About the authors

Ans van Eijden is a clinical child and adolescent psychologist and child psychotherapist (play therapist). Now retired, she worked for Royal Dutch Visio for 25 years, both at the school and the rehabilitation centre, and also ran her own private practice. With Ellen van den Broek and Yolanda Moleman she co-wrote ‘the Play Course’ for child development professionals, teachers and parents.

Ellen van den Broek is a developmental psychologist. She is retired after more than 30 years with Royal Dutch Visio, the last 15 years of which she focused on early childhood development at the rehabilitation centre. With Yolanda Moleman and Joop Hellendoorn, she developed the ‘Play development scale for blind and visually impaired children’ (2005).

Ans van Eijden and Ellen van den Broek wrote together with Yolanda Moleman ‘Spelontwikkeling en spelbegeleiding van slechtziende en blinde kinderen’ (Huizen, 2009) translated into English as ‘Playing is growing’. In 2012, they and Paula Sterkenburg joined the VIPP-V project (Video Intervention to promote Positive Parenting), which they adapted to fit the needs of parents of children with a visual or a visual-and-intellectual impairment. They have since published a number of papers on the subject.

Paula Sterkenburg has a chair by special appointment on 'Persons with a visual or visual-and-intellectual disability, social relations and ICT' at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. The chair was established in 2019 by the Bartiméus Foundation and the Bartiméus Fund. Paula Sterkenburg is a developmental and healthcare psychologist at Bartiméus and coordinates activities at the ‘Social relationships and attachment’ Academic Lab a joint initiative of Bartiméus, the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam and Ons Tweede Thuis. In 2007 Sterkenburg received the first Award of the Dutch Association of Healthcare Providers for People with Disabilities (VGN Gehandicaptenzorgprijs), and, in 2012, the Han Nakken prize for her workbook ‘Developing Attachment’. She gained accolades from the NutsOhra Fund and Vilans Centre for an APP and was selected for the VU EMGO+ Societal Impact Award. In 2016 the serious game ‘Stop

bullying now!' was on the shortlist for the 2016 Award of the Dutch Association of Healthcare Providers for People with Disabilities (VGN Gehandicaptenzorgprijs). She received the Innovation award for the development of the HiSense app. She is the author and co-author of a number of books, articles and has been active in app development, serious games and VR and robot programming.

All children play. It's their natural way of being. And as they play, they discover the world around them. Playing is both pleasurable and important for children's development.
'All children play! Parents and their child with a visual impairment' is about the play of children with a visual or visual-and-intellectual impairment. Due to their visual impairment their play may look different but that does not mean it is less meaningful. It's impressive to see how children will use their other senses during play to compensate for what they are missing out on visually.
This book is about stimulating and supporting your child's play, about connecting with his play, about playing together and togetherness and about sharing a pleasurable experience.
This book was written with parents in mind but it is equally useful for grandparents, other members of the family, caregivers and teachers and anyone else who is part of your child's social environment.

'I really enjoyed this book. I recognised many of the experiences I have had with my own blind child. The straightforward explanations about play development in blind children have given me a better understanding of my child. I was also happy to find that it is completely normal to not always know how to support the play of a child with a disability.' mother of a blind child.
'It's a proper feel-good book, with its focus on what is possible. The authors have managed to put together a wealth of information in a practical and easily accessible way. It's a must-read for anyone who wants to know more about playing with children with a visual impairment. I for one can't wait to get started!' developmental therapist

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