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Fun Toddler ACTIVITIES

AGES 12 MONTHS
TO 4 YEARS OLD



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Kitchen Chemistry

Toward the end of their first year, babies develop an understanding of cause and effect, which enables them to trigger changes on their own. Here, help your tot make a fun food transformation.

Appropriate ages: 12 months to 2 years

To Prepare: Whipping up a batch of gelatin demonstrates how to dissolve a powder into liquid, then how to cool a liquid into a jiggling but solid mold. Pour the contents of a package of instant gelatin into a bowl. Let your child touch and taste the grainy powder. With your child well back from the bowl, stir in 1 cup of boiling water for about 2 minutes, until the powder is completely dissolved. Explain that the hot water is dissolving the little grains of powder into the liquid.

To Play: Next, mix in 1 cup of cold water, then put the gelatin in the refrigerator until it has firmed up. Tell your toddler that adding water and cooling the liquid will help it to become a solid. Scoop out a piece of the solid gelatin and let your child touch and taste it.

First Photos

Put together an album of everyone's favorite activities.

Appropriate ages: 6 months to 2 years

To Prepare: Take snapshots of your family, then put them in a small album. Write a descriptive sentence beneath each one.

To Play: Babies love to look at photos, so browse through the book together and talk about what each person is doing. You can also make up a short, silly song about each.

Here's to Hue!

Pick a color to honor all day, and help your toddler recognize it.

Appropriate ages: 12 months to 3 years

To observe the day's hue:

- Let your child pick out an outfit or shirt in the chosen shade.
- Point out all of the objects and toys in her room in the same color.
- Hunt for the special color outside, in the supermarket, or while you're traveling around town.
- Collect objects in the chosen hue as you walk around the block or in a nearby park.
- Serve foods in that color.

Goo , Glorious Goo

Your child can check out the color, texture, and consistency of food with these edible finger paints.

Appropriate ages: 6 months to 3 years

To Prepare: Wash your hands, strip your child down to his diaper, cover the floor with a plastic tablecloth, and have a bath waiting.

To Play: Let your baby use his fingers to mix foods on his high-chair tray, or for older kids on a piece of wax paper taped to the table. Some good combinations: whipped cream with gelatin, and yogurt with a teaspoon of sugar. For kids under 9 months, who aren't yet eating dairy foods, try applesauce with cinnamon, and mashed bananas with a little hot-chocolate powder.

A Feast for Beasts

Invite your toddler to celebrate the pretend birthday of a favorite stuffed animal.

Appropriate ages: 12 months to 3 years

Help your child host a birthday bash: Together, prepare a cake from play dough or modeling clay. Let him choose a toy to give the guest of honor (he can even scribble on paper and use it to wrap the gift). Pick up the guests (dolls, stuffed animals) in a pretend bus, then sit them on the floor in a circle. Now it's party time! Sing "Happy Birthday," serve cake, and make up games to play.

Brick Layer

See what your child can construct using oversize homemade building blocks.

Appropriate ages: 12 months to 3 years

Materials: *Empty oatmeal, salt, shoe, cereal, flour, or gift boxes*
Rolls of colored masking tape

To Play: Wrap each box completely in colored tape. Then let the building begin:

- Help your child construct a wall big enough for her to hide behind.
- See how many boxes she can stack vertically before they topple.
- Make the perimeter of a mighty fort in a corner.
- Place the bricks in a pyramid shape, or try stacking them in an inverted pyramid.
- Lay the blocks in a row, a foot of space between them, to make an obstacle course.
- Build a wall, then knock it over by tossing or rolling a ball at it.
- Build a bridge, placing blocks lengthwise on top of upright ones.

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Catch Some Rays

Make a sun reflector to show your toddler how sunlight shimmers and shines.

Appropriate ages: 12 months to 2 years

Cover both sides of a piece of cardboard with aluminum foil, shiny side showing. Outside or near a window, tilt the reflector so that he can see it light up.

A Day in the Life

Creating a book that illustrates your child's daily routine helps teach her that there's a time and a place for everything.

Appropriate ages: 12 months to 4 years

Materials:

Camera

Film

Small photo album

To Make:

Over the course of one day, take a picture of your toddler engaging in each of her regular routines — waking up, eating breakfast, getting ready for a walk, and so on.

Put the pictures in the album chronologically. Above each, write a brief caption: "Every morning [child's name] sits in her chair and has yogurt and cereal for breakfast."

When you're done, read your child the story of her day: "This is you waking up. Every morning, Mommy and Daddy pick you up and give you a morning kiss." Emphasize the time of day, pointing out clues such as the sun shining through a window.

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Animal Exercises

Touching your toes has limited appeal to most toddlers and preschoolers. But acting like an elephant bending at the waist and swinging your clenched hands down like a trunk from side to side is considerably more exciting.

Appropriate ages: 12 months to 4 years

See how many standard exercises can be turned into something resembling an animal or inanimate object. As you exercise, get your children to guess what you are (make appropriate noises as clues) and get them to exercise along with you. Challenge them to see what exercise charades they can come up with. Can they arch their backs like a cat? Roll like a worm? Skitter like a crab?

Obstacle Course

Older kids and toddlers alike will enjoy an indoor triathlon, which could last all morning.

Appropriate ages: 12 months to 4 years

Materials:

<i>Pillows</i>	<i>Tunnels (or a big cardboard box)</i>
<i>Couch cushions</i>	<i>Bottomless coffee cans</i>
<i>Ride-on toys</i>	<i>Balls</i>
<i>Slides</i>	

To Play: Scatter the pillows and cushions around carpeted areas of the house to establish the course route. In between station cars to drive, slides to scoot down, balls to roll through bottomless coffee cans turned on their side, and open cardboard boxes or pre-made tunnels to crawl through. From the age of 18 months my daughter could spend entire mornings running these courses. This always made nap time a breeze for both of us, because she insisted that I run the course with her.

Bowl 'em Over

This game shows your child how a round object can be an effective tool.

Appropriate ages: 12 months to 3 years

Stack about 10 blocks at least two levels high. (Or line up several empty plastic bottles.) Place a ball 2 or 3 feet away, and help your toddler kick it to knock down the blocks. If he's too young to kick, help him roll or swat the ball. Stack the blocks again and let him have another go.

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10 Little Fingers

Your baby's growing awareness of her body will help her get a feel for numbers.

Appropriate ages: 3 months to 2 years

Start by asking, "How many fingers do you have?" Then count them, touching each one in turn. Repeat with her elbows, cheeks, ears, chin, eyes, lips, belly button, knees, feet, and toes. As your baby gets older, let her "count" with you. Say, "Show me how many ears you have today."

Guide her hand to touch one ear, then the other, as you count together. Repeat with her nose, head, eyes, tummy, and legs. Wrap things up with this poem, touching each part of the body:

*Ten little fingers
Ten little toes
Two little eyes and
One little nose.*

*Two little cheeks and
One little chin and
One little mouth
Where the food goes in!*

Know Noise Zone

When your child begins to crawl, demonstrate how an object's sound can vary, depending on its container. This will encourage him to listen closely -- a skill that may aid language development.

Appropriate ages: 12 months to 2 years

Collect an array of household items and place several different containers - a paper bag, a glass jar, plastic ware, and a cardboard milk carton - on the floor. Prompt your child to choose a container and a noisemaker, and put the two together. As he shakes his creation, describe the sound he's hearing - soft brushing, loud jingling, shuffling. Then help him transfer the item into a container made of some other material, so he can hear the difference.

Earth: A Kit

What better way for a toddler to explore nature's goods than to dig right in with his fingers.

Appropriate ages: 12 months to 3 years

Give your child an empty egg carton, a sectioned box (like the kind that holds holiday ornaments) or a muffin tin to sort the rocks, wood chips, fallen leaves, pieces of grass, clumps of dirt and twigs he finds while playing in the backyard. (Be sure he doesn't put anything into his mouth.)

If he's old enough to talk, have him tell you what he has found. Say the name of any item he's not sure about and point out details he may have missed pebbles in the dirt, for example. A few days later, spread newspapers on the kitchen floor and let him pull out his outdoor collection and play with it. You might point out any changes that have occurred. For example, if the moist dirt he collected has become crumbly, or the fresh blades of grass have turned brittle, explain that the water in dirt or living grass has dried out since he took them out of their natural environment. Then show him what adding rain (a few drops of water) does to the dirt.

Homemade Play Dough

It's never too early for a child to play games. For babies, playing is learning. And vice versa.

Appropriate ages: 12 months to 3 years

How to play: Spread a plastic tablecloth or a clean tarp on the floor. Then, using a bowl and a spatula, try this play-dough recipe (compliments of Jean McCartin, director of Bright Horizons Child-care Center in Cambridge, Massachusetts) with your toddler: Mix two parts creamy peanut butter with one part powdered milk. Once you've got a malleable mass, sit back and watch your child mold his own free-form blobs. Later, you can show him how to roll balls or twirl snakelike shapes between his hands.

What it teaches: Small motor skills and creativity. Manipulating play dough shows a toddler that his hands can be used to make something, not just touch it. "It's also a great example of open-ended art, where children are not locked into making just one thing," says McCartin. "This kind of dough also invites a child to use most of the five senses."

Block Therapy

Toddlers can learn a lot from a simple set of blocks.

Appropriate ages: 12 months to 3 years

To Play: Offer your toddler a set of large wooden, plastic, or cardboard blocks and ask her to build a house or a tall tower. If you have rectangular blocks, help her build a simple three piece bridge.

What It Teaches : Balancing techniques, measuring, a sense of symmetry, and the concept of part/whole relationships, such as fractions. All this from a humble set of blocks? That's right, says David Kushner, an associate professor of early childhood education at the University of Cincinnati College of Education. Unit blocks — which are rectangular and come in different lengths — are especially instructive, he says. "When toddlers play with these blocks, they soon learn to use them like a ruler or a standard distance of space," he says. "And because everyone has a natural affinity for symmetry, children can also learn that the two sides of an equation must be in balance," he adds.

Bubble Dance

Make raisins jump with gas.

Appropriate ages: 12 months to 12 years

To Play: Pour club soda into a clear cup. Can your child see and feel the bubbles popping in the air? Now drop in raisins.

What You Discover: When enough carbon dioxide bubbles collect under each raisin, they rise. Air trapped inside the dried fruit also fizzes as it's released. As the gas disappears, the raisins settle on the bottom.

Stringing Beads

It's never too early for a child to play games. For babies, playing is learning. And vice versa.

Appropriate ages: 12 months to 3 years

How to play: Tie one really large knot at one end of a two-foot piece of sturdy, thick string. Glue the other end and let it dry; this will make it rigid. Then place an assortment of large, colorful, differently shaped wooden or plastic beads in front of your child and ask him to string them onto the cord. Have your child pick beads in random order for the first necklace. Then encourage him to think about the different colors and shapes of the beads. Ask, for instance, "How is this bead different from that one?" Later, show him how to alternate two or more types of beads in a row.

What it teaches: Manual dexterity, classifying, and patterning. Stringing beads gives toddlers a chance to practice their newfound small motor skills; learning about patterns helps pave the way for understanding math. It will also help them exercise their ability to reason.

Sand Pies 101

It's never too early for a child to play games. For babies, playing is learning. And vice versa.

Appropriate ages: 12 months to 3 years

How to play: Outdoor sand activities require the least cleanup: Simply pack a container of water and an assortment of safe kitchen utensils and cookware, such as muffin tins and spatulas, and take your child to a sandbox or the beach. Or if there's no sand near your home, place a plastic dishpan and a small plastic bottle of water on top of a few beach towels. Then offer the same kitchen supplies and pour about five pounds of cornmeal, grits, or cream of wheat into the dishpan to substitute for sand. Add water occasionally so that your child can experiment with consistency and shape. The outcome may be messy, but mess is instructive, too.

What it teaches: Physical properties and experimentation. Sand play isn't exactly high science, but science it is: Children see firsthand how a grainy substance can become soupier or more crumbly. Many a scientific mind gets its first nudge during such hands-on exercises.

I Spy

Appropriate ages: 12 months to 3 years

How to play: First, single out certain objects pictured in a book and say: "I spy, with my little eye, something red." After your child guesses correctly a few times, expand the field to include objects in the room. Later, you can make the clues more specific and challenging. ("I spy something red, in a bowl," or "I spy a ball that's bigger than that pink one.") Eventually, your toddler may want to initiate the game and challenge you with some clever clues.

What it teaches: Perception of similarities and differences. This classic game is a good way to help toddlers start to distinguish colors, shapes, and different objects.

Scribble , Scrawl

Appropriate ages: 12 months to 3 years

How to play: Tape several long pieces of wax paper to the top of your coffee table (to protect the finish), and tape a large piece of white paper on top. Give your toddler some oversize crayons and start doodling with one yourself so she can see how to use them.

What it teaches: Hand-eye coordination and creativity. Toddlers may be a long way from drawing anything remotely representational, but that doesn't mean they can't scribble. "Don't even ask what the child what she just drew," advises Elaine Martin, a former preschool teacher in Toronto and the author of *Baby Games*. "What matters is her sense of accomplishment in mastering the process."

Bucking Bronco

Believe it or not, this rowdy game can teach your toddler compassion.

Appropriate ages: 12 months to 3 years

To Play: In an uncluttered, carpeted area, kneel on all fours, and encourage your intrepid toddler to clamber up on your back. Neigh, snort, trot, munch imaginary grass from time to time, and even rear up a bit, but once you've been "tamed," step out of character long enough to remind your child to reward you with a pretend carrot or some gentle back-patting.

What It Teaches: Gross motor skills and compassion. Small children spend a good part of their daily lives being told what to do, so it's a good idea to hand them the reins once in a while. Arms and legs will get a real workout trying to hang on to a sometimes fractious mount. And if the compassion part of the lesson takes hold at all, it will be quite a triumph for you both: Empathy, after all, is not high on the typical toddler's roster of emotions.

A Fantasy World

Appropriate ages: 12 months to 3 years

How to Play: Collect an assortment of household odds and ends (a colander, for instance, could make a fun crown, and a turkey baster can easily become an impressive magic wand). To this, add a makeshift dress-up box full of old clothes. Then just stand back and observe, resisting the urge to guide or question. In this production, your toddler becomes the director, producer, and star all rolled into one.

What it Teaches: Dealing with emotions. Children need this kind of open-ended outlet to handle the vast amounts of new knowledge and powerful feelings they deal with every day. "Fantasy play is the ultimate self-teaching tool," says Vivian Gussin Paley, a kindergarten teacher at the University of Chicago Laboratory Schools who has studied this activity for more than three decades. "By acting out different roles, children learn to examine their emotions and express them as well."

Sound Off!

Long before your little one can sing her ABC's, she's learning language structure through rhythm, rhyme, and repetition.

Appropriate ages: 6 months to 3 years

Encourage your baby's initial vocal explorations with:

Vowel Chant

Face your child and slowly chant these vowels, which are among the first sounds a baby can make. Exaggerate the shape of your mouth; hold each sound for three seconds.

- Ahhhh (drop your jaw and open wide)
- Ehhhh (like the a in ate)
- Eeeee (like the e in bee)
- Ooooo (like the o in boat)
- Ewwww (like the u in cue)

As her vocal skills develop, explore other letters.

Letter Rhyme

*P, P,
One, two, three.
This is how you make a
[pause for dramatic effect] P!*

On the last note of this jingle, trace the letter on your child's tummy with your finger. If she's old enough, have her "alphabetize" your stomach too. Repeat, using B, C, D, E, G, T, V, and Z. You can also tailor the rhyme to other sounds: *U, U, one and two. This is how you make a U!*

Shifty Appearances

Toddlers are still trying to figure out the differences between themselves and others. Playing dress-up in front of a mirror is an amusing way to show them that changing their appearance doesn't change who they are.

Appropriate ages: 2 to 3 years

Gather some old accessories, clothing, shoes, and scraps of material, and place them next to a full-length mirror. Help your child put on a pair of Dad's shoes, an old shirt, a towel for a turban — whatever he wishes. Describe what you're doing as you help him dress: "Sam, this is Daddy's baseball hat you're putting on. Now you're putting on Mommy's raincoat." Then let him try on other items. Some popular ones:

- Anything belonging to Mom or Dad
- Scraps of see-through material (so toddlers can cover up but still see themselves)
- Hats
- Scarves or towels
- Sunglasses or glasses frames with the lenses taken out (to remove, heat the lenses with a hair dryer and pop out)
- Plastic bowls (to wear as hats)
- Paper cups (stick a looped piece of tape inside the rim of the cup, then rest the cup on your child's nose to make a snout)
- Aluminum-foil crown, sword, or antennae
- Halloween masks

Dog and Bone

When we roll a die, we know without counting that the two sets of three dots represent the number 6. With this game, your child will learn to quickly recognize these common depictions of numbers too.

Appropriate ages: 2 to 5 years

Materials :

12 index cards
Black felt-tip marker
Die (for your reference)

To Set Up : Six cards will be "bone" cards. Draw a small bone, about 1½ inches long, in the center of the first card. Draw two bones on the next card, positioning them like the dots on a die. Continue, drawing bones on cards three, four, five, and six. On the other six cards, draw simple pictures of dogs instead of bones, again positioning them like the dots on a die.

To Play: Shuffle the dog cards and place them facedown in a pile. Shuffle the bone cards and lay them face up in a row. (Start with cards depicting one, two, and three for younger kids. Use all six for older ones.) Explain that your child is going to make sure the dogs find just the right number of bones for lunch. Take turns picking up a dog card and looking for its match in the face up row of bone cards.

When your child selects a bone card, ask her, "Are there enough bones on that card for your dogs? How do you know?" If a player makes a match, she keeps both cards. If she doesn't find the match card, she keeps the card and tries again on the next turn. Continue until all cards have been matched.

Challenge: To sharpen your child's recognition of patterns, place the bone cards facedown in a row. Your child draws a dog card, turns over a bone card, and checks to see if there are enough bones for every dog on the card. If she makes a match, she keeps the cards. If not, she replaces the bone card facedown in the same spot on the row.

Sock It to Me

In this game, toddlers get an idea of how a detective might use his senses of touch and sight when important evidence is under wraps.

Appropriate ages: 2 to 3 years

Using a marker, draw a smiley face on an old sock near the toe, just for fun. Collect small objects with simple, distinctive shapes - a ball, a block, a spoon - and slip one into the sock.

Knot or tie the open end and let your little sleuth poke and prod the sock to figure out what's inside. Then try a different item. For very young private eyes, place familiar objects in the sock as he looks on, then talk him through the investigation: "Do you feel a spoon? Or a cup? A spoon is long and straight; a cup is round."

1, 2, 3 ... What Do You See?

Solving this mystery helps strengthen a tot's ability to remember what he's just seen - a skill every budding detective or eye-witness must master.

Appropriate ages: 2 to 3 years

To begin, place three small toys or knickknacks on a table or the floor. After pointing out and naming the goods, cover them with a towel or cloth napkin. Then ask your child to close his eyes and slowly count to three as you surreptitiously (and quietly) remove one of the objects and place it behind your back.

To begin sleuthing, say "1,2, 3... What do you see?" As you lift the cover, feign astonishment that one of the objects has disappeared. Your youngster will likely wonder too. Ask him if he can tell you what the missing item is - give clues if necessary - and suggest he look for it.

While he's distracted, slip the missing item back under the cover. Remove the cloth again and show your little one that the object has reappeared. For 3-year-olds, play the game with more objects. The challenge for them is to name the item that has vanished based on those that are left behind.

Reel Fun

In this game, kids catch fish using a magnetized rod.

Appropriate ages: 2 to 4 years

Materials:

2 sheets each of red and blue construction paper (9x12 inches)
Black marker
2 boxes of small paper clips
8 pieces of contact paper (9x12 inches), available at most art supply stores
Scissors
Pencil or a small stick
String
Magnetic wand or a bar magnet

To Make: Draw 4 fish about 6 inches long on each sheet of construction paper. With marker, mouth to both sides of each fish. Place 10 to 12 paper clips on each red fish.

Cover each piece of construction paper with contact paper, sticky-side down. Turn them over and laminate the other sides. Then cut out all 16 fish.

To Play: Tie the string to one end of the stick for a fishing pole; tie the magnet to the other end as a hook. Scatter the fish on the floor and show your child how to reel them in.

Moon Walk

Show what it's like to be an astronaut walking on the moon.

Appropriate ages: 2 to 4 years

Hold your child tightly under the armpits and tell him to start walking. Each time he takes a step, lift and carry him two steps forward before gently setting him down.

Explain that gravity is an invisible force that keeps people and houses and toys from floating up to the sky. And that astronauts are buoyant on the moon because of the lower levels of gravity there.

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Fridge Sticks

To help kids learn what sticks to a magnet, initiate a hunt around the house.

Appropriate ages: 2 to 4 years

Materials

Pencil
Index cards (3 x 5 inches) in various colors
Scissors
Old magazines
Glue
Magnetic stick-on tape
Clear contact paper

Draw several different-size shapes (at least 2 square inches each) on the colored cards. Cut out magazine pictures of animals and plants and paste them to the cards.

For each shape or picture, cut a strip of magnetic tape half its length and affix it to the back in the center.

Cover the front and back of each card with contact paper. It'll be lumpy over the tape. Then cut out the shapes.

To Play: Toddlers will usually take it from here, sticking the magnets on the refrigerator door and pulling them off again and again. But you can also try this game: Place all the magnets on the refrigerator and ask your child to pull off the small yellow star, the brown puppy, and so on. Ask preschoolers to make up a story, using the picture magnets to tell it.

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Star Search

Little ones will enjoy the peek-a-boo fun of this celestial concentration-style game.

Appropriate ages: 2 to 3 years

Materials

Scissors
Manila file folder
Black construction paper
Metallic markers

Cut ten flaps (about two square inches each) at random on the cover of the folder. Then glue a sheet of black construction paper to the inside of the folder's opposite flap.

Glue the edges of the folder closed.

Open two flaps at random. Using metallic markers, draw identical stars on the black paper under each flap.

Repeat with other pairs of flaps, drawing two crescent moons, a pair of ringed planets, two identical clusters of stars - such as the Big Dipper - and two suns.

Show your child how to lift the flaps to find each picture's match.

Stage a Switch Day

Turning the day upside down will provide your preschooler with an opportunity for crazy creativity.

Appropriate ages: 2 to 5 years

Declare the day utterly different, and go about ordinary routines in the most extraordinary fashion: Your child can start off the morning by telling you a bedtime story, then feast on dinner for breakfast. Wear your shoes on the wrong feet, or trade hats. Any mixed-up idea will do.

Sketch a Self-portrait

Help your child make a life-size portrait.

Appropriate ages: 2 to 5 years

To make a life-size body poster, first cut off the rectangular bottoms from several paper shopping bags, then slit open one side of each bag. Next, paste or tape them together to make one sheet that's long enough to accommodate your child. Have her lie still on the paper while you use a marker to draw an outline of her body. Then, she can paint or draw on a clever face and clothes.

String Along

All you need is some string or twine for this rainy-day game.

Appropriate ages: 2 to 4 years

Wind a long piece of string or twine in a trail through the bedroom or kitchen to parts unknown. Your child will get a kick out of marching on the string, following it wherever it takes her, and trying not to step off. (For a special treat, pack a lunch bag and put it at the string's end.)

Welcome to My Hideaway

Appropriate ages: 12 months to 3 years

How to play: Set up a big box for your toddler or create a tented shelter by covering a table with a sheet or a blanket. Consider this the child's own private domain, a place to hoard toys, hatch fantasies, and someday invite a few select guests.

What it teaches: Autonomy and self-reliance. Like teenagers, toddlers have a pressing need to assert themselves as individuals. What else would account for the tendency to say no as often and reflexively as they do? Support your little one's bid for independence by giving her plenty of time to play in her own little hideaway. Once she's ready to move on to one of her next developmental frontiers — socializing — her castle will be the perfect setting for cooperative pretend play.

Toe to Toe

Turn toes into talkers and chat away.

Appropriate ages: 2 to 4 years

To Play: Draw different faces on the bottoms of your toes and your child's. Sit on the floor together and put your toes "face-to-ace." (Or let her sit in front of a mirror.) Make up imaginary conversations, encouraging all the toes to chat with each other.

Bring in the Noise

Take the next scientific steps by experimenting and recording your discoveries.

Appropriate ages: 2 to 4 years

Use a stick to demonstrate how tapping on the ground, the porch, a tree, or a fence produces different sounds. Give your toddler his own stick, and join him in seeing how many noises the two of you can make around the yard, on the porch, or through a playground.

Then grab a video camera or tape recorder and encourage your toddler to do a solo performance by making his favorite sounds. Replay the recording, asking him to describe the sounds. Point out how different each one is.

Be Pushy

Help your child exercise fine-motor skills and her imagination.

Appropriate ages: 2 to 3 years

Materials: Two blocks of floral foam: one whole, one cut into squares, sticks, drinking straws, pipe cleaners, crayons, or long pasta.

To Play: Show your child how to push a stick, straw, or other object into the big block of floral foam. Once she gets the hang of it, let her add the smaller squares of foam to the ends of the items. Talk about balance and gravity: Too many items on one side tips the whole creation over. (Note: These materials are not edible, so supervise a young toddler closely.)

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Journal Keeping

Diaries don't have to be top secret.

Appropriate ages: 2 to 6 years

This exercise isn't just recreational — it can teach your child the connection between words and writing as well as give you the record you want of your child's firsts.

My daughter and I started her journal during the dark days of January when she was two. I'd ask about her day, and she'd tell me bits and pieces, watching carefully as I wrote down the fragments, sentences and disconnected words. Soon we were taping Polaroid photos, as well as cutout scraps of artwork, into the journal or drawing the outlines of our hands and feet on the pages. These days Anna "writes" in her journal herself, and lets me write down what she tells me she has inscribed below it.

Waiting Games

Helping your children learn the fine art of patience.

Appropriate ages: 2 to 4 years

You're standing on line at the Department of Motor Vehicles on the last day you can renew your driver's license before it expires, or maybe you're seated at a restaurant, waiting for dinner to arrive. Tugging on your hand is your two-year-old, who thinks that four minutes of staying still has been more than enough. She's ready for action. Although there's always I Spy and Simon Says, a little imagination can go a long way in making a wait more tolerable for your toddler.

For instance, you could play:

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The Song Box

Fill a small plastic box, such as an empty baby wipes container, with strips of cardboard on which you've written the names of different songs. Shake it up, then let your child reach in and make a selection (no peeking). Together, sing the song she picked. Return it to the box when you're done, snap the lid, let her shake the box, and start again.

High Five, Low Five

Put your hand up in the air and say, "High five!" After your toddler slaps it, bring it to her knee level and say, "Low five!" Next, with your palm down, say "Backside!" This time, pull your hand away before it's hit, saying, "Too slow!" Toddlers unfailingly giggle and want to try again and again. Make sure you alternate "Too slow!" with "Oops—you got me!" periodically. Then give her a turn to try the sequence herself, with you slapping her hand.

The Grab Bag

Take along a bag of inexpensive playthings she's never seen before: a small board book, a new pad of paper and chunky crayons, a toy truck, some plastic animals. Let her pick one without looking, then play with the toys, draw pictures, or read along with you. (Depending on where you are, she may keep busy on the floor, so choose items that won't cause either of you heartbreak if stepped on.)

Funny Sounds

Two-year-olds adore nursery rhymes, so memorize a few with nonsense words such as "Hickory Dickory Dock!" and say them to and with your child. Then play with her expectations: Change a word here and there, or simply the first letter of some words ("mickory pickory sock"). She'll burst out laughing at the silliness, leaving both of you to enjoy how time flies when she's having fun.

Circle Safari

Searching for circles around the house is a fun way to identify the shape.

Appropriate ages: 2 to 6 years

For Preschoolers:

- Find a circle in your toy chest that rolls and bounces.
- Find 4 circles on your toy truck.
- Look on the wall for a circle that ticks and has numbers on it.

For Older Kids:

- Name something that you drink out of that's round on top. When your child guesses a cup, ask her why she thinks the opening is circular. Explain that when you tilt a glass for drinking, the liquid comes out in a thin stream. To demonstrate, have her try to drink out of the flat side of a square plastic container.
- Find something round that helps you open the door. Ask her if it would be harder or easier if the doorknob were a triangle or square. Take an orange and a banana and have her pretend they are doorknobs, holding them in midair. Which one is easier to turn in a circle? Explain that the round orange best fits the shape of her hand.
- Name something round that gives off light. A light bulb is round, you can explain, because the shape allows the light to shine equally in all directions.

Shape Shifters

Use modeling clay or Play-Dough to create 3-D circles.

Appropriate ages: 2 to 4 years

Sphere : Place a small lump of clay on a flat surface and put your child's palm on top. Show her how to move her hand in a small circle to roll the dough into a ball. Point out that no matter how you turn it, it always looks round.

Cylinder : Help her roll the dough with her hands into a short, stocky snake about 2 inches long. Show her how the ends of the snake are round, like circles.

Spiral : Have her roll the cylinder into a thin snake about 6 inches long. Loop one end into a small ring. Then show her how to wrap the rest of the clay around the ring to form larger and larger circles. Continue until there's no more snake left. Explain that a spiral curves around itself, growing larger and larger.

Disk : Have your child press the spiral flat with her palm to create a disk. Ask her to think of some disks in real life: pizza, Frisbees, pennies.

Shake Your Shadow

Your child can dance with a shadowy figure.

Appropriate ages: 2 to 4 years

Remove the shade from a lamp with a strong bulb and set the lamp in an uncluttered corner of a darkened room. The light will cast long shadows. Play lively music and invite your child to twirl, bend, sway, and move to the beat so her shadow dances along with her. Point out how her shadow changes as she moves quickly or slowly, moves closer to or further from the wall, and makes little or big movements.

Follow Your Nose

Most kids recognize something by sight - such as green grass - before smell. But in this activity, your child will learn to use her sniffer to identify items around her, as well as notice odors she might not otherwise.

Appropriate ages: 2 to 4 years

First, clean a small plastic or glass container that's odorless and opaque, like a margarine tub or dark glass jelly jar. Poke 4 or 5 quarter-inch-wide holes in the top with a scissors point. (For metal tops, use a hammer and nail.)

Collect several samples of fragrant items from your backyard - such as flowers, grass, bark, leaves, wood chips, or dirt - and fill the container with one item at a time. Accompany your child outside with the aromatic jar and encourage her to match its smell to the real thing.

Touchy-Feely Match-ups

Challenge your toddler to match pairs of texturized cards, using her fingertips as a guide.

Appropriate ages: 2 to 3 years

Materials: Scissors, 6 swatches (each large enough to cover two 3 x 5-inch index cards) of various materials: silk, felt or flannel, sandpaper, tin foil, plastic wrap, cotton balls or gauze, canvas or denim from old blue jeans, hosiery, velvet, suede, 12 index cards (3 x 5 inches), glue

To Make: Cut two pieces of each type of material to the size of an index card, and glue each swatch to a card. (Glue cotton balls or material to completely cover one side of each card.)

To Play: Arrange one set of textured cards on a table or the floor in front of your child. Then ask her to place her hands behind her back, and offer her one of the matching materials to feel (no peeking). After she's familiar with the texture, tell her to touch the cards in front of her and guess which material is behind her back.