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Preschool Prep

Get your toddler engaged and ready for higher learning with these do-at-home activities.

BY RACHEL RABKIN PECHMAN

You don't need to be a teacher or have a master's degree in education to offer your toddler an enriching day at home. Everyday activities can prepare him to eventually read, write, do math, and more. "Whether you're doing it consciously or unconsciously, every parent acts as a teacher," says Tim Seldin, president of The Montessori Foundation and author of *How to Raise an Amazing Child*. Follow these tips to build your toddler's skill set—and help him develop a love of learning.

BRAIN-BOOSTING ACTIVITY

Reading Books

"One of the most effective and proven ways to build literacy is reading aloud," says Candace Lindemann, a curriculum designer and owner of Naturally Educational, a consulting firm. Do it cuddled up together in a comfy chair: "That way, your toddler will associate reading with having your positive attention, and her interest will grow," Lindemann notes. If your squirmer won't sit still for a story, no problem. To engage her more, ask simple questions about what's happening, or even change the name of the pro-



Sorting shapes is more than just fun—it's also an early lesson in geometry.

tagonist to your child's name, suggests Alice McAdam, program manager for the Parents As Teachers program at Hillside Family of Agencies, in Rochester, New York. "This may give her the feeling that she's the one having the adventure." The more you read together, the more your child will catch on to the connection between the story, the pictures, and the words on the page. Over time, you might notice that she begins to remember the sequence of a beloved book. After that, she'll realize that the squiggles on the page are symbols that have meaning, which is the first step on the road to reading, Lindemann notes.

BRAIN-BOOSTING ACTIVITY

Checking Out the Shape of Things

Stacking blocks, doing puzzles, and playing with objects of different shapes and sizes are key ways to help your child learn about spatial relationships, geometry, and other pre-math concepts. "Children are sensory-oriented, and they learn through their body, so they need to physically feel the shape of a triangle or discover that one block is different than two by holding them to understand the abstract concept of shapes and numbers," says McAdam.

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So give your kid a pile of toddler-friendly Lego Duplo bricks or some brightly colored nesting cups to play with on the living-room floor. While you're busy in the kitchen, let him stack Tupperware or sort spoons. Then ask questions: "Which container is bigger? Which cup fits in this bowl?"

BRAIN-BOOSTING ACTIVITY

Discovering Nature

Exploring the natural world is an ideal way for toddlers to learn the fundamentals of science. For example, teaching your child about biology could be as easy as putting a goldfish in a bowl where she can observe it or planting seeds in a window box so she can witness the life cycle of a plant. "Pay attention to what she's interested in, and use that as a springboard for learning," McAdam suggests. If your child is captivated by dirt or rocks, go outside and do some digging, while asking questions like, "What does the soil feel and smell like? Is that pebble smooth? Does it make a sound when it drops?" The more you teach your child to use her senses, the more you're helping her become a trained observer, like a scientist, Seldin says.

BRAIN-BOOSTING ACTIVITY

Splashing Around

Water play is another great way to harness kids' love of exploration. "Right in the bathtub, they're learning about basic physical concepts like whether something sinks or floats," says McAdam (not to mention water displacement, volume, gravity, and cause and effect). To jumpstart the learning, ask your toddler if his rubber ducky will float. "Children are natural experi-

menters. Your questions will lead your toddler to form a hypothesis, predict what might happen, and observe the results,” says Lindemann. “Later in life, as he learns more complicated information and concepts, there will be a foundation of experience to which this knowledge will stick.”

BRAIN-BOOSTING ACTIVITY

Building Art Smarts

Whether your child is singing, scribbling, or painting, encouraging her to express herself through music or art can have big benefits. “Researchers have found that learning to play music—even just banging on pots and pans—fosters a child’s development in a huge way,” says Lindemann. After all, it encourages self-expression and teaches rhythm and beat counting. “Fractions will eventually come more naturally to a child who has mimicked rhythms on instruments or through song,” notes Lindemann. What’s more, dancing to music and playing an instrument build coordination and motor development.

Drawing and painting offer similar advantages: They boost imagination, improve hand-eye coordination, and strengthen hand and finger muscles (which helps prepare little hands to write later on). Painting, especially, gives children a chance to use their

senses (feel the paper or brush, smell the paint, and see the colors as they combine), which is critical for making connections in their brain.

BRAIN-BOOSTING ACTIVITY

Playing Pretend

Around 18 months, your child will likely begin to playact, by holding a banana to his ear and talking into it like a phone, for example, or by cradling a doll in his arms and rocking it. This is a major intellectual transformation, says Jan Drucker, Ph.D., professor of psychology at Sarah Lawrence College, in Bronxville, New York. It signals that your child is now able to think hypothetically (e.g., if I were a daddy, this is how I would act with my baby), which is the basis of all abstract thinking, whether it’s creative or mathematical, Dr. Drucker explains. So how to encourage your kid? Just let him take the lead, and be ready and willing to participate. “You don’t have to entertain, instruct, or create a scenario,” Dr. Drucker says. By doing what interests your child, you’ll help him internalize the message that he’s important—and that the things he’s discovering and learning are exciting and important too. Ultimately, this confidence-boosting lesson will help your child become a successful and happy learner. □



My husband loves to toss our 24-month-old up in the air for fun. It always makes me so nervous. Is this kind of roughhousing safe?

Yes, if it’s not *too* rough. A young child’s underdeveloped neck muscles and softer brain tissue make him more susceptible to injuries; you should never shake a baby or a toddler. Your spouse should keep throws modest and his hands in position to catch your son. Also be sure that your son’s excitement isn’t really fear. “There’s a fine line between the delight of an unusual sensation and the discomfort of feeling out of control,” says Lawrence Cohen, Ph.D., coauthor of *The Art of Roughhousing*. Still, horseplay can be a bonding experience, showing a child that you’re there to catch him.