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**ZERO TO THREE**

Early connections last a lifetime

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Early Learning ([https://www.zerotothree.org/issue\\_area/early-learning/?post-type=resource](https://www.zerotothree.org/issue_area/early-learning/?post-type=resource))

## Play Activities for 12 to 24 Months



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**Whether you're looking for games to build your toddler's language skills, or games to keep the young ones busy, here are some great play ideas for your infant or toddler.**

## **Action-Oriented Activities**

### **Squishy Sponges**

Give the child some soaking wet sponges to play with outside. Let him wash his trike, the mailbox, or even stamp wet sponge-shapes onto the sidewalk. Show him how he can squeeze the sponge to make the water come out—this builds physical skills in his hands and fingers. “Important” jobs like washing a tricycle or baby doll help toddlers feel like confident and helpful members of the family. As with all water activities, it is critical to supervise children carefully as they play.

### **Leaf Collector**

Give the child a small basket and take her on a walk around your neighborhood or a local park or school. See if she wants to pick up leaves and other “treasures” and put them in her basket. You might be surprised by how long your toddler will be happy to walk, snapping up leaf after leaf for her collection. This activity builds gross motor (large muscle) and fine motor (small muscle) skills as children walk, squat, and pick up their discoveries.

### **Freeze! Toddlers love freeze dancing**

Play music and encourage the child to dance or move in whatever way he likes. Then instruct him to stop when the music ends. This kind of activity encourages listening skills and self-regulation as he practices stopping and starting. (This is a very useful skill for when he goes to school and has to follow a lot of directions!)

## Pop Some Popcorn

Take a receiving blanket and have the child hold one side while you hold the other. Place some foam balls (“popcorn”) on the blanket and then shake the blanket so the balls bounce (or pop!) off. Your little one might like singing “POPCORN! POPCORN! POP, POP, POP!” while you shake. Once all the balls have “popped,” have your grandchild race to grab them and put them on the blanket to do it again.

## Quiet Play Activities

### Shadow Play

In a darkened room, shine a flashlight at your hand so that the shadow is reflected on the wall. Wave to the child and make silly shadow shapes with your hand. Does the child want to try to wave with his shadow hand too? He may also enjoy shining the flashlight on the wall all by himself.

### Fill and Dump

Make 5-10 homemade balls (wad up waxed paper or newspaper and cover with masking tape). Put the balls in a shoebox or basket. Give the child another box and show her how she can move each ball from one box to the other. If the child is walking, place the baskets a few steps apart so they can toddle from one to the other. Games like this encourage toddlers to move their hands across their bodies as they transfer the balls, which helps them later on with many skills from athletics to handwriting. ##Teddy Bear, Teddy Bear Starting at about 18 months, children are just beginning to play pretend. A good way to build these skills is by playing with a doll or stuffed animal. You might say, “Oh, Teddy fell down and got a boo-boo. He needs a hug.” Then give it a cuddle. See if the child also wants to give Teddy a hug. Next, you might use a “prop”—like a cup or a blanket—and suggest that the child “give Teddy a drink” or “put Teddy to sleep.”

### Make a Homemade “Wagon”

Attach a 12–18 inch length of string or ribbon to a shoebox using sturdy tape. Show the child how she can pull the string to make the box move. If she is walking, give her a job to do using her “wagon,” such as pulling some clean dishtowels into the kitchen or

delivering mail in another room. This kind of activity builds physical and problem-solving skills as the child learns how to use an object as a “tool” (pulling the string to move the box.) Be sure to supervise closely and put this toy away when you are done playing.

## Activities That Build Thinking Skills

### How Does Your Garden Grow?

Plant some seeds that grow in summer, such as grass or flower seeds, in a patch of dirt outside or in a pot to keep inside. This is a fun project for toddlers who love to shovel, pour water, and get messy! At the same time they’re building fine motor skills (as they use their fingers and hands) and learning important science concepts as they watch their plants grow.

### Try the Classic Shell Game

You’ll need a plastic cup and a small toy. Show the child the toy, then set it down and cover it slowly with the cup. See if he picks up the cup to find the toy. Once the child has mastered this game with one cup, try it with two cups and later, with three cups. This is a very challenging concept for toddlers to master so it’s important to be patient. Soon enough, the child will have no trouble at all locating the toy. This kind of activity builds thinking skills and hand-eye coordination.

### Take Out Some Tubes

Put those empty wrapping paper tubes to work. String a scarf through the tube and let your toddler pull it out. Or, show your toddler how to drop a ball or foam block down the tube and watch it fall on the floor. Roll the tube and race across the room to get it. Make music by banging the tube on the floor. Games like this build the child’s thinking and imaginative play skills.

### Practice Pouring

Wash out an empty plastic spice container and show the child how you can drop a few pieces of cereal inside. Offer it to the child and watch as she tries to figure out how to get the cereal out. She may shake it or drop it, but eventually, she will pour them out onto the high chair tray, a plate, or her hand. This type of activity builds problem-solving skills.

# Activities That Build the Senses

## Take a Peek!

Remove the label from several small water bottles. Fill each bottle with interesting objects—one might contain small shells, another can be filled with sparkly glitter, water, and mineral oil, and another with a few pennies. Securely glue the lid on each bottle. Give them to the child to look at, shake, and explore.

## Water, Water Everywhere

Fill a dishpan with water and place it on a towel on the floor (or better, outside). Give the child plastic cups, spoons, bowls, and a funnel. Watch her pour, splash, and more. Add some food coloring to the water for a new twist on water play. As with any water activity, supervise carefully and pour all water out when you are done.

## Band Together

Gather several objects that make different noises—rattles, bells, tambourines, etc. Start singing a song and pick up an instrument—offer one to the child too—and make some music together. Games like this nurture a child's language, physical, and thinking skills.

## Make a Bubble “Mound”

Fill a small bowl with some bubble liquid and then use a straw to blow a mound of bubbles. Let the child explore the bubbles with his hands—but watch to make sure he doesn't eat any. He may also enjoy watching you blow bubbles for him to catch.

# Activities That Build Language Skills

## Name It!

During diaper changes, take a moment to play “what's this?” Lift up her foot and say, “What's this? It's a foot. And what are these? They are toes.” You can name belly, belly button, knee, leg, parts of the face, and more. Through repetition, young toddlers learn new words.

## Picture This

Snap photos of the child during an activity with you, such as making cookies. Take a picture of the beginning of the activity (getting the ingredients), the middle (adding ingredients, stirring), and the end (eating cookies). Glue each photo to an index card. Show the photos to the child and talk about the steps you took for each activity. Activities like this help develop the child's thinking and language skills.

## Point It Out

As you read books with the child, ask him to “point to the cat” or “show me the moon” in his favorite stories. He may not be able to follow through yet (so you should go ahead and do the pointing), but as the child approaches 2 years, you may be surprised by how many words he seems to know. Reading activities like this help children understand the connection between words and pictures and build their vocabulary.

## Hello, Good-Bye

Make a tunnel from a large cardboard box by opening both ends. The child can be at one end of the tunnel. You sit at the opposite end. Peek your face in the tunnel and say, “Hi!” Then lean away from the tunnel (so the child can't see you) and say, “Bye!” Does the child try to communicate with you by crawling to find you, or by making sounds to copy your “hi” and “bye?” This activity encourages language, problem-solving, and physical skills as a child figures out how to locate you.

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**5 Ways to Play...** (<https://www.zerotothree.org/resource/5-ways-to-play/>)

Bells and whistles and lights, oh my! The more the toy is doing, the less the child is learning. There are many ways to play with toddlers with items you already have on hand. Children explore the world through play, figuring out how things work and how people think, feel, and act in different situations. Play also provides lots of [...]