

Toys and Games for Toddlers

By Janelle Durham, MSW. Parent Educator, Bellevue College. gooddayswithkids.com, InventorsOfTomorrow.com

Despite the millions of dollars spent on advertising to convince you otherwise, there are no specific toys or 'scientifically designed' educational products that are "must-have" items for children!

What toddlers really "must have" is: time and opportunity to play, caregivers who value the role of play and take the time to play with them, and a variety of play experiences.

Play time offers our children the chance to explore their world, figure out how their bodies work, learn how to use tools to accomplish cool things, practice interacting with others, learn the value of trial and error, learn how to make decisions, learn about cause and effect and the consequences of their actions.

Toddlers benefit by having a variety of activities to stimulate different skills and brain development. When you play games with your child, try to think of activities that help to build a wide variety of talents. There is an educational theory about the different kinds of intelligence that we all have, in varying degrees. (See www.institute4learning.com/multiple_intelligences.php) We can use those categories of intelligence to think about all the different types of activities we can expose our kids to. For example, if your child only had 10 toys, it would be great if they have one toy from each of these categories! All the suggestions below are for young toddlers, but the categories are useful to keep in mind throughout your child's life.

Word Play (Linguistic or Verbal Intelligence)

Toys and Stuff – Books, Books, and More Books! Story tapes. Alphabet toys. Alphabet blocks.

Activities – Read to your child. Kids' books are great for rhythm & rhymes, but it's fine to read whatever *you* want to read (NY Times or Sports Illustrated!). Let kids see you reading. Go to the library regularly, and get excited about the books you find. Talk to your child. Label things: when he reaches for a ball, say "that's a ball." When she notices a bird flying by, say "see the bird." Expose him to other languages.

Doing the Numbers (Logical – Mathematical Intelligence)

Toys and Stuff – Anything you can count! Anything you can compare. Anything you can sort.

Activities – Count out loud. Count how many seconds to put shoes on, how many steps from the kitchen to family room, how many toys are on the floor, etc. Talk about numbers or comparisons: there's *more* blocks in that pile, there's *three* dogs over there, here's a *few* cheerios, this spoon is *bigger* than that spoon, in *five minutes* we'll leave the park. Talk about the order of tasks: first, we do this, then that.

Putting the Pieces Together (Spatial Intelligence)

Toys and Stuff – Nesting cups (measuring cups, mixing bowl sets, and plastic containers are great for this), puzzles, toys that can be taken apart and put back together, shape sorters, duplos and other building toys, blocks to stack (or cans of food, or books, or any items you can stack and balance in a pile).

Activities – Put things in and take things out. (Plastic dishes in a drawer, paper in the recycling bin, toys in the toy box, clothespins in a jar) Put lids on, take them off. Open and close doors. Talk about directions: we're going up stairs, the book is on the top shelf, it's above the trains, but below the stuffed animals.

Moving and Grooving (Bodily – Kinesthetic Intelligence)

Toys and Stuff – Balls! Things to climb on (stairs, couches, playgrounds... always ensuring safety, of course, but also encouraging physical exploration). Swings. Things to step over (broom handle), go under (coffee table), climb into (cardboard box), or go around (anything that's blocking their path!) Scooters and riding toys.

Activities – Playground time, swinging your child side to side, "wrestling" with your child, playing together in a swimming pool, dancing together, soccer, hiking in the woods, climbing up rocks, balancing on a curb, climbing stairs, spinning in an office chair.

Playing Well With Others (Interpersonal Intelligence)

Toys and Stuff – Dolls, stuffed animals, toy animals, play kitchens, toy phones – anything that allows your child to act out relationships, practice connecting with others, and play different roles.

Activities – Interaction! Lots of time with attentive adults – sometimes adults take the lead and guide the activities, sometimes the adult should let the child lead and follow what she wants to do, sometimes you take turns. Practice saying please, thank you, as well as other manners and sharing (it will be years before they really get this idea!!). Lots of supervised playtime with peers and older kids. Peek-a-Boo!

Learning about Myself and How I Feel (Intrapersonal Intelligence)

Intrapersonal intelligence is not about *toys* or about specific *activities*. It's about giving your child down-time to reflect on things, play on their own, learn to entertain themselves, and learn to problem-solve on their own. Intrapersonal intelligence is about learning emotional intelligence: being able to understand and label the feelings he is having. Help give your child words for how he feels. Share words for how you're feeling: "I'm sad because... I was scared when..." For more info, see the book *Raising an Emotionally Intelligent Child* by Gottman, or *Parent Effectiveness Training* by Gordon, which encourages parents to learn skills that encourage their children's personal growth and healthy parent-child relationships.

Song and Dance Routines (Musical Intelligence)

Toys and Stuff – Musical instruments – rattles, drums to bang on, jingle bells you can fasten on them, tapes and cd's of all kinds of music. Pots and pans to bang on with a metal spoon. Containers of food that baby can shake to make noise. Keys that jingle. Toys that play music.

Activities – Sing together!!!! (It doesn't matter if you don't sing well, it doesn't matter if you forget the words, it doesn't matter whether you sing kids' songs or commercial jingles.) Dance with your child. Musical rhythms help children develop mathematical intelligence. Singing familiar songs helps teach cause and effect: she learns to recognize "when mommy sings 'Ring Around the Rosie' we always go round in circles. When she says 'ashes, ashes', we're going to pretend to fall down.... "

Fun with Flora and Fauna (Naturalistic Intelligence)

Toys and Stuff – Sandboxes, shovels, backyards, pets. Natural materials to play with: rocks, shells, balls of wool felt, working with real food (holding the carrot you're getting ready to peel). Water. Mud! Snow.

Activities – Trips to the park, the beach, the zoo, go for walks, notice the birds in the parking lot, point out slugs on the sidewalk, look out the window at the moon or a rainbow, talk about the weather, go camping. Go to a farm. Shop for fruits and veggies. Let your child get wet and dirty!

Expanding Their Horizons (Magic / Imagination / Religion / Cultures)

Toys and Stuff – Dress-up clothes. Puppets (can be made from paper bags and old socks). Story books about worlds that are different than theirs. Stories and movies about people who are different from them.

Activities – Make observations about similarities and differences. Play imagination games. Make up puppet shows. Go to story times that focus on diversity, go to plays, concerts in the park. Traditions and rituals. Prayers. Talk about ways of understanding the world: where we come from, what our purpose is.

All the Pretty Colors (Artistic Skills and Appreciation)

Toys and Stuff - Finger-paint, scribble with crayons or markers, painting with bingo-dot-markers, colored soap to paint with in the bathtub. Ziploc bags full of pudding to squish back and forth. Shakers: fill a bottle with water, vegetable oil, food coloring and sparkles; glue the lid on, and let your child shake and admire.

Activities – Blowing bubbles. Cut pictures out of magazines and catalogs to tape up next to the changing table. Talk about colors. Show her pretty things. Do art together. Let your child see you creating art yourself (not just helping her create her art). This will show her how important art is!

Enjoy trying out all these different types of fun and games with your child!