

Cognitive skills for toddlers by Alex Mead, OT, Taree Community Health

Pretend play:

One of the key foundations of pretend play is object substitution. That is, using an object for a purpose other than it was designed...like a block phone. Have fun modelling object substitution with your toddler through games such as talking on a pretend phone, doing pretend cooking with bowls and cups, driving toy cars around a track, playing doctors, and playing with dolls and toy animals. Your toddler will learn to play by watching you.



Shape sorters:

Shape sorters are a great tool to teach your toddler about size, shape and colour, while also learning problem solving skills.



Peg puzzles:

It is never too early to start with puzzles! Peg puzzles are great for toddlers as the pieces are easy to grasp. Your toddler is likely to begin by taking all the pieces out, and will need help to put them back in the right places. You can show your toddler how to turn the puzzle pieces around to see if they fit. Talk to them about the pictures on the puzzle pieces—name the colour and shape. If it has a picture of an animal you could make the animal sound.

**Books:**

Your toddler loves to read books with you, and is starting to be able to interact more and more with books. They will be able to point out different pictures of interest, and might be able to start saying animal sounds, or recognising some of the pictures. Read with funny voices, make sound effects, have fun with it! It is also nice to allow your toddler to have some books they can play with and 'read' themselves. Cardboard books are best for this.



Sorting:

Sorting and matching activities help toddlers develop a variety of helpful skills, including visual discrimination skills, counting, colour recognition...the list goes on!

There are so many fun sorting activities you can do with your toddler, using things you already have at home. You could even have them help you sort their laundry, the cutlery drawer (minus sharp utensils), or their toys!



Painting:

Toddlers learn about their world through their senses, and getting messy is an important part of learning! Allow your toddler opportunities to paint...with their fingers, brushes, sponges, kitchen utensils...anything you can think of! Let them experiment by mixing colours, painting the paper (and themselves), and getting messy! You might like to introduce painting to your toddler outside, and put them in old clothes first.



Sand and water play:

On the theme of getting messy, playing in sand and water also provide great opportunities for your toddler to learn. Provide them with buckets, cups, bowls, scoops, and spades to tip, pour, measure, build and play.



Musical instruments:

Allow your child to experiment with sound by playing with musical instruments. This can include things like maracas, xylophones and tambourines...but it is also fun to make your own instruments! Pots and pans, DIY rain-sticks (plastic bottle or cardboard tube filled with rice or dried beans works well for this), a tissue-box guitar...the possibilities are endless.

Now is also a good time to sing or play action songs with your child... *'Heads, Shoulders, Knees and Toes'*; *'If You're Happy and You Know It'*; *'Open, Shut Them'*. Action songs help build body awareness, motor skills, rhythm and timing, as well as language.

