

The Encyclopedia of Infant and Toddler Activities

for Children Birth to 3



*Created by Teachers
for Teachers*

Edited by Donna Wittmer, PhD

The
Encyclopedia of
**Infant and
Toddler
Activities**
for Children Birth to 3

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**Revised
Edition**


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Foreword



Parents often feel a surge of overwhelming awe and love for their newly birthed baby. Less often, however, have they taken lots of child-development courses that explain developmental norms, trajectories, and theories about how babies develop stage by stage and how best to support early development. Even more rarely have new parents taken courses that include practical experiences to encourage participating in, as well as carefully observing, the ways in which seasoned and well-trained caregivers embed learning activities in daily routines as they care in nurturing ways for infants and toddlers. Sometimes, professional care providers who provide emotional nurturing for babies have also not had sufficient opportunities for in-depth learning of ways to promote early learning in very young children.

This encyclopedia can serve as a treasure chest for parents and for infant-toddler caregivers. It provides a treasure trove of activities in a great many domains that are important for adults to consider when planning activities. The book addresses a myriad of developmental areas by providing interesting and stage-appropriate activities.

Among the varied activities provided are those that clearly address fundamental goals that caregivers need to accomplish to ensure an optimal developmental trajectory for each little person. Every baby deserves to have each caregiver foster:

- a loving, secure attachment to each person who is given the precious trust of caring for a baby or toddler;
- the early blossoming of receptive and expressive language abilities;
- pleasure in singing and listening to, as well as moving and dancing to, music;
- curiosity and love of learning—even the youngest baby is entranced by a mobile over the crib that swings in the air when the baby kicks or swipes a hand at it;
- delight in trying and mastering new activities, whether tasting new foods, rolling playdough into long snakes, scribbling a picture with a marker, blowing soap bubbles, trying to dress a doll or teddy bear, or handling and exploring a toy with focused attentiveness and persistence;
- early, passionate interest in age-appropriate books, carefully chosen so that infants and toddlers come to treasure them and love to have a special book read over and over;
- early emotional development of empathy—the ability to understand, accurately interpret, and care about another’s feelings—as well as willingness to be helpful and kind when another person has troubles;

- love of the outdoors and nature and gentleness with creatures, such as flowers, plants, and tame animals;
- enjoyment of spatial and perceptual challenges in games that require simple counting abilities and estimations of distances and mass in order to accomplish an activity; and
- enhancement of young children’s bodily strength and skills in climbing, swinging, running, skipping, jumping, and other gross motor activities that enhance gracefulness and self-confidence.

Of special importance and adding to the usefulness of the activities in this encyclopedia, the suggestions provided will increase a caregiver’s awareness of the many different developmental goals that can be reached by arranging for a given activity. For example, when an adult provides props for dress-up pretend play, then such play can enhance toddlers’ physical motor skills, fine motor control, prosocial interaction skills with peers, planning and sequencing skills, and language abilities.

Each of the activities provided in this encyclopedia is designed to enrich children’s development in many areas as well as the domain that is the main focus of the activity. For example, learning to cut with a pair of safe scissors, in which eye-hand coordination and dexterity are a special focus, also can enhance a toddler’s executive-planning skills, creativity, artistic imagination, and vocabulary enrichment. Remembering how to use this or any other safe tool also enhances a young child’s memory skills.

This encyclopedia is so rich in activity suggestions that a caregiver, regardless of a particular child’s personal preferences, will be able to choose at each stage of development some activity that really appeals to that special little person and will further that little one’s positive growth and development. Adults who are searching among the rich array of activities can find suggestions that will feel comfortable in each domain of learning and will fit the unique skills or preferences of a particular child. Browsing through the many activities may also spur an adult to increase his or her own creativity in creating further experiences and activities with the same generous goals—to promote the optimal flourishing of each precious little child in care!

Alice Sterling Honig, PhD
Professor Emerita of Child Development
Syracuse University

Introduction



If you are looking for hundreds of ideas to help infants and toddlers grow and learn, this book is for you. More intellectual growth occurs in the first three years of life than at any other time. Not only does the brain grow during this period, but the structures that support learning now and in the future also are created.

Infants, toddlers, and two-year-olds process information every waking minute. They do this by observing, tasting, listening, smelling, and touching. These very young children try out different actions and learn from them. They are active learners who energetically shake, bang, drop, push, pull, roll, bounce, and move objects. They are constantly looking for patterns in interactions, in how objects work, and in how language is structured. They have goals, such as learning what a ball does; strategies, such as licking, tasting, bouncing, rolling, shaking, and pushing the ball; and theories about how things work, such as balls roll, but square blocks do not. They will be very surprised if they find a square object that also rolls. As they explore and experiment, they develop expectations for how relationships, objects, and the environment will act. The rapid growth in the first three years of life is nothing short of miraculous.

Whether you are a teacher, caregiver, parent, or family member, you are key to what and how the children learn about themselves, others, and the world. The experiences you provide for the children in your care play a crucial role in the process of hardwiring their brains for learning and loving. You provide the opportunities for young children to develop and learn in the emotional, social, language, cognitive, and motor domains. You also influence how children approach play and learning. Are they motivated, curious, and persistent in their learning? Can they manage their feelings, actions, and behaviors with the support of familiar adults? Do they demonstrate flexibility in their actions and behaviors? These **self-regulation** skills that young children develop with you will provide a foundation for their present and future learning.

We know that infants, toddlers, and two-year-olds thrive within safe, secure, affirming, affectionate, and motivating relationships. These relationships provide many opportunities for loving and learning at home and in care and education programs. Responsive relationship-based care is vital for children's brain development, secure **attachments**, energy and desire to learn, and sense of well-being. Young children need to know that they can trust adults to keep them safe, be encouraging, and make learning enjoyable. They develop confidence in their own abilities within warm, consistent, sensitive, caring relationships.

We also know that culture—what individuals and groups value and believe—influences all aspects of life and learning. These values and beliefs guide the decisions about who families want their children to be and what they want them to learn. We hope that you talk with families concerning their goals, hopes, and dreams for children and then consider which activities best support those goals.

How This Book Is Organized

Teachers, child care directors, and other early childhood professionals who work with infants and toddlers contributed many of the activities. This book provides an array of activities that are responsive to children's goals, interests, needs, and strengths and that support learning through children's exploration and discovery. Many of the activities happen during normal daily routines such as transitions, napping, and snacking. All activities support learning across emotional, social, language, cognitive, and physical and motor domains; however, some have a special focus on particular domains. Other activities are written for the learning areas in a program room—creative, dramatic play, literacy, math, outdoors and nature, and sensory/science. There is a section on fingerplays and rhymes that adults can relish with young children. The last section includes activities for working with families. All the activities are fun and enjoyable and are developmentally appropriate for very young children.


This book is organized within the following categories:


- Domains: emotional development, cognitive development/discovery, fine- and gross-motor development, language development, and social development
- Learning Areas*: construction, creative explorations, dramatic play, literacy, math, outdoor play/nature, and sensory/science
- Routines: arrival; songs, fingerplays, and rhymes; transitions; snack time; nap time; cleanup; and departure
- Working with Families

***Note:** Cognitive development and discovery can happen anywhere for infants, toddlers, and two-year-olds. Specific activities to support cognitive development are listed in that chapter. Similarly, fine- and gross-motor development can happen in a variety of settings. Specific activities to support motor development are listed in that chapter.

Age Ranges

Within each category, the activities include the age range for which the activity is best suited. Think of the activity selections as a continuum. For example, some are appropriate for infants; others can be adapted to work with infants, toddlers, and two-year-olds. Suggestions for adaptations in the activities will help you adjust to fit the interests and abilities of the children in your care.

Infant activities, signified by this symbol , are for babies up to twelve months old. The activities fit easily within an infant's daily routine of feeding, eating, diapering, and playing and will build relationships and support learning at the same time. Most of the activities for infants include language, literacy, and relationship opportunities.

Toddler activities, signified by this symbol , are for children from twelve to twenty-four months of age. Children this age enjoy dumping and filling, opening and closing containers, as well as crawling and walking through obstacle courses. They are developing both their large muscles in their arms and legs and their small muscles in their hands. Activities that engage toddlers' eyes and hands together build **perceptual** and **eye-hand coordination skills**. Activities that support emotional, social, language, and literacy activities are very important during these years. Toddlers' **receptive** (words they understand) and **expressive** (words they can say) vocabularies increase every day when they are given opportunities to engage in interactive, reciprocal sounds,

gestures, words, and early sentence conversations. Many of the activities for toddlers recognize that they develop friendships, learn to be **prosocial**, and learn to negotiate conflicts within supportive adult-child relationships.

Some activities are appropriate for both infants and toddlers and are signified with both symbols. These activities include adaptations for children who are in these age groups. Children these ages need opportunities to actively explore their environments without being placed in containers, such as car seats, infant seats, jump seats, and entertainers. The activities emphasize opportunities to play with new materials and to experiment and discover something new every day. Activities that build secure relationships with adults and peers are the key to the success of these children. Infants need nurturing, and toddlers will want to explore but will need to return to their favorite adults for emotional energy.

Activities for two-year-olds are signified by this symbol: 

Two-year-olds, from twenty-four to thirty-six months of age, love using crayons, paint, and playdough to create. Language and literacy activities are crucial for this age. Almost every activity builds on books that two-year-olds love to look at and listen to. Many songs and fingerplays are appropriate for this age group to learn. Dramatic play opportunities increase as two-year-olds begin to pretend while feeding dolls, stir pretend food in pots and pans, and imagine that they are dogs or cats.

Some activities, such as Discovery Bottles, are appropriate for children of all ages and abilities, with adaptations to make the activity easier and more challenging. Infants will visually enjoy the bottles, and older infants and toddlers will experiment with rolling them. Older toddlers and two-year-olds can help make the discovery bottles, experimenting with what materials make their creations glow, sparkle, light up, and make interesting sounds.

Activities

Each activity includes a list of needed materials. You will probably already have most of them on hand, and families are great resources for materials. You might want to ask local businesses whether they have items they want to donate, such as empty cardboard boxes. Note: Only teachers and caregivers should use certain materials. Give children only the materials that they can use safely.

The “More to Do: Extensions and Adaptations” section provides ideas for adapting the activities for children’s interests and abilities. This section also offers ideas for using books and songs that build on the opportunities for learning provided in the activity. There are enrichment ideas to extend the activity into other areas of the curriculum, such as dramatic play, language, literacy, art explorations, and outdoor play/nature. Because of the extensions and adaptations, there are many activities within activities, allowing and supporting the activity to be offered for many days and weeks and revisited when you think children’s interest will be sparked again.

It is critical that you know the children in your care and select activities that are interesting, challenging, and allow for success. Psychologist J. McVicker Hunt called this *meeting the match*, and developmental psychologist Lev Vygotsky’s work helped us think about the **zone of proximal development**. These terms mean that we find activities that are both challenging enough to spark children’s motivation and are easy enough that children can successfully complete them with effort. Use your judgment to decide whether an activity is appropriate for an individual child or a group of children. Adapt activities to take into account children’s individual strengths,

interests, and needs. Children with special needs may need adaptations in some specific domains but not in others.

Determining the Appropriateness of an Activity



- Does it meet one or more children’s needs and strengths?
- Does it spark the interest of a child or many children?
- Does it provide for developmental levels—infants, toddlers, and/or two-year-olds?
- Does it support learning in a variety of developmental domains—motor, communication, thinking, social, emotional, and cultural?
- Does it support a child doing many different things with the toy or material?
- Does it support gender-neutral, multicultural thinking and nonviolent, prosocial behavior?
- Can the material or the activity be offered as an opportunity for children rather than as a forced activity?
- Can the material or experience be adapted for children with special needs?
- Are vocabulary-rich expansion interactions suggested?

Source: Wittmer, Donna, and Sandra Petersen. 2017. *Infant and Toddler Development and Responsive Program Planning: A Relationship-Based Approach*, 4th ed. New York: Pearson.

Some activities provide a list of related books, songs, and rhymes. These enhance and support concepts that children are learning in the activity. For example, during an activity, children may have opportunities to learn prosocial skills, names of emotions, colors, sorting skills, and concepts such as on/off, up/down, in/out, and the names of animals. The books and songs chosen provide more opportunities to learn those skills and concepts. Look in this section for both original and new versions of familiar songs and rhymes.

The “Opportunities for Learning” section highlights the possibilities that the activity offers for children’s learning. They are not learning objectives that you make sure all children learn. Rather, they define the potential that each activity has for children’s learning. They are based on North Carolina’s *Foundations for Early Learning and Development* (ncchildcare.nc.gov/pdf_forms/NC_foundations.pdf) and on the *Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework* (<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/hs/sr/approach/pdf/ohs-framework.pdf>).

Some activities have a section called “What We Know.” This section offers developmental information to support your understanding of how and why to use the activity with the children in your care.

Glossary

A glossary of terms appears on pages 269 through 271. The terms that appear in boldface in the text are defined there.

Final Thoughts

Safety

Safety is the first and most important requirement for any activity. Review all activities before presenting them to the children, using your knowledge of the developmental needs of the children in your care. Test all materials with a choke tube to be sure that they do not pose a choking hazard.

Qualities of Successful Activities

Any activity you do with very young children should meet their need for secure relationships with their primary caregivers. Children should receive responsive, positive, warm interactions—not scolding, harsh, authoritarian interactions. Children must be loved, nurtured, cherished, and comforted when they are distressed.

Activities should provide respect for each child’s individuality, development, and culture and should offer language and communication models and responsive interactions with children. Activities should be responsive to individual children and group interests, goals, needs, strengths, and culture. Create an individualized program by adapting and extending activities for children’s different ages, stages, cultures, and interests.

Activities should provide prosocial models and support children learning prosocial behavior for present and future social and academic success. Caregivers should demonstrate empathy for children’s feelings, needs, and distress and should help children understand emotions, feel empathy for others, and express emotions in healthy ways.

Activities should offer levels of symbolization—a real object, animal, or person; photos or pictures of objects, animals, or persons; or dramatic play, letters, and words—in many activities to support cognitive, language, and literacy development. Language and literacy experiences, in particular, are the key to children’s ability to communicate, socialize successfully, and learn to read.

Create enriched environments that are not only individually effective by age, stage, and culture but are also enticing, beautiful, calm, and interesting. Encourage problem solving as basic to children’s lifelong learning. Create schedules that ensure that children have time to explore in an enriched environment and have opportunities to come back to adults for comfort, energy, and safety. Ensure that teachers understand that all opportunities have possibilities for language, literacy, emotional, social, motor, and cognitive learning. **Scaffold** learning by helping children learn how to learn. For example, rather than finishing a puzzle for a child, help the child learn strategies for doing a puzzle.

Understand the importance of knowing, observing, and documenting children’s learning.

And work closely with families, always.

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- Find out how to support development of language, social-emotional, cognitive, and motor skills.

Activities will help you support curiosity, play, exploration, persistence, emerging foundations in literacy and math, problem solving, and so much more!



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