

Playing with Household Items Instead of Toys

Question: My baby has no interest in regular toys and prefers to play with household objects. Should I be worried? What can I do to help make sure she is learning while she is playing?

There are a number of reasons that young children prefer household objects to many commercial toys:

- Household objects are what is called "open ended," meaning that they can be used in many different ways, whereas some commercial toys are limited in their use (you turn them off or on, etc.). Even the toys that children most prefer over long periods of time are open-ended, such as blocks or other building materials, small cars or trucks, little animals or people and drawing materials.
- Household objects represent the adult world and children are trying to figure out the adult world.
- Household objects give children a chance to test their ideas about how things work. For example, when your child drops a spoon from the highchair, he or she might be testing out the many ways the spoon can fall and the different sounds it makes.

This kind of play with everyday objects can promote the life skill of Making Connections.

Making Connections is at the heart of learning—figuring out what's the same and what's different, and sorting these things into categories. Making unusual connections is at the core of creativity. In a world where people can Google for information, it is the people who can see connections who are able to go beyond knowing information to using this information well.

1

Keep it fun.

According to Alison Gopnik of the University of California at Berkeley:

Children are using the same kinds of processes as scientists. They're making up theories about what's going on around them; they're checking to see if those theories fit what they see and what other people are telling them. And they're testing those theories by asking questions and making predictions. You [can] see this in their play.

Here are some things your child can do with household objects:

- An empty shampoo bottle can become a pretend spaceship or boat in the bathtub.
- A plastic bottle with things inside can become a musical instrument.
- A pot with a wooden spoon can also become a musical instrument.

- An empty cardboard box can become a hiding place for your child or for playing, "Where are my socks? They're they are."

Play does need not be expensive! What matters is that the things your baby plays with promote your child's imagination and learning. For other ideas of everyday things you can do to promote learning, download the free app DailyVroom on your iPhone or Android phone. For more information, visit vroom.org.

2

Join in.

Kathy Hirsh-Pasek of Temple University and her colleagues conducted an experiment in which researchers evaluated how children's learning changed when their parents helped. Hirsh-Pasek says:

When a parent joins in, we call it "guided play," and it always elevates the level of play. So parents shouldn't feel like they have to stay out and let the kids play on their own—they should join in, but they can't be the boss. They have to follow the child's lead and talk about the kinds of things that the child is interested in.

Play interactively with your child and follow her lead. Try to act as a guide, not the boss. You can do this by:

- Describing what your child is doing and if your child is older, asking questions that don't just have yes and no answers;
- Imitating her actions; and
- Adding on to her ideas.

When you join in with your child in her play with household objects, you are helping her bridge (or make connections among) experiences and the larger ideas behind them.

3

Select items and toys carefully.

The American Academy of Pediatrics notes that play is a critical part of development, and toys are a critical part of play. Avoid household objects or toys that make loud or shrill noises, toys with small parts, loose strings, cords, rope, or sharp edges, and toys that contain potentially toxic materials.

Infants explore with their eyes, by putting things in their mouths as they grow, to feeling and touching and trying out how things work. You can play with your baby with simple cause-and-effect household objects or toys. Some suggestions include:

- Items you can roll back and forth;
- Things your baby can push; and
- Objects that can be put into a container and dumped out.

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Use your imagination.

Karen Wynn of Yale University finds that you promote learning on the deepest level when you tap into children's passion and enthusiasm and build on it. She says:

Babies are deeply driven and passionate about understanding the world and understanding the people around them. A baby's whole essence is about plugging into the world.

Making unusual connections is at the core of creativity. Introduce your child to new ways of using familiar objects. For example:

- Your baby can bang on a variety of kitchen pots and plastic containers as drums, using different utensils as "drum sticks." Point out the different sounds that these objects make.
- You can also set up an area for water play. You can do this outside in nice weather, on top of a plastic sheet or tablecloth indoors, or at the kitchen sink with a safe stool. Your baby can explore filling and pouring with different containers and using different utensils.

In these simple and fun ways, your child is beginning to explore basic ideas of science and math while learning about concepts like cause and effect, size and shape. You are encouraging your child to explore the endless possibilities in the world and paving the way for lifelong learning.