

Toy Recommendations

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General Guidelines

Choose traditional toys over electronic ones

Children are often drawn to things that light up and make noises, and smart toys can seem like the new thing to help them learn and grow. However, they are not the best for promoting a child's social language and ability to engage with others.

Pick toys that fit your child's current play skills

Remember the best way to maximize a child's interest and learning opportunities is to start playing at their current level. Often parents tell us their child is uninterested in toys, and we find that the toys they have been trying are just too complicated for their child.

- **Simple:** If they are mainly holding objects or putting them in their mouth, start by rolling a ball, pushing a car, or crashing a tower of blocks.
- **Combination:** If they are combining two or more objects in play, you can start by putting people in a bus, sticking toppings on a toy pizza, or cutting toy fruit apart with a fake knife.
- **Pre-symbolic:** If they are acting out familiar actions like drinking from a toy cup, or feeding a stuffed animal, you can join them in simple imaginary play. Start by modeling basic actions they do frequently like eating, drinking, walking, and bathing.
- **Symbolic:** If they are setting up multi-step sequences pretending the toy has a life, pick toys that add new steps onto their routine. For example, if they are putting figures in a bed, covering them with a blanket and then pretending to have them sleep you can pick toys where they can act out getting ready for bed like a toothbrush, soap, towel, and pajamas.

General Guidelines Continued

Be flexible in how you play with toys

It's easy to get caught up in your own plan for the toy and forget your child may have different ideas. If your child has an idea, take a step back and follow their lead. It's ok if they aren't playing in the way the toy was intended to be used.

Everyday objects also make great toys

Sometimes the best toys are objects already in your home. We use salad spinners, Tupperware containers, and empty diaper boxes in therapy. In addition to traditional toys, we will be adding non-traditional toys and ideas for how to use them in this PDF.

Have fewer toys available

Research has shown that access to fewer toys at a time is related to better quality of play. In other words, having only a few toy options encourages children to play with toys longer and to get creative with how they play with them. One tip is to periodically rotate out your toys. Try packing away half them in storage, and then switch them out every month or so. Not only will you be supporting your child's play, it will also help you limit new toy purchases because the ones that come out of storage will seem new and exciting to your child again!

Animal Safari Truck



Get the toy [here](#)

This safari truck is a fun and flexible toy for your animal-loving child! It has a lot of different animals to talk about. Below are some ideas of how to play with the toy according to what level of play your child currently enjoys. Suggestions for words to say while playing are in *italics*. Please see the [guidelines page](#) to learn more about the different play levels and which one may be most appropriate for your child. As always, get creative and follow your child's lead!

Simple Play:

- Drive the truck around the room. (*Truck. We're pushing it.*)
- Push the truck back and forth between you (*It's fast! Oh no, it fell.*)
- Open/close the door on the back (*Door. It's open.*)

Combination Play:

- Put all of the animals in the truck. Hint: If the shapes are too difficult for your child to match, you can push them through any hole or put them in using the back door. (*Lion. Zebra. In the truck. The hippo is in.*)
- Dump out all of the animals from the back door. This helps start the routine over again. (*They came out.*)
- Put the animals in a different vehicle. (*Giraffe. He's in the bus.*)

Pre Symbolic Play:

- Make a road for the truck using blocks, paper, or tape. (*Block. We're sticking the tape. We made a road.*)
- Scatter the animals around the room and drive the truck around to pick them all up. (*He's under the couch. The zebra is on the table.*)
- Have the animals do different actions. (*The lion is running. The rhino is climbing. He's on top of the truck!*)

Symbolic Play:

- Set up different habitats for the animals. Hint: You can use boxes and construction paper. For example, you can make a pretend pond by cutting a circle out of blue paper. (*The hippo is hiding in the grass.*)
- Make houses out of board books standing up like tents. You can drop the animals off at their homes and put them to bed. (*The zebra went in his house. He's sleeping.*)

Birthday Party Cake



Get the toy [here](#)

Who doesn't love cake? Here are a variety of play ideas we have done with this wooden cake toy. Suggestions for words and phrases you can say while playing are in *italics*.

Please see the [guidelines page](#) to learn more about the different play levels and which one may be most appropriate for your child. As always, get creative and follow your child's lead!

Simple Play:

- Pull apart the cake pieces. (*It's off.*)
- Push the pieces back together as a puzzle. (*Cake.*)

Combination Play:

- Stick toppings and candles on the cake. (*Candy. Candles. They're on.*)
- Pull topping and candles off the cake. (*They came off.*)
- Cut the cake apart with the knife. (*Knife. We're cutting.*)
- Put the toppings into a container and shake them. (*We're shaking the box. It's loud!*)
- Put the toppings in a bowl and stir them and dump them out. (*We're mixing. They came out.*)

Pre Symbolic Play:

- Sing "Happy Birthday." (*You're singing.*)
- Take a big breath and pretend to blow out the candles. Hint: You knock them off while blowing to start the routine over. (*We blew the candles. They came off.*)
- Pretend to eat pieces of cake. (*We're eating cake. It's yummy.*)
- Pretend to feed pieces of cake to a puppet. (*The dog is eating. He's hungry.*)

Symbolic Play:

- Pretend to bake the cake in a toy oven before decorating it. Hint: You can use a box or the space under a chair as a pretend oven. (*The cake is baking. It's in the oven. Ouch, the pan is hot!*)
- Put the pieces on plates, pour some imaginary drinks, and pretend to eat with utensils. (*It's a fork. The cake is on the plate. We're drinking.*)
- Create an imaginary party by making birthday hats and unwrap fake presents. Hint: You can wrap up small items in your house with construction paper. (*It's a present. The hat is on your head. The paper came off.*)

Board Books as Toys



Books are for reading, right? To this we reply an emphatic “Yes! And...” Reading with your child is important on many levels, but you can use those board books you have lying around your home as a toy. Suggestions for words and phrases you can say while playing are in *italics*. Please see the [guidelines page](#) to learn more about the different play levels and, as always, get creative and follow your child’s lead!

Simple Play:

- A board book can serve as a perfect ramp for a ball or car. You can either set it up like an upside-down “v” or put one end of the book on something taller, like a box, to create a ramp. You can also hold it slanted over the edge of a table, that way, when you put a car down the ramp, it will crash to the floor. Of course, what could be more fun for a toddler than making things crash loudly? (*The car is up. It went down. You’re pushing the car.*)

Combination Play:

- Board books can be stacked into a tower either lying flat or standing up. (*We’re stacking the books. It’s on top. We made a tower. The books crashed!*)
- If you are playing with a train set, books can serve as wonderful tunnels to put over the tracks. You’ve expanded the complexity of the activity and allowed for more labeling opportunities! (*The train is under. It went through the tunnel.*)

Pre Symbolic Play:

- Books can serve as great little houses if they are turned upside down. Line a few of them up and you have garages to park cars in or houses for small animal or people figures. (*The sheep is in his house. The house is dark. The sheep is sleeping.*)

Symbolic Play:

- Pretend that an upside down book is a car wash for a toy car. You can talk about how the car is dirty, make some funny washing noises while it goes through the car wash, and when it comes out you can talk about how it is clean now.
- If you are playing with toy animals or people, introduce the idea that it is raining and mimic the action by moving your hands/fingers up and down. You can help your child put all of the animals or people into the “house”, the overturned book, so that they stay dry.

Build-a-Track



Get the toy [here](#)

Our kiddos love cars, and we love finding new ways to play with them! This track building set goes beyond just building roads though – the possibilities seem endless! The smaller pieces make them easy to hold and snap together, and creates a more flexible, bendable structure.

Suggestions for words and phrases you can say while playing are in *italics*. Please see the [guidelines page](#) to learn more about the different play levels and, as always, get creative and follow your child’s lead!

Simple Play:

- Push the pieces together. (*Track. We pushed it together.*)
- Pull the pieces apart. (*You pulled it. It came off.*)
- Push enough pieces to make a snake and slide it around the room while someone chases it. (*It’s a snake. The snake is chasing you.*)
- Build a circle and take it on and off your little one’s head to create a silly game. (*It’s a hat. The hat is on. The hat is off.*)
- Drive the cars around or put batteries in and watch them go. (*The car is going fast!*)

Combination Play:

- Build a road for cars to drive on. (*We made a road for the cars.*)
- Drive cars up and down the ramp. (*The car is up. It came down.*)
- Drive cars over and under the bridge. (*The car is under. The car is going over the bridge.*)
- Create a bigger bridge by taping both end of a strip of track to two tables. Roll cars and balls across the bridge and have them drive under the bridge.
- Slide little people or animals down the ramp or bridge. (*The girl is on top. She’s sliding down.*)
- Create a bigger ramp by attach a long strip of track to a table with tape. Roll cars and balls down the ramp. (*It’s a ramp. The ramp is long. The ball is rolling down.*)
- Build a ramp that ends in a bucket or container so you can dump the balls or cars out at the end. (*The car went in the bucket. It came out.*)

Symbolic Play:

- Build a corral for animals or a fence around a toy house. (*It’s a fence. The horses are inside.*)
- Build a road and create a little city with houses and little people. (*The girl is walking on the road. She’s going to the store.*)
- Make objects you can wear, such as necklaces, belts, and crowns. Pretend you are going to a fancy party and get dressed up!

Canisters



Upcycle that old oatmeal or coffee canister into a fun and engaging toy for your toddler! Here are a variety of play ideas you can do with a canister, as well as ideas of words to say along with the play in *italics*. Please see the [guidelines page](#) to learn more about the different play levels and which one may be most appropriate for your child. As always, get creative and follow your child's lead!

Simple Play:

- Cut a hole in the lid and drop items in. (*You dropped it. It's in.*)
- Open the canister and dump items out. (*Lid. It's off. They came out.*)
- Cut slits in the top and slide popsicle sticks, pipe cleaners or ribbon in and out. (*Stick. You pushed it in. We're pulling the string.*)
- Shake items in the canister. (*We're shaking it.*)
- Put items in and roll the canister back and forth. (*It's rolling!*)
- Turn the canister into a drum. (*We're playing the drum. It's loud!*)

Combination Play:

- Have several containers and pour items from one canister to the next. (*We're pouring the rice. It's full. You dumped the animals out. Now, it's empty.*)
- Make a ramp from the top of the canister with cardboard, then have cars roll up the ramp and into the canister. (*Ramp. It went up the ramp. The car is in. It's in the garage.*)

Symbolic Play:

- Create a silo with the canister and have animals go in and out of the silo. (*Cow. The cow is on top. He fell down.*)
- Create an animal out of the canister, like a caterpillar, with a hole in the lid as a mouth. Feed the animal toy food. (*The caterpillar is hungry. You're feeding him a sandwich. He's eating. The sandwich is yummy.*)
- Make the canister into a toy rocket ship. Have little people or animals climb aboard and blast off. (*Rocket. The rocketing is flying! It's up in the air.*)
- Turn the canister into a tower of castle. Have little people climb the rock wall to the window at the top! (*The cat is in the window. The girl is climbing. The tower is tall. She climbed to the top! The girl kissed the cat.*)
- Cut off both ends of the canister and turn it into a car wash for cars to go through. (*The car is dirty. The car has soap on it. It's wet. The car is clean!*)

Cookie Set



Get the toy [here](#)

This cookie set, which includes cookies with detachable icing, a cookie tray, an oven mitt and utensils, is great toy for your toddler that will grow with him or her from simple play combinations to fully developed pretend play. This toy can easily be used on its own, but is also a great addition to a play kitchen set. Suggestions for words and phrases you can say while playing are in *italics*. See the [guidelines page](#) for info on play levels.

Combination Play:

- Take cookies out of the tube and put them on the pan. (*Cookie. Pan.*)
- Take cookies off the pan and put them back into the tube. (*It's off. It's in.*)
- Start with the icing off the cookies and then push icing onto each cookie. (*It's on.*)
- Pull the icing off of each cookie and drop the icing into the tube or another container. (*The icing is off. You dropped it in.*)
- Use the knife to cut the icing off of each cookie, then drop the icing into the tube or another container. (*Knife. You cut the cookie. The icing is off.*)
- Use the spatula to scoop cookies off of the pan. (*The cookie came off.*)

Pre Symbolic Play:

- Pretend to eat the cookies and the icing. (*We're eating. The cookie is yummy!*)
- Pretend to feed the cookies to a play partner or stuffed animal. (*The bear is eating the cookie. He's hungry.*)
- Once the cookies are on the pan, put the pan into a play oven or cardboard box to cook. (*They're in the oven. The cookies are baking. Be careful, they're hot!*)
- Serve cookies and a group of friends or dolls/stuffed animals. (*The dolls are hungry. The cookie is on her plate. Her plate is empty. She ate the cookie!*)

Symbolic Play:

- Get a bowl and spoon and pretend to mix up the ingredients to make cookies, once you reach the step of putting the cookies on the pan, substitute the toy cookies and bake in pretend oven. Pretend that the cookies are hot coming out of the oven and use the oven mitt.
- Serve milk and cookies at a party for a group of friends or dolls/stuffed animals, give each person a cup and plate (can be pretend or real) then serve milk and cookies.
- Pretend to be a baker and sell cookies to play partners or dolls/animals, or be a customer at a bakery and pick out cookies and pay for them.

Cups



What could be simpler than grabbing some cups when you need a quick and easy toy for your tot? Styrofoam, Dixie, plastic, paper: all will work! You can use the example words and sentences in *italics* to add rich and diverse language to your play. Remember to balance imitating your child's ideas with modeling your own new ones. Please see the [guidelines page](#) to learn more about the different play levels and which one may be most appropriate for your child.

Simple Play:

- Stack the cups up high and let your toddler enjoy knocking them over. (*Cups. They came down.*)

Combination Play:

- Stack the cups into a tower and then crash it down. Then build it again! (*Tower. We're building. It fell down.*)
- Put toy pieces, cotton balls, or any other little objects into the cups. You can then dump them out and start over. You can also pour the items from one cup to another. (*Ball. It's in. The pieces came out. The cup is empty. We're pouring the beans.*)
- Tape the open ends of two paper cups together and fill it with beans or rice. Then you can have fun shaking it. (*The cup is full. You pulled the tape. I ripped it off. The tape is sticky! We're shaking the cup. It's loud!*)

Pre Symbolic Play:

- Cut garage doors out of paper, stick them to the cue opening, and pretend they are garages for miniature cars. (*The door is open. The car is in the garage. It's parked.*)
- Lay the cups on their sides and use them as homes for toy people or animals. (*It's a house. It's full. The horse is inside. He's sleeping.*)
- Pretend to drink from the cups, or give stuffed animals/puppets pretend drinks. (*The cup is full. The water is cold. You poured the milk. We're drinking.*)

Symbolic Play:

- Have a tea party! Set out cups for everyone (stuffed animals included) and pour them all their favorite tea. You can also set out plates, utensils, and serve up some play food. Pinkies up!

Cutable Food



Get the toy [here](#)

Pretend food is a classic toy, and when it's cut-able, there are even more ways you can play with them. So let's grab some and get cookin'! Suggestions for words and phrases you can say while playing are in *italics*. Please see the [guidelines page](#) to learn more about the different play levels and, as always, get creative and follow your child's lead!

Combination Play:

- Pull the pieces apart. (*You pulled the carrot. The stem is off.*)
- Push them together. (*Watermelon. We pushed it together.*)
- Put pieces of food in a pretend microwave. (*The apple is in the microwave. You pushed the buttons. It's cooking. The apple is out. It's hot!*)
- Put pieces of food in a bowl or pot. (*The pear is in the bowl. You dumped the fruit out.*)
- Cut the pieces with a pretend knife [your toddler may need help with this]. (*It's a knife. We're cutting the tomato.*)

Pre Symbolic Play:

- Feed the food to a puppet. You can set up a play routine by having your child stick the pieces together, then feed them to a puppet (who tears them apart while eating), and then starting over building the food again. (*You fed the dog. He's eating the lemon. It's too sour. He spit it out!*).
- Put the pieces in a bowl, and then stir them with a spoon. You can also add other steps like scooping the food out and putting it into different bowls/plates. (*The orange is in the bowl. A spoon. You're mixing the fruit. The food came out. Now, it's in the pan.*)

Symbolic Play:

- Cut up the food and then decide with your child what to put in a bowl to make a yummy soup. You can pretend to cook the soup, blow on it if it's hot, and then pretend to eat it. (*The eggplant is in the pot. You put an onion in the pot. The soap is cooking. Oh no it's too hot! We're blowing on the soup. Now, it's cool.*)
- Set a small table with utensils, plates, and cups, and then serve up some pretend food.

Laundry Bin



Sometimes the best toys are everyday objects in your home. Who knew toddlers could find an empty laundry bin so exciting? Please see the [guidelines page](#) to learn more about the different play levels and, as always, get creative and follow your child's lead!

Simple Play:

- Drop toys into the bin. Hint: This activity can be a great substitution for kids that like to throw toys around the room.
- Sit your child in the bin and cover them with balls or other toys. Have them pop out and scare you!
- Sit them in the bin and sing "Row Row Row Your Boat" while you tip the bucket back and forth.
- Sit your child in the bin and give them a push so they slide down the hall.
- Turn the bin upside-down, put your child underneath, and play "peek a boo." Then put the bucket over your head and you take turns popping out.

Combination Play:

- Turn the bin on its side and practice soccer skills by kicking toys into the "net."
- Drop toys into the bin, shake them around, or toss them up in the air and catch them again, and then dump them out.
- Place the bin upside-down and have animals or cars climb over it like a big hill.

Symbolic Play:

- Pretend the bin is a car and have your child drive somewhere. Remember to model all the little steps like pretending to open the door, putting on a pretend seat belt, starting the car, and honking the horn. You can also add in a modified game of red light/ green light where the child has to pretend to stop the car every time you call out a "red light!"
- Pretend the bin is a boat and your child is going on a fishing trip. You can give them a wooden spoon as a paddle and use a colander as a net. You can even start with an art project where you cut out toy fish and have your child decorate them so they have something to catch on their trip!

Lonely Socks



We all have lonely socks lying around who have lost their partners due to the turmoil of the dryer. With a little creativity, these cast-aside socks can become a go-to toy! Remember to pay attention to and go along with your child's play ideas, but feel free to introduce some new ones (like those suggested below) along the way! For general toy and play guidelines, please see the [guidelines page](#).

Combination Play:

- Help your toddler fill a long tube sock with rice or dry beans using spoons or Dixie cups. (We recommend spreading an oil cloth/tablecloth on the floor to do this activity on; it makes cleanup a cinch.) You can use action words like, We're scooping (or pouring or dumping) the beans. Once you think the socks are full enough, tie them off, and try the next idea.
- Fill socks full of dry beans or rice, and then tie them off so that you have something resembling a beanbag. Then have fun tossing them into a laundry bin or box. You can say things such as, It went in. It came out. You tossed it.

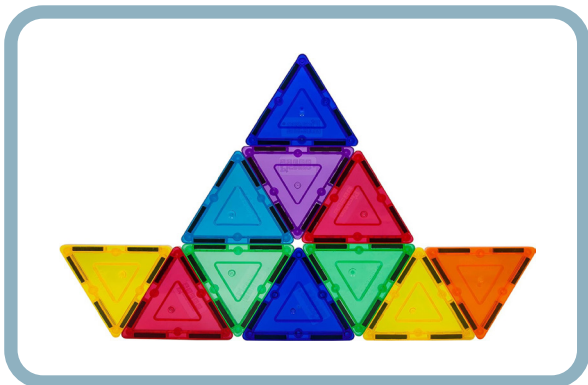
Pre Symbolic Play:

- Put the sock over your hand and you have an instant puppet! Decorating the sock is an added bonus, but you animating the sock will be what creates the magic for your toddler. You can add this puppet to any food play routine you are doing, such as feeding him cuttable food or birthday cake.

Symbolic Play:

- Pretend that your sock puppet is "Dr. Sock." You can use tape as pretend band aids, talk about where your child or his/her stuffed animals have owies, and then Dr. Sock can put on a band-aid and give it a big kiss. For older toddlers, you can swap the roles and they can pretend to be the doctor.

Magnet Tiles



Get the toy [here](#)

Magnet tiles takes playing with blocks to a whole new level! The magnets allow younger players or those with less developed fine motor skills to play successfully with blocks, while allowing older, more advanced players to build complex structures that stay together. Please see the [guidelines page](#) to learn more about the different play levels and, as always, get creative and follow your child's lead!

Simple Play:

- Stack pieces vertically.
- Put pieces together horizontally (like a road or a path).
- Pull stacked pieces apart.

Combination Play:

- Build a tower.
- Build a box.
- Crash the tower and start again.
- Build a car (some of the sets come with a platform with wheels).

Pre Symbolic Play:

- Build a road and drive cars over the road.
- Build a garage to park cars.
- Build a house for play people.
- Build a corral for animals.
- Make a tunnel for cars to drive through.
- Build a rocket ship and have it blast off into the air!

Symbolic Play:

- Pretend to have a birthday party, and use tiles to make boxes with "gifts" inside.
- Use tiles to make an oven to pretend to cook food.
- Use tiles to build a road from one play set to another. For example, have people walk along the road to get from their dollhouse to the playground.
- Build a school and put some pretend students inside. You can pretend to have the students take the bus there, go inside to learn, and come out to play!

Mr. Potato Head



Get the toy [here](#)

This classic toy seems to be found in every household! He is silly and goofy, and provides endless combinations of silly faces. Some ways we play with Mr. Potato Head are not so obvious though, and we wanted to share them with you! Suggestions for words and phrases you can say while playing are in *italics*. Please see the [guidelines page](#) to learn more about the different play levels and, as always, get creative and follow your child's lead!

Simple Play:

- Roll Mr. Potato Head across the floor back and forth to each other – this only works if he is a naked potato! (*He's rolling.*)

Combination Play:

- Push and pull the pieces into Mr. Potato Head. They don't have to make a face, let your child take the lead! (*Nose. Eyes. Hand. You pulled it out.*)
- Open the back and put pieces in and out. (*It's open. The hat is in. The ear came out.*)
- Put pieces in the back, close the door, shake him up and dump them out! (*It's full. We're shaking Mr. Potato. It's loud. The pieces came out.*)
- Play peek-a-boo with Mr. Potato Head! Hide him under a blanket or pieces of furniture and have him pop out. (*He's hiding! He's under the blanket*)
- Make Mr. Potato Head sneeze and have his parts fly off. This always elicits big laughs and become a fun game! Grab some tissues and make a routine out of it where he sneezes and his parts fly off, the child wipes his nose and puts the pieces back together. (*Achoo! He sneezed. His nose fell off!*)

Symbolic Play:

- Get out some utensils and feed Mr. Potato Head a snack. (*A fork. Cupcake. He's eating.*)
- You can pretend that Mr. Potato Head gets hurt when one of his body parts fall off and play "doctor." You can use masking or painter's tape as a band aid. (*Mr. Potato Head got hurt. A band-aid. The band-aid it's his arm.*)
- Make a pool or bath out of a Tupperware container or bowl and have Mr. Potato Head take a swim. Don't forget to grab a washcloth to use as a towel when Mr. Potato Head is ready to dry off! (*Water. He's swimming. He got wet. You're drying him. He's dry!*)

Nesting & Sorting Garages



Get the toy [here](#)

Nesting blocks are a popular childhood toy, and these are one of our favorite sets! They are made of cardboard which means they are not quite as durable as wood, but they also hurt less when they come crashing down on you! Of course, feel free to substitute any of the play ideas with your own set of nesting blocks. Please see the [guidelines page](#) to learn more about the different play levels and, as always, get creative and follow your child's lead!

Simple Play:

- Drive the vehicles around the floor- this set comes with 6 different vehicles with wheels that spin.
- Crash the tower of blocks.
- Nest the blocks into each other by size.

Combination Play:

- Stack the blocks into a tower, park the cars into them, and then crash it down.
- Stack the cars on top of each other to form a tower and then knock them over. You can also try to drive them as a tower without letting them crash.
- Do the same sequence but have the cars drive up the side of the tower to get in the upper floor garages.
- Do the same sequence but substitute in small people or animals for the cars. Pretend to have them climb up the side of the tower to get in their "house."
- Line up the blocks into a line by size and have the cars drive down the "ramp" you built.
- Build a road with magnet tiles and have the car follow the road into the garage.

Symbolic Play:

- Use the blocks to build a pretend town. The blocks can be a garage on the bottom level and a house on top. You can connect each one with roads built from magnet tiles or masking tape. Include other toys from your collection like people and animal figures and alternate forms of transportation like a school bus or firetruck. Set up a park, swimming pool, school, or grocery store using other play sets, empty boxes/Tupperware, or your own imagination!

Play Bathtub



Get the toy [here](#)

This toy bathtub is extra fun because it pumps out real water! It can be a great choice to help young children work on their pretend play skills, but it also works for children at all levels of play. Suggestions for words and phrases you can say while playing are in *italics*. Please see the [guidelines page](#) to learn more about the different play levels and, as always, get creative and follow your child's lead!

Simple Play:

- Have your child help pour water into the tub. (*Water. We're pouring the water The water is in the tub.*)
- Push the pump down and watch the water come out. (*I pushed it. The water came out.*)
- Splash in the water. (*We're splashing.*)

Combination Play:

- Put plastic animals in the bathtub and squirt water onto them. (*The tiger is in the bathtub. He got wet!*)
- Drop items into the water so they make a big splash. (*The elephant jumped in. He splashed the water. It came out of the tub!*)
- You don't just have to fill the sink with water. Try dumping small blocks or beans in there, scoop them with a cup or pour between cups, and then dump them back out. (*The tub is full. You poured the beans. They're in the cup.*)

Pre Symbolic Play:

- Fill a cup with the water from the shower and have an animal pretend to drink. (*The lion is drinking.*)
- Wet a sponge and pretend to wash a plastic doll or animal. (*The sponge is wet. We're washing the dog. He's clean!*)

Symbolic Play:

- Pretend the doll is doing their own actions by making the doll's arm splash in the water or push the water out of the shower head.
- Act out a whole bath time routine with a doll. Take their clothes off, pour water into the bath, have them climb in, shower them by pumping out water, wash them with a sponge, and then dry them off with a towel.

Puppet



Get the toy [here](#)

We love puppets at the EIRG because they are a fun addition to playing with pretend food, and they can also span a wide variety of play levels. This puppet is one of our favorites because it can actually eat the food! If your child isn't quite ready to play with dolls or stuffed animals, you may entice them to do some of those pretend play ideas with a puppet instead. You can start out with our beginning play ideas and move up levels as your child begins to get more comfortable with it.

Simple Play & Combination Play:

- Put the puppet on your hand and initiate a tickle game with your child. (*He's tickling you. It's silly!*)
- Place the puppet on your hand and pretend it's eating your child by making eating noises. (*He's eating your nose.*) If your child gets into the game, have them request the next body part for the puppet to eat.
- Stroke the puppet's fur. (*I'm petting the dragon. He's soft.*)
- Let your child take a turn putting the puppet on their hand. (*He's on your hand.*)
- Open and close the puppet's mouth. (*Mouth. The mouth is open. Now it's closed!*)
- Build a tower and then have the dragon sneeze, accidentally knocking the tower over. (*Oh no! The tower fell.*)

Pre Symbolic Play:

- Have your child feed the puppet a piece of play food. The best part of this puppet is the food disappears from the mouth and ends up in the belly. (*He's eating the apple. His mouth is empty. The apple is gone! His belly is full.*)
- Scoop up the play food with a spoon and then feed it to the puppet. (*Spoon. The orange is on the spoon. You're feeding the dragon. The dragon is hungry.*)

Symbolic Play:

- Set up a whole cooking and eating routine with the puppet. First drop pieces of food into a dish, then stick it in the microwave. When it comes out, stir it up with a spoon, scoop a piece out, and feed it to the dragon. Maybe the dragon spits it out because it's too hot so the next time you have to blow on it. Get creative!
- Act out other daily activities with the dragon. Maybe he needs to wipe his mouth and wash his hands after dinner. Or he needs to brush his teeth, get in bed, and go to sleep.

Salad Spinner



One of our top favorite household items to use as a toy is the salad spinner! Suggestions for words and phrases you can say while playing are in *italics*. Please see the [guidelines page](#) to learn more about the different play levels and, as always, get creative and follow your child's lead!

Simple Play:

- Push the buttons on the top of the salad spinner to start and stop the spinning. (*You pushed it. It's spinning. It stopped.*)
- Put the top on the salad spinner. (*Lid. The lid is on.*)
- Take the top off of the salad spinner. (*The lid came off. It's open.*)
- Take the basket in and out of the spinner. (*The basket is in. It came out.*)

Combination Play:

- Put toys/balls/puzzle pieces (pretty much anything that fits) in the salad spinner and watch it spin. (*The ball is in. The pieces are spinning. They're spinning fast!*)
- Use the basket in the sink or a sandbox. You can sift through the water or sand to get toys or other items in the basket. (*The basket is full. The toys are covered. We're shaking the basket. You found a toy!*)

Symbolic Play:

- Pretend the salad spinner is a washing machine. (*My clothes are wet. The soap is in the machine. The socks are spinning. We're washing the clothes. Now my shirt is dry.*)
- Pretend the salad spinner is an amusement park ride or a merry-go-round. You can put pretend people and animals in the salad spinner and give them a ride. (*The tiger climbed in. The girl is sitting. The animals are having fun. The people are spinning fast. The ride stopped.*)

School Bus



Get the toy [here](#)

Vehicles are always a great addition to any toy collection.

A great vehicle toy, like this school bus, can be a part of your child's play through many stages of growth and development. From simply pushing the bus across the floor, to complex play schemes with children getting on and off as they go to school, this toy will not be outgrown quickly.

Please see the [guidelines page](#) to learn more about the different play levels and, as always, get creative and follow your child's lead!

Simple Play:

- Roll the bus across the floor.
- Open and close the doors of the bus.
- Roll the bus down a ramp.
- Singing "Wheels on the Bus" as the child pushes the bus.

Combination Play:

- Take people in and out of the bus
- When your child is young they can drop people in from the top, as their fine motor skills develop, they can walk them through the doors.
- Build a road out of blocks, board books or Magnatiles to drive the bus down.
- Crash the bus into a tower to knock it down.
- Race two different vehicles across the floor or down a ramp made of books, cardboard or the backside of a puzzle.
- Build a "garage" to park the bus out of a box, pillows, or under furniture.

Symbolic Play:

- Put people in the bus and bring them to school.
- Build bus stops and have people wait for the bus.
- Take people in the bus and drop them off at different locations, such as the pool, the store, or each of their homes. (You can build all of these with other play materials)
- To expand this even further, you could have people running late for the bus, will they be able to catch it?
- Pretend to fix the bus with tools.
- Pretend to wash it with a washcloth and spray bottle or even have a car wash.

Shape Sorter



Get the toy [here](#)

Shape sorters come in all shapes and sizes. This is one of our favorites because it's two toys in one! Even though shape sorters seem like “educational” toys, all of our general toy recommendations still apply. That means letting your child lead and making it fun. We've included some ideas of what words and sentences you can say in *italics*.

Simple Play:

- Pull the truck by its red string. (*Truck. You're pulling it.*)
- Push the truck around the room. (*He's driving. The truck is going fast.*)
- Spin the barrel of the truck. (*It's turning.*)
- Fill the shape sorter up and let your child dump them out the back. (*The shapes came out.*)

Combination Play:

- Put the shapes in the shape sorter. If putting the shapes through the holes is difficult for your child and is getting in the way of having fun, you can put them halfway in and let the child push them in the rest of the way. (*Circle. The circle is in.*)
- Stack shapes on top of each other to make a tower, if possible. (*It's a tower. It fell down.*)
- Drop the shapes into any container — salad spinners can be especially fun! (*The shapes are in.*)
- Put toys other than shapes through the holes in the shape sorters. Pegs, puzzle pieces, popsicle sticks, and anything else that fits will work!
- Put the man in the driver's seat. (*The door is open. He's in the truck. The door is closed.*)

Symbolic Play:

- Shape sorters can be fun to pull out again when your child's play skills have advanced to substituting one object for another.
- Pretend that the man works as a garbage man. Have him put the shapes in his truck, get in his truck, drive to a different location, and unload them out the back.
- Pretend that the shapes are different foods. You can play “chef” and use the shapes to cook up some yummy soups, smoothies, and salads.

Spin Again



Get the toy [here](#)

This is one of our go-to toys for children who are just beginning to engage with toys or for our children with autism who love to watch things spin! It is simple, colorful, sturdy, and oh-so-fun. The spinning rings are a definite attention-grabber, and this toy allows us to help turn spinning into functional play. We find that this toy doesn't lend itself to complex play and best suits children who are using simple and combination play. Suggestions for words and phrases you can say while playing are in *italics*.

Simple Play:

- Roll the rings on the ground. (*Ring. It's rolling.*)
- Your child can watch you put the rings on the pole and help choose which ring to put on next.
- After all of the rings are on the pole, you can pull the pole up vertically so that the rings are left standing in a tower. Your child can then have fun knocking them over! (*You crashed the tower. It came down*)
- Pull the pole off the base, flip it upside down, and watch the rings spin down and fall on the floor. (*They came off.*)
- As the rings are spinning down, you and your child can flick them to make them go faster. (*The rings are spinning. They are going fast!*)

Combination Play:

- Have your child put the rings on the pole and watch them spin down. You can always provide hand-over-hand help if needed. (*The ring is on. It's on the pole.*)
- Thread the rings through a piece of cloth, such as a blanket. (*You're pulling the blanket. It came through.*)

Spray Bottle



Spray bottles can make a novel toy and a fun activity for children that like to play with water. You can find small plastic ones for a couple dollars at most grocery stores or pharmacies. They will work across several levels of play and you can use it as an opportunity to model some great language (suggestions listed in parentheses below).

Note: if you are going to re-purpose a bottle you already have, make sure it's one that is only used for water.

Simple Play:

- Fill up the bottle with water. You can help your child hold the open bottle under the faucet, dunk it in a bucket, or practice their fine motor skills of pouring from a cup. (*The bottle is full.*)
- Spray your child's hand lightly with water. If they enjoy it, try spraying other body parts. If you pause between spraying they can request continuation of the game by pointing to or holding up the next body part they want sprayed. (*Your hand is wet. I sprayed your belly!*)
- Help your child take a turn to spray the water on you. (*We're spraying the water. My face is wet!*)
- Spray a sponge or wash cloth and watch as it gets wetter. Squeeze it out and start again. (*The sponge is very wet. It's dripping. You squeezed the sponge. The water came out.*)

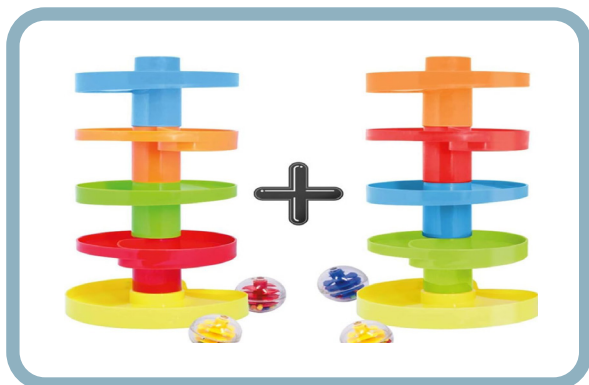
Pre Symbolic Play:

- Incorporate the spray bottle into a pretend washing routine. First, spray a toy animal or figure with water, pretend to wash them with a washcloth or rag, rinse, and then dry them off. You can use a toy bathtub or even a Tupperware. Incorporate shaving cream or foaming soap to make it extra fun!
- Give your child a spray bottle and a rag and have them help you pretend to clean (or maybe actually clean!) surfaces around the house. They can even help you water your plants!

Symbolic Play:

- Pretend a dollhouse or building they made from magnet tiles or blocks is on fire. Drive a firetruck over and use the spray bottle as a hose to put out the fire.
- Set up a pretend car wash! You can use streamers or a duster for the brushes, the spray bottle for the rinse, and a hair dryer for the dry stage, and a towel for the buffing.
- Spray water into the air and pretend it's raining! Time to get out the rain gear!

Stacking Ball Ramp



Get the toy [here](#)

This is a classic go-to toy for children playing at simple and combination levels. It can serve as an “entry level” toy for children who are just becoming interested in toys.

For children with autism, this toy offers both sensory components (spinning, dropping, rattling) and combination elements (stacking, dropping in), which can help this toy serve as a bridge from repetitive and sensory play to more functional toy play.

Simple Play:

- Drop balls down the ramp. The youngest of players may enjoy simply watching you drop the balls. You can also help your child play with this toy by helping him drop the balls down the ramp with hand over hand assistance. (*Ball. It's going down.*)
- Shake the balls like a rattle. (*We're shaking the balls.*)

Combination Play:

- Stack the pieces into a tower with your child. (*The piece is on. It's a tower.*)
- Pull the tower apart piece by piece. (*You pulled the piece. It came off.*)
- Combine stacking and dropping into a two-step game. Stack the pieces into a tower and then drop the balls down. After you have dropped all the balls, pull the pieces apart and then you can build them again!
- Bring over additional containers to drop the balls into, shake, and dump out (shoe box, salad spinner, dump truck). (*They're in the truck. They came out.*)
- Although a bit cumbersome, some matchbox cars can manage to fit through the holes and roll down the ramp.
- For a bit more advanced play, your child may enjoy building a corral or wall out of blocks to keep the balls in the area after they come down the ramp.

Stacking Ice Cream



Get the toy [here](#)

Whether it's the delicious treat or the toy variety, ice cream is a hit with almost every kid. Suggestions for words and phrases you can say while playing are in *italics*. Please see the [guidelines page](#) to learn more about the different play levels and, as always, get creative and follow your child's lead!

Simple Play:

- You stack the ice cream and have your child pull the scoops off the top one at a time. (*It came off.*)
- You nest the ice cream into a tall stack and have your child knock it down. (*The ice cream fell down.*)

Combination Play:

- Stack the ice cream on top of each other until it's a tall tower. Switch the scoops between your cone and your child's cone. (*We're switching the ice cream.*)
- Drop the scoops into a big bowl, stir them around with a big spoon, and then dump them out. (*It's in. We're stirring the ice cream. The ice cream came out.*)

Pre Symbolic Play:

- Build the ice cream cones and pretend to take a big lick. Try each other's cones and decide which flavor tastes the best. (*You licked my cone. The ice cream is yummy!*)
- Feed the ice cream to a puppet or have the puppet sneak over and steal a scoop off the top. (*The dog is hungry. He's eating ice cream. He ate it all!*)
- Pretend to cook the ice cream in a toy oven (or box)! (*The ice cream is cold. It's in the microwave. It's cooking. It's getting hot. Uh oh, the ice cream melted!*)

Symbolic Play:

- Pretend to have an ice cream store. Come in and request different flavor combinations or scoop amounts from your child. Then switch roles and have your child practice ordering.
- Who says the scoops have to be ice cream? Turn them upside down and pretend they are boats or planes. Put a little person or animal figure in the hole and have them sail down a river or fly through the air.

Tape



To adults a roll of tape can seem about as ho-hum as it gets, but for a toddler it is exciting stuff. Tape is sticky, makes cool noises when it's pulled off, and can be rolled across the floor. You can find a list of general play strategies [here](#) to help you discover what level of play your child is currently enjoying. Included in *italics* are words and sentences to use while playing.

Simple Play:

- Roll the tape across the floor back and forth to one another. (*Tape. The tape is rolling.*)
- Send the roll of tape down a ramp, such as a hard cover book or puzzle back. (*It went down. It's under the couch.*)
- Pull the tape off the roll. (*You pulled it. The tape came off.*)
- Rip the tape and make a tape ball. (*You ripped the tape. We're making a ball. You're squeezing it. The ball is squishy.*)
- Spin the tape roll when it's standing up on its side. (*The tape is spinning.*)

Combination Play:

- Give your child pieces of tape to stick on a piece of paper. (*The tape is sticky. We're pushing it. It's on the paper.*)
- Use the roll of tape as a basketball hoop and toss or drop anything through it, such as balls (even balls of tape!), puzzle pieces, plastic food, pretend people or animals, anything you have around and your child likes! (*The ball went in!*)

Pre Symbolic Play:

- Use tape to help secure a pretend cloth diaper (paper towel or tissues work well) on a baby doll. (*The diaper is on the baby.*)
- Create roads for toy cars with painters tape on the floor, connecting different houses or toy sets. (*The car is on the road.*)

Symbolic Play:

- Tape can serve as a pretend band-aid while playing doctor. You can use a sock as a puppet doctor, or you and your child can take turns playing the doctor. Talk about body parts as you give each other tape band-aids for all of your pretend scrapes and bruises.

Toilet Paper Tubes



Wait! Don't throw away that toilet paper tube! Save those tubes from the trash can and repurpose them into a great toy, no DIY crafting necessary. You can find a list of general play strategies [here](#) to help you discover what level of play your child is currently enjoying. Included in *italics* are a variety of words and sentence ideas to use while playing.

Simple Play:

- Roll the tubes across the table, down a ramp (overturnd books, puzzles, and baking sheets all make great ramps), or back and forth. (*It's rolling. It went down. We're pushing it.*)
- Play a game of peek-a-boo while looking through the tube. (*You're under the blanket. You're hiding. I found you!*)
- Stand a tube up on top of your head and let your child knock it down. (*It fell down.*)

Combination Play:

- Set up an array of tubes and encourage your child to knock them over bowling-style with a ball. (*Ball. The ball is rolling. It crashed. The tubes fell down.*)
- If you have some yarn or other long string, you can thread the tubes like beads onto the string. (*String. We're pulling the string.*)
- Stack the tubes into a pyramid and have fun crashing them over. (*A tower. The tower came down.*)

Pre Symbolic Play:

- Tubes can serve as either tunnels or garages for small cars. (*It's a garage. The car is inside. It's parked. It's a tunnel. The car drove through the tunnel.*)
- Pretend to drink from the tubes like cups. (*I poured the juice. We're drinking.*)

Symbolic Play:

- Pretend that the tubes are houses for little people or animals. You can cut out doors and make a little neighborhood of houses.
- Pretend that the tubes are rockets and have fun blasting them off into outer space.

Toy Sink



Get the toy [here](#)

Toys that incorporate real water can be extra exciting for little ones, and this pretend sink can be fun for children at all different levels of play. Please see the [guidelines page](#) to learn more about the different play levels and, as always, get creative and follow your child's lead! Don't forget to think about the language you're modeling for them. We give you some suggestions in *italics*.

Simple Play:

- Have your child help you pour water into the bottom before you play. (*Water. We poured it in. The sink is full.*)
- Turn the knobs on the stove for a fun clicking noise. (*You're turning the knob.*)
- Drop the dishes in the sink and splash around. (*The dishes are in. We're splashing. I got wet!*)
- Fill a cup with water and then dump it out. Or practice pouring between two cups. (*The cup is full. Now it's empty. We're pouring.*)

Combination Play:

- Try grabbing items out of the sink with the tongs. This can be harder than it looks! (*You picked it up! Oh no, it came out.*)
- Fill the sink with small blocks and scoop them out with the cup or pan. (*The blocks are in. The sink is full. It's in the pan.*)

Pre Symbolic Play:

- Pretend to drink out of the cup even if there isn't water in there! (*We're drinking.*)
- Pretend to eat using the plates and the silverware. (*You're eating. I'm hungry too.*)
- Pretend to stir with a spoon in the cup or the spatula in the pan. (*A spatula. I'm stirring the eggs.*)

Symbolic Play:

- Your child has watched you wash the dishes, and now it's their turn! Pretend to squeeze some soap in, give them a sponge and a dish towel, and they are ready to wash. (*The soap is in the water. The plates are dirty. We're washing them. The plates are wet.*)
- The sink doesn't have to be reserved for dishes. Turn it into a bathtub for their dolls, little animals, or cars. (*The car drove through mud. It's dirty. You're washing the car. The car is clean.*)



****** Our research group has not accepted any monetary incentives for our recommendations