

## Fill the Day With Play

We know children love to play—they would play from sunup to sundown, with short breaks to eat and sleep, if they had their way. We've heard over and over from brilliant psychologists and teachers such as Jean Piaget and Maria Montessori that play is a child's work. We understand that it's critically important to their healthy development, and we've begun to accept the fact that children not only enjoy play but learn through play. The days of thinking that children should be engaged in paper-and-pencil tasks in order to be learning are disappearing. 

The question, then, for parents is, what types of toys create the most learning? What's the best environment for play? What's the parent's role in play? And how do families make time for play when days are filled with so many things to do?

Most parents have had the unpleasant experience of choosing toys that are ignored. The old joke of children being more interested in the box than the toy is still around because it is quite often true.

The high-tech magazine *Wired* recently published "The 5 Best Toys of All Time." Here is their list:

- 1. Sticks
- 2. Boxes
- 3. String
- 4. Cardboard Tubes
- 5. Dirt

It's surprising at first, until you realize that you have watched your child spend hours turning boxes into castles and cars, or using them as building blocks or treasure boxes. And how many kids have turned sticks into forts, swords, fishing poles, writing instruments, telescopes, and baseball bats?

Children increase their ability to socialize with others, imagine, solve problems, and interpret the world while engaging in the wonderful world of play. As their child's first teacher, parents have the awesome but fun responsibility of providing the right toys, space, and opportunities to explore, create, and learn.

**The best toys are those that offer many possibilities—they're open-ended, meaning they can be played with in a number of ways.** Dolls and stuffed animals fit into this category. Children cuddle, sleep, feed, dress, and bathe them. One child might set up a doll hospital, another might play house, and still another might think of a doll as a trusted friend. Blocks also fit into this category. They can be stacked and transported. They're excellent for counting, categorizing, and, of course, constructing.

Dramatic or pretend play helps children try on new roles. What does a firefighter do? What about a ballerina? Props for this favorite pastime can be found all around the house.

Choosing age-appropriate toys is often challenging. A toddler has enough problems with walking. If he's



given a remote control car to operate with his limited motor skills, it will be disappointing. And if creating jewelry sounds fascinating to you but your child is more interested in learning how to play soccer, your best bet is to go with soccer. It's great to expose children to all sorts of new things, but if toys are neglected, choose another toy that will be met with more enthusiasm.

Spaces for play are also important. Art takes some preplanning, or else the creative talent on the loose may lead to disaster. Some questions to ask: Are there quiet spaces for reading and writing? Are dress-up clothes and musical instruments accessible? Are there spaces outside for sand and water play, wagons, bikes, and nature exploration?

Reflect on what types of toys and play experiences brought you joy when you were a child. Chances are, things haven't changed all that much, and you might even find yourself back to some basics, such as sticks, boxes, string, cardboard tubes, and dirt.

# PERSONAL PARENTING

## Stay Connected

- Separation moments can creep up on kids during the day. Chase away the blues with these ideas.
- Send a picture of the family to school or child care. Whenever your child misses you, he can take a peek.

- Kiss the palm of your child's hand. When she's feeling lonesome, she can put her hand to her cheek and feel your love.
- Pack a little love note in your child's lunch or backpack. Now that's a welcome surprise!

## Baby Love, Oh Baby Love

Babies have quite a task for their first year or two of life. They have to learn how to trust. When they cry, someone pays attention. When they get picked up, they know they're in secure hands. If they're dirty, someone gives them a refreshing bath. And those dirty diapers get changed over and over again!

"When a baby looks into a caregiver's face—that person's, that mother's, that father's—it's the map of that child's world. And if those maps are always changing, that world can become very frightening." Fred Rogers



## Coconut Banana Bites

This is a kid-friendly recipe that children can help with from start to finish.

### Ingredients:

- 1 orange
- 2 medium bananas
- Shredded coconut

### Directions:

Squeeze the juice from the orange into a small bowl. Peel the bananas and cut them into bite-size chunks. Spread the coconut onto waxed paper. Using a fork, dip the banana bites into the orange juice and roll in coconut. **Delicious!**

## PAPER PLATE PLAY

Use your imagination and let your child help! It's amazing what can be made from this simple, inexpensive item found in most kitchens.

### • Paper Plate Tambourine

Make a tambourine by placing a handful of rice or dried beans in the middle of two paper plates. Staple the plates together around the edges, then tape the edges to make them snag-proof.

### • Paper Plate Weaving

Let children punch holes in a paper plate in random order. Give them a bobby pin laced with yarn and let them create original designs. In and out, round about—this is a super activity for small muscles.

### • Paper Plate Masks

Make a mask from a paper plate by simply gluing on or drawing a few facial features, cutting out holes for the eyes, and adding yarn for hair. The mask can be glued to a popsicle stick or strung with yarn on each side and tied around the head.

## Brain Building

Listening to classical music early in life exercises the same neurons used for mathematical and spatial reasoning later in life. Enrich your children's lives and stimulate brains by listening to some great music.



# Winter Reading

**T**here's something about winter that invites children and adults to curl up and read. And the adventure starts with a great book. But there are so many books—how do you select just the right one? Reading Rockets ([readingrockets.org](http://readingrockets.org)) is a great place to begin. It's a huge site that includes everything from interviews with authors to book lists according to age and interests.



## **SNOW** by Uri Shulevitz

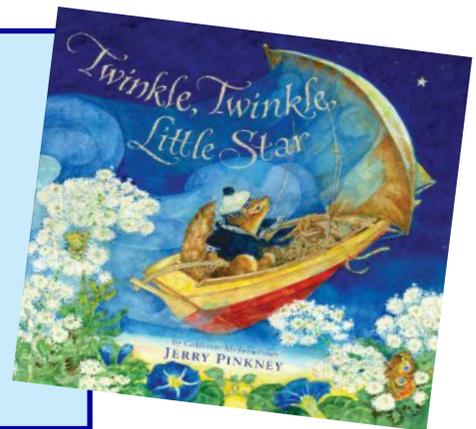
"It's snowing," said boy with dog.  
"It's only a snowflake," said grandfather with beard.  
One or two snowflakes won't amount to anything, right? People simply aren't paying attention to a snowflake here and a snowflake there. Except for one little boy and his dog. They have faith that the swirling flakes will add up to something magical!



**THE MITTEN**, adapted and illustrated by Jan Brett. As this beloved Ukrainian tale unfolds, Nicki drops the white mitten his grandma has knitted in the snow. He doesn't know it's missing, but the animals do, and one by one, woodland animals crawl in—among them, a mole, a rabbit, a badger, an owl, and, finally, a huge brown bear and a tiny, tiny mouse. What happens next is a loud surprise! Let children act out this story by printing out adorable animal masks from this Web site:

[www.janbrett.com/mitten\\_masks\\_main.htm](http://www.janbrett.com/mitten_masks_main.htm)

**TWINKLE, TWINKLE, LITTLE STAR**, by Jerry Pinkney. A Caldecott Medal winner for *The Lion & The Mouse*, Jerry Pinkney knows how to paint whimsical, magical pictures that stay in your mind long after the book is closed. And this is exactly the result you want when you're putting your little one to bed. In this book, children follow a little chipmunk's travels from a bird's nest to a lush pond as he sails through the soothing starlit sky. When paging through this amazing book, you'll notice a few pages that have no words. This leaves a perfect opportunity for little ones to gaze to their heart's content at the exquisite artwork. Sweet dreams!



**FORGET-ME-NOTS: POEMS TO LEARN BY HEART**, selected by Mary Ann Hoberman, illustrated by Michael Emberley. This anthology, selected by a former children's poet laureate, will get you moving in the right direction if you love to hear your children recite a poem or two. Favorite poems by Emily Dickinson, Shel Silverstein, Robert Frost, Aileen Fisher, Ogden Nash, and others are included. Of course, you won't be able to resist "The Llama Who Had No Pajama" by Mary Ann Hoberman herself.