

Games to play with toddler

Learn to engage your toddler in safe and fun independent play. Useful ideas for parents with 2 and 3 year olds.

A toddler's natural curiosity, intense involvement in her surroundings, and short attention span combine to make child care a high-energy job. While most parents are capable of meeting the challenge under ordinary circumstances, it becomes more difficult when they have to divide their attention between their child and other responsibilities. But with a little creativity, most two and three year olds can be entertained for short periods of time with only minimal adult intervention.

Admittedly, toddlers need a great deal of supervision and interaction. It isn't possible or desirable to impose a degree of independence on them before they are ready. However, toddlers have already begun developing the capacity to enjoy their own company for short periods of time. Provided that the environment is safe and a parent is nearby (i.e., Mom is working on the computer while her child plays in another part of the room), young children can be kept happy with minimal input. Here, then, are some tips for keeping little ones happy on your busiest days.

--First, prepare the area where you need to work. If you haven't done so already, child proof the room. Install safety plugs in electrical outlets; make sure cords from blinds and draperies are well out of reach; close and lock windows to prevent falling; move heavy items that could fall or be pulled down from shelves, counters, dressers, and desks; and be sure that any poisonous, sharp, hot or otherwise potentially lethal items have been removed from the area.

--Provide objects to play in. Several boxes in varying sizes will provide unlimited play possibilities. Be sure no box is too big for your child to climb into. If he can be trusted with a crayon, allow him to decorate the box when he begins to tire of playing in it.

--If you're working in the kitchen, empty one of the cabinets under the counter. Young children enjoy hiding things there, then retrieving their treasures. Some even climb inside to play hide and seek – but make sure the area is free from sharp objects and can be opened easily from inside if a child is going to play there.

--Construct a tent with chairs and a sheet in the room where you will be working. Then, one at a time, offer the child objects to use in the

tent. When she tires of her book, for example, tell her it's time for the teddy bear to take a nap in the tent, and let her tuck him in. When she next tires of the game, offer her a juice box and tell her it's snack time in the tent.

--Spread a plastic tablecloth on the floor and provide homemade play dough and plastic cookie cutters. Have several colors available, but offer only one at a time. When your tot tires of the first color, take it back and replace it excitedly with another.

--Keep containers of trinkets, knickknacks and do-dads. Give your child one of the boxes to explore. He will take each item out of the box, examine it and experiment with possible uses. Be careful to include only items that have no small parts that could choke a tot who still puts things in his mouth.

--Stock up on board books when they're on sale, and introduce a new one to hold your toddler's interest. Try to have a few minutes to spare when you do, so you can read the book together first.

--Plan periodic breaks, and spend this time giving your full attention to your child. Be flexible. Some children need more interaction than others, so let her cues be your guide.

--Have several small snacks ready if your child is a frequent eater. Prepare paper bags or plastic containers of raisins, pretzels, dried fruit, or other healthy treats. This will save you from having to stop in the middle of something if your child decides he is hungry.

The toddler years are a challenging time for most parents. With forethought, however, you can help your child learn to enjoy her limited independence, while finding much-needed opportunities to tend to your other responsibilities.