

Learn at Home

Early Childhood Instructional Resources

Children love to play—anytime, anywhere, and with almost anything. As they play, they’re learning about the world around them and practicing important skills. To support their play, early childhood programs typically arrange their spaces into learning areas or centers. The following activity suggestions are also organized around these same learning areas. Additionally, these activities are similar to the type of activities your child does in their early childhood program and are aligned to the Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework, the New York State Prekindergarten Foundation for the Common Core as well as the New York State Prekindergarten Learning Standards.

Pick activities from each area according to the materials you have available and the interests of your child. Many of these activities include a range of suggested materials. If you do not have the suggested materials, look around your home for similar materials that may also work. In addition to the activities suggested here, your child’s favorite toys, games, and books likely also offer many opportunities for learning, especially when you play and talk with them. By talking with your child as you play, and engaging in back and forth conversations, you are supporting the development of many important skills (e.g. vocabulary development, communication skills, listening skills, social emotional skills, and critical thinking skills). ***Always feel free to use any language your family speaks when talking and playing with your child as this supports later learning in any language.***

The activities in this document are intended to be fun and engaging. Some of them are designed to be implemented over the course of many days. Your child may also want to repeat some of the activities. Young children enjoy doing things they like many times. If possible, keep materials you use available to your child and feel free to revisit them often.

Children thrive on routines. Following a predictable routine is a helpful way for children to feel safe and know what is expected of them (e.g. washing hands before breakfast, reading a book before nap, or playing outside after lunch). Routines help you and your child move confidently through the day and encourages positive behavior. At the same time, be flexible and responsive to your children’s needs. You know your child best!

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Blocks/Construction

Build Together. Use the materials you have available to build a structure together. For example, you might use blocks, connecting blocks (e.g. Duplos, Legos), cardboard boxes, pots and pans, cups, recycled materials or other household items to build. As you build, talk about the process as well as the structure. If desired, use paper to add labels or additional details to the structure. If possible/desired, your child may want to leave the structure up even when they seem finished working. They may want to return to the structure later to continue building or playing.

Draw and Build. Look outside with your child at the area near where you live. Select a building or structure that looks interesting to both of you. Draw a picture of the building/structure together. Talk about what you see as you draw together. Hang the picture at your child's eye level, or place it on the floor near where you will build, and then use materials you have available to build the building/structure together. For example, you might use blocks, connecting blocks (e.g. Duplos, Legos), cardboard boxes, pots and pans, cups, or other household items to build together.

Pick a Number. Add an element of challenge to the building experience by picking a specific number of blocks to build with. For example, you might pick the number five and challenge your child to build a building/structure with five blocks/building materials. Repeat with various numbers. If desired/possible, children may want to leave the structures up and make comparisons between them (e.g. which is taller/tallest? Shorter/shortest? Etc.).

Dramatic Play

Play Store. Gather objects to buy and sell and take on roles of cashier and customer. Discuss what the customer is buying and why, how many items they are buying as well as how much the items cost individually and together.

Taking Care. Take care of a doll or stuffed animal together. If you do not have a doll or stuffed animal, look for household items you could use to create one such as stuffing a paper bag or a sock with soft materials and adding details with a marker. Work together to care for the doll. Consider pretending to feed it, give it a bath, put it to sleep, etc.

Faces and Feelings. Look at pictures of people in magazines or books together. Invite your child to look carefully at the expressions on the people's faces. Ask your child to share why they think the person might feel that way, if they ever feel that way themselves, and when. After discussing the expressions, you and your child may want to make the same expressions yourselves. Consider doing this activity near a mirror so children can see the expressions they create.

Let's Eat. Pretend to eat together in a pretend restaurant, at a tea party, or create a pretend picnic together. Think with your child about what items you will need and work together to find or make them. After setting up the play scene, pretend to eat with your child.

Take a Trip. Take a pretend trip with your child. Consider where you will go, how you will get there, and how you feel about going on this trip together. Work together to find or make the things you need for your trip. After preparing for your trip, pretend to go on the trip together.

Empty Box. If available, provide an empty cardboard box big enough for your child to sit in. Invite your child to use their imagination to turn the box into something else. If desired, they could also decorate the box. Celebrate all of their ideas and engage in imaginative play with them around their ideas.

Art

Recycled Materials. Save reusable materials such as empty cardboard boxes and clean plastic containers. Use these containers to make various creations with your child such as the buildings in your neighborhood, cars, trains or other objects your child enjoys.

Draw Together. If you have paper or another surface for drawing (e.g. cardboard box) and writing/drawing tools such as a pen, pencil, crayons, or markers draw together. Create anything you want, and then make up a story together about what you drew.

Create a Mural. Consider taking apart a large cardboard box, several smaller boxes, or using pieces of paper and attaching them together. You could use tape, glue, staples, or other materials you have on hand to secure the pieces together. Use any writing or drawing tools you have available such as pens, pencils, markers, crayons, or paint to create a picture. Invite family members to join in the fun.

Draw a Family Picture. Think of the people who are important to you and your child and draw each of them together in a picture. Consider adding people's names to the picture as well and hanging the picture where you live.

Then and Now. Compare and contrast a baby picture of your child with how the child looks now, highlighting how the child has changed since they were a baby. Use the baby picture to create a drawing of your child as a baby or use materials you have available to create a representation of your child when they were a baby. If you do not have a baby picture of your child, discuss how your child has changed in the past few years and create an image together without referencing an actual photograph.

Shakers. Make shakers with your child out of empty water bottles or other containers. After finding a good container, think about what materials to add to make noise. Consider trying water, beads, other small objects, or anything you can find! Which material is loudest? Quietest? Work with your child to describe the sounds each shaker makes. For an extra challenge, try putting them in order from quietest to loudest.

Science/Discovery

Breathe. Place a light object (e.g. cotton ball, feather, piece of paper, round pencil, small ball, etc.) on one end of a table and see if you and your child can blow it to the other side. Repeat with other objects of differing weights.

Shadows. Turn out the lights and use a lamp or flashlight (or the light on your mobile device) to make shadows on a wall or floor. Move your bodies or hands closer to and further from the light and note what happens. Think with your child about other ways you might create shadows too.

I Spy. Look outside and note a few things you see. Make a list or draw pictures of these objects (e.g. I see birds flying in the sky). This activity could also be done inside.

Ramps. If available, use a cardboard tube (e.g. paper towel tube) or a flat surface such as a book, to create a ramp. Invite your child to tilt the ramp to various angles and roll a small toy car, ball, or other round object through the tube/down the ramp. Talk with your child about how quickly/slowly the objects roll depending on how they angle it.

Toys and Games/Math Manipulatives

How Many Steps to the Door? Invite your child to guess how many steps they will need to take to get to a specific place such as a door. After they have made a prediction, invite them to walk to the specified place. Help count the steps as needed. Substitute another location such as a window or bathroom for the door.

Practice Measuring. Measure and cut a piece of string or ribbon as long as your child's arm. Invite them to look for objects that are the same length as this piece of string then compare the string to each object. Consider making a string as long as your own arm too and doing this activity with your child.

Find Shapes. Notice the shape of objects around you. Ask your child to find and count the sides and angles and then name the shape.

Collections. Invite your child to collect various items such as lids from jars/containers, or look around your home for items to create a collection such as items of a specific color, or pebbles from the park. Explore the materials with your child and use them to practice sorting and counting.

Laundry. Have your child help with the laundry. They can sort and count clothing items, look for matching socks, or count items in a folded pile.

Scavenger Hunt. Invite your child to look around the place you live for objects you and your child use to take care of yourselves. For example, you might use specific items to care for your hair, soap to wash your hands, etc. After creating a small collection of objects, count them with your child. If desired, use pictures or words to create a numbered list of items.

Patterns. Clap a simple pattern, and invite your child to clap it back to you (e.g. two slow claps followed by 3 faster claps). Take turns creating the pattern.

Sensory

Water Play. Play with water with your child. Fill a container with water (e.g. sink, bathtub, or other container) and add various cups and scoops such as spoons or toys that encourage dramatic play (i.e. toy boats) and engage in water play together.

What Happens? Investigate what happens when objects are placed in water. Collect several objects, discuss what might happen when you place each one in water, and test your ideas by placing the objects in water one at a time and discussing what occurred.

Bath Play. Sing together during bath time to help your child remember new words and practice rhyming. Sing a song you know, in any language. Also consider asking your child to teach you a song they sing at school.

Library

Read a Book. Read and re-read your child's favorite books in any language your family speaks. If you do not have any books, you can create books together by writing down the words to stories you created together and working together to add illustrations.

Tell a story. Share a favorite story you already know, or create a new story with your child. The story can be about anything! For example, you might retell something that actually happened, or make up a story together.

And Then... Take turns imagining what comes next in a story. Start a story, then pass it to your child to determine what comes next with a line such as, "and then..." You and your child can pass the story back and forth until it comes to an end.

Clouds. Look out the window with your child and discuss the clouds. Take turns telling stories about the shapes of clouds to help your child use their imagination and express ideas in words. "That cloud looks like a cat! What do you see?"

Sing and Rhyme. Sing songs and play rhyming word games with your child.

Read Everything. Note the words you see wherever you are. For example, you might point out street signs, labels, and even cereal boxes you and your child see as you spend the day together.

Today. Ask your child to draw pictures of what they did today. Ask them to tell you about the picture and add their words to the picture. Do this daily. Keep the pictures and combine them to make a book.

What comes next? Begin singing your child's favorite song or nursery rhyme. Sing the first line and then pause. Invite your child to sing the next line. Continue with this back and forth pattern throughout the entire rhyme or song.

Stories. Share a story with your child about something from their past. Among other things, this could be a story about the first time your child did something new, a funny story about an experience or a time when your child made you proud.

Writing and Language Development

Talk. Talk to your child in the language you are most comfortable with. After you say something to your child, pause so they can respond. Research shows that back and forth conversations can help children develop larger vocabularies.

Morning news. When you start your day, make a plan for what you and your child will do together. Jot these things down in a list. Check off each item as you complete it.

Letter Hunt. Look for letters where you live. Point them out to your child. Pay special attention to letters that are especially relevant to your child such as the first letter of their name as well as those of close family and friends.

Listen. Invite your child to be very quiet and use their ears for listening. What sounds are in the room? What sounds do we hear outside if we open the window? Can we stay totally quiet for 10 seconds and listen? For 20 seconds? For 60?! Describe the sounds you hear – like beeping cars, vrooming buses, and barking dogs – to help your child learn new words to describe the world.

Take a Look. Invite your child to look outside of the window at the neighborhood with you. What do you notice? Describe what you both see.

Pictures. Look at a few pictures of people you and your child care about (either prints or on a mobile device). Point out things you notice in the pictures and invite your child to do the same. In addition to noting things in the picture, invite your child to tell you about these people.

Make a Menu. Share with your child a list of the foods you are serving for a meal. Invite your child to draw these items to create a menu. Add the words that match the pictures below each picture. If your child is ready, they can do their own writing. Celebrate any mark your child makes. Marks, scribbles, and creative spelling are all essential steps in learning to write.

I Love You. Talk with your child about things you do to show that you love each other. Draw pictures or use words to create a description.

Lines. Invite your child to experiment with drawing lines with you. Begin drawing and note the types of lines you are making, the types of lines your child is making, and how they can make the lines change. For example, you could start with a straight line, and then change it to a zigzag or curvy line. You could also experiment with changing the writing instrument, or the amount of pressure used on the writing instrument to change the lines.

Keep a Journal. Talk with your child about the activities they did each day. At the end of the day take a few minutes to reflect using open-ended questions such as, “What did you like best?”

Why? Was anything difficult or challenging? Why?" Jot down your child's thoughts about these activities and invite them to add pictures to the journal as well.

Write a Letter. Invite your child to write a letter to someone. They can draw pictures to create the letter, use their own writing, or share their words with you and you can write for them. If your child chooses to write on their own, celebrate any mark they make. Marks, scribbles, and creative spelling are all essential steps in learning to write. If possible, share the letter with the person your child wrote to.

Cooking and Mixing

Meal Prep. Invite your child to prepare a meal or snack with you. As you work together, talk about what happens as you mix and stir ingredients.

Cook and Count. Invite your child to prepare food with you. As you work together, count the number of items you use.

Snack Counter. Count the number of items available at snack or meal time. As your child eats, talk about how many items they have eaten and how many items are left.

Ingredients:

2 cups white flour

2 cups water

½ cup salt

¼ cup cream of tartar

2 tbsp. vegetable oil

Food coloring (if desired)

Directions:

Heat all ingredients over medium heat, stirring constantly, until they come together and take on the familiar consistency of play dough. Dump the dough on foil or wax paper and let it cool slightly until it is cool enough to touch.

Store playdough in an airtight container.

Playdough. If the materials are available, make playdough with your child. Playdough can be used repeatedly.

Family Favorites. Invite your child to cook a favorite family meal with you. As you cook together, talk about the recipe, the ingredients, and the directions. You may also want to talk about why your family enjoys this meal.

Music and Movement

Mouth Music. Invite your child to explore different sounds you can make with our mouths. You might sing, hum, pop your lips, etc. Ask your child to note how it feels to make each type of sound.

Family Favorites. Invite your child to listen to some of your family's favorite music. Find a song that each family member loves and listen to a recording of it.

Cultural Music. Share your family's cultural music with your child. Does this music include any special instruments from your heritage, religious practice, or community? Invite your child to listen for these instruments or sounds.

Water Xylophone. Fill a few drinking glasses with differing amounts of water. Use a spoon to gently tap them. What do you and your child notice about the sounds? Try to play a little tune together.

Kitchen Band. Use pots and pans, containers, or another surface to create kitchen drums. Tap on them with your hands or an object. Invite your child to suggest songs to sing, or to create new songs with you.

Dance. Invite your child to dance with you. Play an assortment of music practice really feeling the music and moving with it. Is the music fast or slow? How does the music make you feel? Happy? Sad? Excited? Energized?

Homemade Instruments. Think about the materials you have available and the ways you could use them to make music. For example, a paper-towel roll with holes poked in it can be a flute, spoons taped together can be chimes. Play with sounds, and use your voices to sing along.

Freeze Dance. Play a favorite song and play freeze dance together. When the music is on, dance or move together. When you stop the music, everyone must freeze! Take turns being the one to turn the music on and off.

Outdoors/Gross Motor

Faster and Slower. Invite your child to explore how they can change speed as they move. For example, they may try moving quickly, then change their speed and move slowly.

Move Your Body. Invite your child to explore different ways they can move their body. For example, can they walk, run, hop, skip, jump, or shuffle?

Stretch. Put some soft music on and invite your child to stretch their body. Can you stretch up tall like a tree? Can you twist to one side? How about the other? Can you hang down low to the ground?

Activities for Infants and Toddlers

Color: Hang or place paper or another surface for marking such as a piece of cardboard on the floor. Supply drawing tools such as markers or crayons and allow the child to explore making marks on the paper. Talk to your child about the types of marks they are making on the paper.

What Do You See? Take a walk and talk about the things you and your child see. Talk about the objects, colors, sizes, shapes, etc. of the things you see.

Mirrors: Bring your child over to a mirror and talk together about what you see in the mirror. Notice each other and other objects you see in the mirror, and name what you see. Invite your child to find objects or parts of their body in the mirror.

Dump and Fill: Offer your child a box and a variety of small but safe household objects. Observe what they do with them and use words to describe what they are doing. Extend your child's play by demonstrating different ways to place items in and out of the box, or filling and dumping it.

Hidden Objects: Show your child a toy they enjoy. Then place a small blanket or piece of cloth over the toy to hide it. Cover the toy and say, "Where did it go?" Give your child 5 seconds to attempt to remove the blanket. If they are successful, try with two objects and two cloths. If your child is older, hide an object somewhere in the room while they close their eyes. Give them hints while they search for it.

Textures: Gently stroke your child with different textured fabric pieces (clothes and accessories work!). Attend to their reactions and tell them when they seem to be indicating their likes and dislikes. Use words to describe the textures, colors, sizes, and shapes of the fabric. Invite the child to explore the fabrics with their hands, too.

Clothing: Bring out clothing of different sizes and encourage your child to try on the different articles of clothing. Talk about whether the clothing fits, is too big or too small.

Peek-A-Boo: Sit on the floor facing your child, cover your face and play peek-a-boo with them. If the child is interested, let them lead the play.

Water Play: In a bathtub or sink, provide your child with materials that they can fill and pour such as, cups, bowls, and plastic containers. Add some water and encourage your child to explore filling and pouring.

Building: Using any building toys or materials that are available, build with your child and encourage them to knock down the structure. If you do not have blocks or other infant/toddler toys for building, try using cups, plastic containers, or recyclable materials such as boxes or empty containers. If your child is unable to build, make a small structure and encourage them to knock it over.

Additional Information

Self-Care Tips for Families and Caregivers

When you take time to care for yourself, you are better able to care for your child. Even a few minutes of “you time” can help you to recharge so that you can be your best.

- Listen to music as you’re doing chores around the house.
- Set an alarm to remind yourself to pause, take a deep breath, or use a calming meditation app. Even 2 minutes of relaxation can make a difference in how you feel.
- Make sure you’re getting enough sleep. When your little one lays down to rest, try to do the same. If they’re having trouble settling down, sing a quiet song that you loved when you were small, one that calms you down, too.
- Take a ten-minute vacation. As you’re bathing your child, soak your hands in the warm water.
- Keep a favorite family photo with you. If you’re having a challenging day with your little one, you can look at it to remind you of happy times you’ve spent together.
- Reach out to others. Feeling alone is common for families and caregivers during stressful times. But you don’t have to handle them on your own. Connect with trusted family members and friends, share your feelings with them, and enlist their help.

Talking to Children about the Coronavirus

With news of the coronavirus COVID-19 everywhere, many families are wondering about how to speak with their children about the virus. Here are some tips to support conversations with your child:

- Children are likely hearing about the virus. Feel free to talk with them about it. Not talking about it may actually make them more nervous.
- Invite your child to share what they know about the coronavirus and how they are feeling.
- Give the right amount of information. Providing too much information may be scary, instead of oversharing, answer your child’s questions about the virus in a straightforward and factual manner.
- Remember that emotions are contagious. Your attitude about the coronavirus will impact how your child feels about it. If you remain calm, your child is more likely to remain calm as well.
- Empower your child with information about staying safe. Share things you are doing to stay safe as well as things they can do to avoid the virus such as washing their hands frequently and well.
- Keep the conversation going. Reassure your child they can always talk with you about what they are hearing, seeing, and feeling and that you will share with them as well.

The following resources may be helpful in talking to children about Coronavirus:

- Talking to Kids About the Coronavirus_
<https://childmind.org/article/talking-to-kids-about-the-coronavirus/>
- Talking To Children About COVID-19 (Coronavirus): A Parent Resource
[https://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources-and-podcasts/school-climate-safety-and-crisis/health-crisis-resources/talking-to-children-about-covid-19-\(coronavirus\)-a-parent-resource](https://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources-and-podcasts/school-climate-safety-and-crisis/health-crisis-resources/talking-to-children-about-covid-19-(coronavirus)-a-parent-resource)
- Talking With Children: Tips for Caregivers, Parents, and Teachers During Infectious Disease Outbreaks
<https://store.samhsa.gov/system/files/sma14-4886.pdf>