Creative Play Ideas

Water-Related Play

• Give children different temperatures or forms of water (warm, cold, ice) and use words to describe it. For example, “The ice is slippery and cold.”
• Give them simple “toys” to use in the bathtub, such as a measuring cup or funnel.
• Have them give a baby doll a bath or perhaps help wash vegetables for eating.
• Fill a dishpan or sink with water and give the child different objects to see which ones float or sink.
• Use bubbles to hide an object in the water or float boats on the surface.
• Use a sponge to soak up water and let the child discover what happens when it is squeezed.

Outings

• Visit a zoo, farm, grocery store, garden, nursery with lots of different flowers, playground, and so on. You could even read a story about such places before and after you go.
• Go for a walk around the house, around the block, in the rain, to a park, and so forth. Talk about what you see, hear, feel, smell, and so on.
• When driving, be a tour guide for your child. Describe where you are going, what you see along the way, and what you might do once you get there. You can even make going to the Laundromat an adventure.
• Get down close to the grass and look at it. Talk about the creatures you might find.
• Plant a garden. It does not have to be big, perhaps just a small container. The child can even plant seeds in a cup, but be sure the seeds go in the cup, not in the child’s mouth.
• Take a walk on bubble wrap. Talk about the sounds, the surface, and so on.
• Collect leaves, rocks, and the like on your walk. Talk about what they look like, feel like, and perhaps even sound like.
• Take a bus ride.
Creative Play Ideas

Imagination Play

Children this age should not be expected to know how to “play,” so be a role model playing alongside the child to facilitate learning.

• Have a telephone conversation using a toy phone.
• Trains and trucks are fun to drive and manipulate. Create a ramp by using a cookie sheet or cardboard or a large wrapping/mailing cardboard tube to drop objects through, such as plastic “whiffle” golf balls, trucks, or even stuffed toys. Talk about size, speed, where is it, and so forth.
• Get a large-sized box and help the child create a boat, house, cave, wagon, and so on, with it.
• Large mirrors fascinate the very young child. Allow the child to use a large safety mirror (unbreakable) to discover his or her own self and body parts as well as to see facial reactions.
• Blow feathers, leaves, scarves, or bubbles. Talk about textures and types of wind (hard, soft, strong, etc.).
• Create a flannel board by covering cardboard (8-by-11 inches or any size) with felt or flannel. You can also use the inside cover of a clean pizza box. Cut out simple shapes either free hand or using cookie cutters for outlines, and the child can create his or her own stories and learn hand-eye coordination as well. You can also mount pictures from coloring books and magazines and even photos on the felt or flannel. Store pieces in a ziplock bag or inside the pizza box.
• Make puppets using a wooden spoon as the base and decorate it with a face. You can do the same with mittens. Use craft sticks, tongue depressors, straws, or stirring sticks to create stick puppets. Simply place a sticker at one end or use a marker to draw a face on the stick. You can also mount pictures from magazines or photos on sturdy paper and then glue on one end of the stick. Larger puppets, often commercially made, are great to use with the very young child because they encourage interaction between the child and puppet, who often “talk” together without shyness.
• Play peek-a-boo. Using chiffon scarves or other see-through material, drape it over your own head and then reappear. When placing it over the child’s head, the see-through material is best because it reassures the child. Cover an object such as a stuffed toy, doll, or truck with the scarf and then make it reappear. Remember to talk about the object and what is happening.
• Play hide-and-seek. This childhood game is best when the very young child is the one who hides. You should talk while looking for the child: “Now, where is Billy? I am going to look behind the chair.” Many times, the child will pop out from the hiding place, bringing the game to a halt, but you should react with appropriate surprise and joy.
Creative Play Ideas

Language Play

• Greeting cards make wonderful activity materials. Use ones that have no small, loose pieces or glitter on them. Take a collection of cards and place them in a dishpan or box. The child will enjoy taking them out, putting them in, opening and closing them, as well as looking at them. You can create stories about the pictures or just describe what is on them. Identify objects, animals, flowers, and so forth, depicted on the cards.

• Junk mail is fun to use in activities with your child. You can talk with the child about the mail, put the mail into boxes, and sort the mail. Help create the letter-writing habit in your child by helping him or her to “write” a letter to someone and then mail it. Take the child with you throughout the process and talk about what you are doing so he or she can learn the process of getting paper, writing, addressing, and mailing the letter (post office, mailbox, etc.).

• Use plastic can covers to help the child develop eye-hand control and coordination. Using fine-motor skills, the child can pick up a can cover and place in a box or coffee can. If you make a slit or hole in the top of the container, the child can “mail” the juice cover. Children love the sound the lid makes when it is dropped in. Colorful stickers are fun to put on these juice lids, or you can use signal dots, which are available at most office supply stores. Later on, use the lids in a sorting or identification game.

• Make picture cards from index cards. Simply glue pictures on or use stickers to cover the cards and then lay them picture side down on clear contact paper. You can cover both sides of the card with clear contact paper, if so desired. Cut the cards apart and use them in the same manner as the greeting cards or juice lids.

• Make your own books. Photo albums, especially the magnetic kind, allow for pictures to be moved around and words written on the pages. Make a book about the child using photos of his or her daily routine. By placing thin cardboard in a ziplock bag, you can create two-sided pages that can then be sewn together using strong thread or yarn, making a book. This is not as sturdy as the photo album, but it will work.

• Play dress up. This does not mean you have to go out and buy these clothes. Children can be creative with scarves, hats, old slips, shoes, and the like. Don’t put out a trunk load of clothes either. Very young children do not need an unlimited number of things to select from, just a few.

• Create a play space. Small pop-up tents have become popular to use, but a sheet works just as well. Just make sure that it is draped securely over objects that will not fall over on the child and cause injuries.

• Give the child his or her own catalog to help the child practice turning pages. Repetition is an essential part of learning. It is much better to practice with an old catalog, probably ripping pages, than with a beautiful picture book.

• Look at magazines, books, and other places where words and pictures may be found with your child. Talk about what you see and give the child time to absorb as much on the page as he or she wants. Reading time may be limited to only one page, but that is how it all begins.

• Let your child handle and discover different kinds of paper. Let the child crunch it into a ball, tear it, and examine it. Use regular paper, wax paper, cardboard, newspaper, and so on.

• Music can play a large part in the language learning of children. Many rhymes and songs reflect the daily activities of a very young child. Create rhythm instruments from pots, wooden spoons, plastic bowls, empty coffee cans, and the like.

• Exercise time is a wonderful time to use language, especially songs that make the activity fun for both you and your child. Roll a ball back and forth between you and the child. Use two different-sized balls (making the size difference distinct) or different colors and talk about concepts such as bouncing and color, high, low, fast and slow, and so forth.

• When baking, read the recipe to the child and name the ingredients and utensils as you get them out. Allow the child to decorate cookies, cupcakes (mini ones are best), or graham crackers with icing, fruit jam, or peanut butter using a small plastic knife or ice cream stick.