

5 Games to Play with Toddlers (12 months)

Why is play important for babies and toddlers? It helps develop sturdy brain architecture, the foundations of lifelong health, and the building blocks of resilience.

Playful interactions with adults also help toddlers build **executive function skills**. Imitation, hiding, imaginative, and container play games, like the ones below, teach them to focus attention, use working memory, and practice basic self-control.

When you play with a baby, **follow their lead!** Play games they show an interest in and, whenever possible, let *them* determine how long to play and when to move on to something else.

1



Toddler See, Toddler Do!

Encourage a toddler to copy your actions while you play together. For example, place a few toy animals in a barnyard, some toy cars in a line, or stack some blocks and then knock them down. When baby does the same, give specific praise: “Wow! Look at that tower you built!” or “Nice work! The cars are lined up and ready to race!”

2



Explore on the Floor

It’s fun for babies to explore their surroundings, whether they are crawling, standing with support, or beginning to walk. Join a toddler for some playtime on their level, wherever that may be. Stretch out, sit down, or kneel on the floor near them and place pillows, couch cushions, or soft toys on the floor between you for “obstacles.” Now, encourage them to explore and come to you. Toddlers might climb over the cushions, stack them, carry them, or even pretend to lay down and go to sleep. It’s all play!

3



“It’s For You!”

One year olds are beginning to understand the concept of imaginary play. A simple way to encourage them is by holding a toy (or a banana, a shoe, or even just your hand) up to your ear and pretending to talk on the phone with a family member or friend. After your pretend call ends, make a ringing sound, but this time when you “answer” the phone, tell the toddler that it’s someone calling for them! Hold the “phone” up to their ear and prompt them to say “Hello” and chat away.

4



Dump and Fill

Toddlers love to put items into a container and dump them out over and over again. (You’ve probably seen a toddler empty out a laundry basket full of clean clothing or a bin full of toys that you just put away!) Encourage and redirect this fun activity by providing them with a variety of containers (such as empty mixing bowls, boxes, or baskets) and safe items to fill them up with, such as toys or socks.

5



Simple Hide and Seek

At this age, toddlers may enjoy hiding themselves and listening to you search loudly for them while they track your location mentally. Keep the game exciting by exaggerating your movements and words, looking in silly places, and narrating your search: “Where is baby? Is baby under the table? Nooo. Is baby on the ceiling? Noooo. Is baby behind the couch? Yes! I found you!”



To see more brain-building play ideas for kids of all ages, visit:

<https://developingchild.harvard.edu/brainbuildingthroughplay>

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