

BRAIN-BUILDING THROUGH PLAY

5 Games to Play with Toddlers (18 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**. Pretend play, songs, and matching 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



Just Like You!

Toddlers at this age may begin to enjoy pretend play. They may act out the behaviors and routines they see adults or siblings doing. Join them! If a toddler pretends to stir food in a bowl, say, “What are you stirring? Are you making a cake? It smells delicious! Let’s put it in the oven!” Or, if they pretend to feed a baby doll, say, “You are taking such good care of baby! Is it time to burp them?” Help encourage pretend play by giving toddlers safe objects to use—like a broom, a dust cloth, a hair brush, pots and pans, etc.

2



Making Chores Fun

Toddlers love to help, and now is the time to encourage them by making chores playful. This is a form of role play! Simple activities like sweeping the floor, putting away toys or books, or putting clothes into a laundry basket are all great for practicing new skills. Make chores playful by listening to music, setting a timer and encouraging them to go as fast as they can, or turning a laundry basket into a basketball hoop and tossing the clothes in. At first, do chores together and give verbal instructions and reminders so the toddler gains confidence. With time, the child can do chores on their own—or alongside you while you tackle something else.

3



Finger Plays and Songs

Toddlers love songs and chants with hand motions, especially when the tempo varies or there is a surprise part. With practice, they can copy motions and remember sequences. Finger plays and active songs can be found in many languages and cultures. “Open, Shut Them,” “Head, Shoulders, Knees, and Toes,” and “The Wheels on the Bus” are some popular ones in English. You can find many examples of songs with their actions on YouTube.

4



Memory Game

Find three cups and three small objects that you can hide underneath, like a toy car, a small ball, or an animal figure. Show the child each toy, say its name (“This is a car”), and let them see you hide it under one of the cups. Then ask, “Where is the car?” and encourage them to lift up the cup they think it’s under. If they’re correct, praise and ask them to find the next object. If they are incorrect, encourage them to look under another cup. Vary the game by adding more (or fewer) cups and objects or by moving the cups around *after* hiding the objects.

5



Matching and Sorting Games

Toddlers are beginning to understand how to match and sort objects that look alike in color or shape. Ready-made sorter toys are great, but you can also make your own games. Place different colored pieces of paper on the floor, give the toddler some colored objects, and ask them to place the objects on the piece of paper with the same color. Or, give the child a small group of similar objects, like toy animals, except for two, such as play people. See if they can group the like objects together. Incorporate sorting to make clean-up playful, too: “Let’s put away all the blocks!”



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

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

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