

What toddlers learn from water play

It's no secret that toddlers love to play with water. Here's why the lessons learned from water play are worth the mess.

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Look at that busy little guy, pouring water from yogurt container to funnel to yogurt container... to floor. He's learning about cause and effect, about warm and cool, about floating and sinking. He's calming himself after a hard day of being small in a big world. He's learning new words, and thinking about the wetness of the water and the bubblyness of the bubbles.

And you thought he was just flooding the bathroom?

What if there was a clean, creative, natural play material that was piped right into your house, 24 hours a day, every day?

You guessed? It's water. Along with the wonderful bright (expensive) toys that Grandma buys, and the paints and play dough and other neat craft stuff you provide, don't forget about water. Young children are drawn to water. It's a universally appealing play material with unlimited possibilities.

What are some of the possibilities? What does a toddler get from playing with water, besides wet?

Your toddler, the great explorer

One of the big lessons toddlers are learning is how the world works, and it's not just a passive experience for them. They want to know how the world really works, how it tastes and smells and feels and how bouncy it is if you jump really hard on it. Toddlers are very tactile. They like to explore with all their senses and they enjoy all kind of sensory activities – water play is one of these.

When your child is exploring, take your cues from him. He will show you what he's interested in – it might be as simple as watching the bubbles flow off his fingers under the running water in the sink.

Try adding natural materials to the water for your child to explore– like pine cones, leaves, and rocks. Talk about what happens to them when they get wet. It's a very simple, natural process of following a child's interest.

Water and words

Water play is about words. Any experience you have with your toddler can be about words, and water is certainly an interesting topic for a little person. Parents and toddlers can have conversations about water and discover language together. Talk about the water pouring and splashing and drizzling. Extend their language with descriptions.

Even if your toddler isn't talking much, he is taking in everything you say, and his language skills are developing. You help that process along when you talk to him or read to him. Stories that describe the properties of water can add to your child's growing knowledge of water. Have a look at *Big Sarah's Little Boots* by Paulette Bourgeois (Published by Kids Can Press), *The Mud Puddle* by Robert Munsch (Annick Press), or *D.W. All Wet*, by Marc Brown (Little, Brown).

Get in the game

Water play is another opportunity to show your child that you like hanging around with him, that you value him and his activities. So don't sit by with a towel (or a raincoat). Play with him. Squish through the soggy mud, too. Show him that you enjoy being part of his play!

Involve your toddler in your water play around the house, too. He'll love to be included in the things you do. Toddlers can help reconstitute frozen orange juice—they can add water, stir, and drink it up. It's exciting to make something real and then serve a drink to the rest of the family. Your child can "wash" the plastic drinking cups at the kitchen sink, or watch the clothes slowly submerge as the washer fills.

The great wet outdoors

Sure, summer is great with sprinklers and bubbles, but water play outdoors can be a year round activity. Spring is perfect. It comes with puddles and mud. Add boots, raincoats, polar fleece jackets and follow your toddler out the door. She'll know what to do next.

And don't give up water play in the winter. Bring some snow inside and watch what happens. Notice the dripping icicles on a warm winter day. There are lots of creative possibilities—the drippy snow, the fluffy snow. Toddlers can take handfuls of icicles to break—the sound they make is amazing. Best of all is stomping through puddles that have frozen with a thin layer of ice—what power!

On the safety side

- Small children need close, constant adult supervision when they're playing around water, whether it's in the bathtub, backyard wading pool or dishpan. A toddler can drown in very little water. Be vigilant.
- Empty buckets and dishpans when your child is finished playing. The cleanup can be part of the exploration. Your toddler can help you pour the water down the drain. Watch it disappear, and wonder together where the water ends up.
- Take extra care that the floor, sidewalk or lawn doesn't get wet and slippery when you've been playing for a while. Keep a couple of big towels handy. If you're outside, move the game around so surfaces don't get dangerously soggy.

Fun water play ideas for toddlers

Here are a few tips for enjoying water play with your toddler:

- Ice cubes are fun—they're cold and slippery and they disappear right before your eyes. (Be sure you are right with your toddler—ice cubes can pose a choking risk if she puts them in her mouth.)
- Gather up some doll clothes, add a squirt of very mild soap to a little pan of water, and your toddler can do laundry the old fashioned way. Also fun: washing the dolls' dishes. (They never clean up after themselves.) Or why not your child's own little socks?
- Add food coloring or a mild scent like orange to the water.
- Discover all the water toys that lurk in the kitchen: big and small plastic spoons and scoops, funnels, colanders (good for showers outside), sieves, turkey basters, sponges, slotted spoons. Assign some old plastic containers to permanent play duty and poke a few holes in the bottom — one hole makes a little stream that lasts a long time, a bunch of holes makes an impressive shower.
- Fill a large margarine tub or jelly mold with colored water and freeze. These can become bricks in your snow fort, or allowed to melt slowly in the bathtub or swimming pool. So your child can experience the thrill of discovery, put a plastic toy in the water before you freeze it.
- Put some water in a plastic spray bottle. A well-cleaned out window cleaner bottle works well. This is good for painting the side of the house, and makes an excellent monster repellent. Also good for watering the lawn, a tiny bit at a time.
- Have a tea party with a tiny tea pot (filled with, you know...) tea cups, and snacks. Invite some bears and other members of the family. Eat, drink, sit on little chairs and be merry.
- Fill a clear plastic jar with water and show your toddler how big his hand looks through the magnifying bottle.
- Help your child paint the side of the house or the sidewalk with a bucket of water and a big brush. A roller is even more interesting.
- Set out a basin of water and some toys to experiment with — a plastic doll that floats, a little car that doesn't, a wooden block, a sponge, a bar of Ivory soap, some ice cubes that float but wait a minute. Where are they?