

STIMULATING DEVELOPMENT

Children are constantly learning, even when adults might think that they are just playing or relaxing. This is true for school-age children, preschoolers, toddlers, and even infants. In our world of gadgets and electronics, it is often tempting to use these as learning tools for young children. Parents often think that there must be a video or a computer program that can help stimulate their child's development. However, most of the best ways to nurture learning and development do not require batteries or electricity. In fact, most of them are practically free. All they really require is a little time and imagination.

Developing children require stimulation of the senses, as well as knowledge of how the world around them works. This is far more important than learning the alphabet! For an infant or a toddler, there are few things more stimulating than hearing a parent's voice and going for a walk together. As you walk, talk about the things you see, hear and feel. Seeing a blooming flower or a squirrel gathering nuts, hearing a bird sing or the crinkle of leaves beneath your feet, and feeling the warmth of the sun on their skin, a breeze in their hair, or the sensation of grass or sand on their hands and between their toes will provide more stimulation than any video could ever hope to.

Once your child becomes mobile, outdoor walks can also include exploration. My kids and I love to walk in the woods together, but we don't just walk – we climb trees (for toddlers, help them sit on branches or even climb up into short trees), we look for bugs, and we even dig holes. You can do this sort of thing over and over, and it is still fresh and new for young kids, as well as for their parents. There are so many things out there for a child to learn, not just through observation, but also through touching and doing. You just have to give yourself permission to get a little dirty. When it gets cold, simply bundle them up and take them out! Cold air on a child's skin is as stimulating as warm air is, and if it ever snows, just make sure that they get a handful of that as well.

For rainy days, there are plenty of things to do inside. Again, stimulation of the senses is the theme, from infancy through the preschool years. Stimulate their sense of hearing with music that you and your child can make together. Make a bin of musical instruments that you can play together: drums, gongs, bells, flutes, triangles, maracas, tambourines, you name it. Stimulate their sense of touch by giving them a variety of textures to experience: play dough, water, and even paint on their hands can fine-tune their sense of touch and work on fine motor coordination at the same time. The next time you go to the icemaker, give your young child a piece of ice to hold and watch the wheels turn! If you are feeling really adventurous, get out a mixing bowl and a hand mixer and bake a cake with your preschooler. Along the way, make sure you talk about what you are doing while you do it.

Of course, don't forget to go outside on those rainy days as well. Nothing makes a young child smile quite like jumping in a fresh puddle (it's actually kind of fun for adults as

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well, if you have forgotten). The next time it rains, go outside and jump in a puddle together – it can be therapeutic for everyone, and it will literally become a treasured memory for everyone (my eleven year old daughter still talks about running around in the rain with me when she was two). Just allow your kids to be kids – you can clean up the mess and give them a bath after they are done!

Nurturing a young child's development can also extend into every day life, if you let it. You don't have to have a formal activity in order to have a learning opportunity. For example, learning fine-motor skills comes from practice, and kids don't always get things right the first time. It is hard for a parent to watch their child struggle with a problem like pouring milk, peeling a banana, spearing strawberries with a fork, or stacking blocks. Parents are often tempted to jump in and try to do it for them. However, allowing children to sort through their problems will allow them to develop their problem-solving skills, improve fine-motor coordination, and most importantly, to gain self-confidence and independence (which are necessities for success in life).

Let your kids practice pouring their own drinks (get them pitchers with well-defined spouts and heavy, broad-based cups that won't tip easily), let them try to peel their own bananas, and yes, let them keep trying to work out their own problems, as long as they want to keep on trying. Most of all, encourage them and let them know that they can and will succeed. Children constantly tell their parents that they can do things by themselves – it is okay to let them try.

With all of the technological advances in our world, it is sometimes tempting to focus a little too much on academics and computers, even when children are very, very young. Let yourself go low-tech! This holiday season, let your children play with the wrapping paper and build things with the boxes. There will be time for computers, TV, videos, and gadgets later, but in the first few years of life, there is no substitute for human interaction, hands-on experiences, and imagination. That is the best thing that you can do for your child's development.