



Sandbox Activities for Your Preschooler

6 Developmentally Appropriate Activities for Preschoolers Ages 1-4

#1: Buried Treasure

Cause and effect are still new concepts for a preschooler, so this game of turn-taking, procedural fun is great! Take an object, then as you bury it, narrate to your preschooler what you are doing. "First, I dug a hole. Now I put the object in the hole. Then, I bury, bury, bury!" Bury the object with sand as the child watches. Then say, "Where is the object?" Allow the child to explore and see if he/she can find the object independently. If help is needed, encourage the child to ask for help before providing it: "Do you need help? Yes? Okay, I can help."

After the object has been uncovered, say, "Now you try." You can narrate the steps as the child tries to bury the object, then find it again.

Vocabulary to Use:

Sequence terms: first, second, third, then, last, next; help; bury; hole; sand; dig; treasure*

*more of an abstract, make-believe term to use with older children

Developmental Goals:

Affective: This activity encourages patience through turn-taking. This is a step towards children realizing that others have emotions and feelings much like their own. By prompting the child to ask for help, you are enabling a tool your preschooler can use in every area of life! It is an important skill, asking for help. Without the ability to communicate this need, children may become frustrated quickly and give up on a task.

Language: This procedural language (first, second, third, then, now, last) applies to many other areas of life. When washing hands, brushing teeth, changing diapers, use these terms so your preschooler can become familiar with their order. Eventually you can test their understanding by asking questions like, "What do we do first? Yes, we wet the toothbrush!" and "What do we do last? Yes, we dry our hands."

Motor: Digging and placing objects develops fine motor skills and spatial awareness.

#2: Make-Believe Play

In your sandbox, provide authentic "toys" such as cups, seashells, and rocks. With these items, you can create basic imaginary play, such as serving "drinks" or pouring "tea". Here is where you can help your preschooler draw the line between imaginary play and real-life. "You *pretend* to drink from the cup. *Do not* eat the sand." Short, concise instructions will allow the child to understand what is okay and what is not allowed. I always say, "Do not do _____. That is not safe/that is yucky/you will get an Ow/that will make you sick." The consistency of these phrases hits home in the mind of a toddler.

Make-believe for toddlers 1-3 should be based in activities they do every day. Some ideas for make-believe play are serving food, having tea, making soup, putting toys to bed, washing hands, taking a bath, cleaning up.

Vocabulary to Use:

Pretend, safe, yucky/sick/healthy, any language that applies to the type of make-believe play you do

Developmental Goals:

Affective: Your preschooler gets the opportunity to explore different emotions based on the make-believe play. These situations are pretend, and thus the emotions are also pretend. However, you can look at it as in your preschooler is practicing how to interact with others, objects, and situations by pretending. The more they practice, the better they will be able to handle real situations in everyday life.

Language: Similarly, not all terms are used all the time in life. There are certain words we use for certain situations, and make-believe helps exercise the use of appropriate terminology. For instance, if playing tea, you will use words like tea cup, tea pot, pour, hot, yummy, more, please. Whereas if you are playing washing hands, you will use words like soap, water, clean, dry. Practice in using these words correctly will broaden your preschooler's vocabulary and accuracy of language.

Motor: Every hands-on activity a preschooler does is strengthening muscles for countless skills from throwing a ball to tying a shoe. A variety of make-believe play varies the muscles that are used and creates a bank of muscle-memories from which your preschooler can pull in different situations. Pretending to pour tea helps a preschooler take drinks from a cup with no lid. Making soup helps a preschooler clean up toys or complete sorting tasks.

#3: I Do, You Do

Of course, this can be used in any situation with any kind of play. Using the toys provided in the sandbox, model how to do a task for your preschooler. It could be scooping sand into a cup. When the child is watching, model how to do the procedure, then say, "You try." Use consistent language, as with the other activities. Phrases like "watch me", "you try", and "try again" will be heard elsewhere in the child's life. It will be helpful for you to provide this frame of reference for what those phrases mean. While you are carrying out a task for your preschooler to observe, explain what is happening: "I am scooping up the sand. Now there is sand in the cup!"

Tasks you can model in this activity include scooping sand into a cup, drawing in the sand with a stick or shovel, pouring sand from a cup, picking up handfuls of sand and placing them in a bucket, using a shovel to scoop sand into a bucket, and anything else you can imagine!

Vocabulary to Use:

You try, my turn, watch me, try again; for younger children, you can simply these instructions to simply "try", "watch", and "again".

Developmental Goals:

Affective: By sharpening these skills in simple tasks, your preschooler is creating a sense of self and independence. Walking your preschooler through these tasks removes uncertainty and therefore the fear of the unknown. With this new confidence, your preschooler is able to practice every day tasks and move on to more complex ones.

Language: Learning the correct usage for simple phrases like “try again” and “watch me” helps to establish context in other situations where these phrases are used. Keep these phrases in mind during the weeks after carrying out this activity, and try using them whenever applicable.

Motor: Modeling is always a great tool for instruction in a new skill. Watching you carry out a simple task helps create a sense of spatial awareness and cause and effect. These concepts assist with hand-eye-coordination and fine motor skills, the more they are practiced.

#4: Drawing in the Sand

Beginning with shapes, drawing in the sand builds strength in hand muscles, precision, and information recalling. For older children, you can draw numbers and letters. Model by drawing the symbol (or shape) in the sand and say its name. For instance, draw a square and then point and say, “Square. Can you say ‘square’? Very good. Square.” Very young children will try to mimic drawing but without any accuracy. The point is not for the child to draw the symbol but to identify the multiple representation of the symbol.

Stick with 1-3 symbols at a time, beginning with the most familiar. Once these symbols have become easy to identify (and recreate if the preschooler is developmentally ready), you can move on to 1-3 new symbols and repeat the process. It can take weeks and months for young children to be able to correctly identify these symbols, so provide scaffolded support without being discouraging.

Vocabulary to Use:

Names of letters, numbers, shapes; draw, sand

Developmental Goals:

Affective: The world of a child age 1-4 is based upon emotions. How do I feel right now? This question governs every aspect of the child’s life. In this activity, you can provide encouragement and celebrate any small success your preschooler makes. This emotional support means the world to your child and gives motivation to try again. This does not mean you should never allow the child to fail. Failure and success are both important lessons for even young children to learn. If the child cannot identify or incorrectly identifies a symbol, simply say, “It’s okay, try again.” Then if the child needs help identifying, you say the name of the symbol along with a prompt to repeat it.

Language: The vocabulary in this activity is the most important part. After this activity, make a point to identify these symbols or shapes in everyday life. Each time, ask the preschooler to repeat the name in order to further develop the use language.

Motor: Older children can trace shapes and symbols in the sand while younger children can point or touch them after you have drawn them in the sand. After naming the shape or symbol, you can allow the child to “erase”.

#5: Identify and Label

Fairly self-explanatory, this activity involves identifying the names of objects, textures, and actions. These should be limited by the objects you have provided in the sand box such as cups, seashells, balls, shovels, pails, etc.

Objects: Point to or hold the object and say its name. Have the child repeat. For example, “This is a seashell. Can you say ‘seashell’? Here, hold the seashell. Say ‘seashell’.”

Textures: This is a difficult concept for younger children to understand, but you can begin to lay the groundwork with toddlers as young as 1 year old. Taking your preschooler’s hand, gently rub it against a texture while labeling that sensation as “bumpy”, “soft”, etc.

Actions: Give a name to the actions your preschooler might be using while playing in the sandbox. Remember, relating learning to your child’s play is the most effective tool at this age.

Vocabulary to Use:

Some suggested vocabulary words are listed above.

Objects

- The names of toys in the box, sand, box, hand, foot, fingers, toes

Textures:

- Rough, smooth, bumpy, grainy, cold, hot, soft, hard

Actions:

- Scoop, pour, dig, hold, drop, pick up, stir, feel, touch, knock, pat

Developmental Goals:

Affective: Using the appropriate vocabulary at the appropriate time allows for interpersonal communication. Giving name to common tasks, actions, and sensations can help with the development of telegraphic speech (combining words to make sentences but omitting articles and prepositions).

Language: Obviously the vocabulary goals in this activity are its most important aspect. Being able to echo these new terms may be difficult, especially if some letter sounds are unfamiliar to the child. You may help sound out these words one sound at a time. This can be referred to as “stretching” the words in order to accentuate their sounds.

Motor: Pointing, touching, and doing are ideal ways of teaching new vocabulary. This activity encourages sensory exploration as well as basic scientific questioning: observing something and investigating to find out more information about it.

#6: I Spy/Where Is

We've all played this age-old game – one person says, “I spy with my little eye something that is *blank*” and everyone else has to guess what that thing is. For vocabulary's sake, I play a different version with my little: Where Is. Because she is 18 months old, she does not understand that everything has different properties that they might share with other. Therefore, I use the phrase “Where is *blank*” and allow her to look around and point at the item.

Most parents play this game with relatives' names or with a favorite toy. In this situation, you may use either version (“I spy” or “where is”) to help your preschooler practice identifying where certain objects are located. For younger preschoolers (ages 1-3) scaffolding of this activity might look like this:

- Level 1: “Where is *blank*” – Have child point to where the item is located
- Level 2: “Where is *blank*” – Have child point to where the item is located and say, “there”
- Level 3: “Where is *blank*” – Have child point to where the item is located and say, “there it is”
- Level 4: “Where is *blank*” – Have child point to where the item is located and say, “*blank* is [insert preposition here]”

Vocabulary to Use:

There, here, on, under, below, on top of, above, ground, wall, ceiling

Developmental Goals:

Affective: In this activity, you are essentially beginning a dialogue with your preschooler. This back and forth of you-say-then-I-say helps develop basic social skills. Before you say “where is”, you can tell your child to “Look at me” (or I usually say, “Look at mama” and put my finger on my nose). This teaches kids to look people in the eye when they are talking and when they are talking to someone.

Language: Prepositions are difficult concepts for small children to learn because they require an understanding of relationships. I don't mean personal relationships but rather that two objects can have be related in size, in location, and in other properties.

Motor: Depth, height, and distance are part of spatial awareness. As the laws of physics solidify in the mind of your preschooler, these concepts help young children to understand their own bodies and how they can move in the world. This activity can help your child learn and exercise these concepts of distance and location.

Disclaimer: The advice in these tips are not meant to replace medical advice from a physician or pediatrician. Please consult your pediatrician if you suspect any medical or developmental issues with your child. These tips do not replace the relationship between therapist and client in a one on one treatment session with an individualized treatment plan based on professional evaluation. All activities are designed for complete adult supervision. Please use your judgement with your children and do not provide objects that could pose as a choking hazard to young children. Never leave a child unattended during these activities. Lil Mama Bear Blog and contributors are not liable for any injury when replicating any of the described activities found in this blog. This is not an exhaustive list of developmental goals and lack of mastery does not necessarily imply a developmental delay. Consult your pediatrician with any concerns.

