

Using Ordinary Materials to Promote Discovery and Learning with Infants and Toddlers
Addendum to Early Head Start Tip Sheet No. 32

Infants and toddlers learn best:

- In the context of relationships with their parents and caregivers
- Through play and active exploration of their environment

Items should be:

- Safe to handle
- Non-toxic
- Easily sanitized between uses
- Used under close adult supervision

Below are examples of household items that can support discovery and learning opportunities with infants and toddlers:

Material		Developmental Task of Infant or Toddler
<p>You, the parent and caregiver!</p>	 <p align="center"><small>Photo: ©istock.com/Yvonne Chamberlain</small></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explore the world by showing and playing with baby and materials • Snuggle, hold, sway, and rock • Coo, talk, sing, tell stories, and read • Mirror baby's facial expressions • Delight in baby's wonder and successes; comfort when upset
<p>Mirrors</p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Track • Bat at and hold • Explore sense of identity (seeing self and facial expressions) • Concept of body parts (identify eyes, nose, etc.)
<p>Tops to liquid laundry detergents, fabric softeners, and mouthwashes</p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mouth • Bang two together • Nest • Stack • Use to fill a large bowl or empty containers • Explore concepts of size, shape, color, texture • Sort and classify by size, shape, color, texture • Dramatic play prop (pretend to drink) • Bath-time or sandbox prop (fill, pour, scoop)
<p>Bandanas, soft scarves, or fabric swatches</p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mouth • Dangle above baby to track, bat at, and grab • Feel and snuggle; explore textures • Play peek-a-boo • Dramatic play prop (use as hat, scarf, or baby blanket) • Use to fill and empty tissue boxes
<p>Muffin tin with toys that fit into holes (Empty egg carton works well too)</p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make sounds or 'music' by banging tin with a spoon • Explore shape (rectangular 'holes' versus circular 'holes') • Explore one-to-one correspondence (1 car for each 'hole') • Prop for pretend play (cooking or shopping)

<p>Empty containers such as powdered drinks, parmesan cheese, mouthwash (Note: mouthwash container has a safety cap making it a great shaker toy)</p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dump and fill (using smaller items such as shower curtain rings) • Place lids on and off • Cause and effect (shake and make noise) • Explore concepts of size, shape, color, texture • Dramatic play prop (pretend to cook) • Bath-time or sandbox prop (fill, pour, scoop) • Roll round containers
<p>Laundry Baskets</p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use for dump and fill • Explore spatial relationships by climbing in and out • Explore balance by trying to pull up on, push, or carry • Cause and effect by pushing or pulling basket • Practice small motor skills by placing smaller items through holes • 'Help' with chores by collecting laundry
<p>Tissue box blocks (Fill with "junk mail" to add weight, seal opening with construction paper and clear, non-toxic packing tape)</p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stack • Bang on boxes • Dump and fill • Cause and effect (build and knock down) • Explore concepts of shape, size, color, weight • Explore balance by trying to carry when walking
<p>Throw-able items such as shower puffs, pot scrubbers, wiffle balls, sock balls, or fabric shapes</p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mouth • Bang items together • Dump and fill • Throw or roll • Props for water or painting activities (shower puffs, scrubbers, wiffle balls) • Explore concepts of size, shape, color, texture • Sort and classify by size, shape, color, texture
<p>Photos cards placed on shapes cut from milk jugs, diaper wipe box tops, yogurt tops. (Be sure photos and any writing are covered with clear, non-toxic packing tape)</p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mouth • Explore sense of identity (seeing self and loved ones) • Explore emotions ('I'm sad to see my brother leave for school.' or 'I can hug and kiss his picture when I miss him.') • Concept of body parts (identify eyes, nose, etc.) • Cause and effect (pulling apart 2 lids attached by Velcro tabs) • Use smaller sizes for dump and fill activities