



Recycled materials are a mainstay in early childhood classrooms. And boxes—big and small—offer opportunities for inexpensive activities that support development and encourage discovery and creativity.

Build your collection of boxes with the help of the families of the children in your care. Make your needs clear—otherwise every inch of storage space will be taken. Plan ahead and use the bulletin board or parent newsletter to post “Box wanted” notices. Indicate the size you need and when you need it.

Of course, you’ll want to keep some boxes on hand for daily use. Maximize space by breaking down the single-piece boxes and storing them flat against a wall or in a closet. Nest boxes with separate lids, keeping lid and bottom together.

Wooden boxes and crates make great classroom storage containers—for paper to recycle, stuffed animals, doll beds, and bookcases. Remove splinters with sandpaper, and paint or varnish.

Shape sorters

(Infants and toddlers)

Here’s what you need:

- shoe boxes with lids
- pencil
- craft knife
- colored, adhesive-backed plastic
- scissors
- lightweight wooden shapes (square, circle, heart, or triangle, for example), at least 2 inches across, available at craft and hobby stores

1. Cover the top and bottom of a shoe box with adhesive-backed plastic.
2. Trace one shape, such as a square, on the lid of the shoe box, making sure the lines are slightly larger than the shape.
3. Cut the shape from the lid.
4. Do the same with the other shapes and boxes.
5. Show children how to fit a wooden shape into the hole, remove the box top, take out the shape, replace the top, and repeat the activity.
6. With infants, use one shape at a time. Toddlers will appreciate a collection of shape boxes with matching wooden shapes.

Texture boards

(Infants and toddlers)

Here’s what you need:

- corrugated cardboard, at least 3 feet square
- liquid tempera paint
- brushes
- pairs of textured fabric pieces, such as burlap, corduroy, satin, fake fur, and sequined pieces
- glue
- tape
- collection basket

1. Plan a paint activity and ask the children to cover the cardboard with paint.
 2. When the paint is dry, tape the cardboard to a wall low to the floor.
 3. Glue one piece in each pair of textured fabric pieces to the board.
 4. Put the matching piece of fabric in the collection basket.
 5. Help infants touch the different fabrics. Tell about the texture and color. Encourage toddlers to match the fabric in the basket with its mate on the board.
- Extension:** Add additional textures like rope, ribbon, jar lids, and twigs to the board.

Tips for cardboard and box construction

- Let parents know that you collect boxes for classroom projects. Ask that they keep an eye out for large appliance boxes and sheets of corrugated cardboard.
- Use glue, masking tape, shipping tape, paper fasteners, or staples to fasten cardboard pieces.
- Create textured surfaces with corrugated cardboard, shredded paper, crinkled newspaper, and bubble wrap.
- Let the shape and size of the box suggest ideas for a project.
- Maintain a supply of collage materials including shiny paper, ribbon, sandpaper scraps, tubes, twigs, and pine cones.

In all directions

(Toddlers)

When toddlers hold something in their hands, they feel steadier on their feet. Use this activity to teach coordination and balance as well as some new vocabulary.

Here's what you need:

- small boxes

1. Gather the toddlers in an open space—indoors or out.
2. Give each child a small box.
3. Ask the children to place the box on the cheek, shoulder, stomach, floor, elbow, and over the head. Do each motion as you say it.

Sensory box

(Infants and toddlers)

Here's what you need:

- cardboard carton, clean and sturdy, at least 2 feet square
- non-breakable mirror
- textured household objects such as keys, film canisters, rope, picture postcards, photos, metal spoons, thread spools, and shower curtain rings
- packing tape
- glue
- permanent colored markers
- trash bags
- sand

1. Fill a trash bag with sand and knot the bag.
2. Place the sand bag in the box. The bag will weigh down the box so it doesn't tip over easily.
3. Tape the box closed.
4. Gather sensory objects that are safe and large enough not to be a choking hazard.
5. Glue the mirror to the top of the box, and the other sensory objects around the four sides.
6. Decorate the space between the objects with permanent markers.
7. Place the box on the classroom floor—or bring it outside. Encourage infants to look at and touch the objects. Help toddlers name the objects.
8. Check the box daily to make sure the objects are firmly attached.

Personal collection boxes

(Toddler and older)

Here's what you need:

- large laundry detergent boxes with hinged lids and handles, one for each child in the group
- liquid tempera paint
- brushes
- glue
- collage supplies

1. Invite the children to paint their boxes.
2. Let the paint dry.
3. Invite the children to personalize the boxes with decorations from the collage supplies.
4. Encourage the children to use the boxes for fill-and-dump activities.
5. Take a nature walk around the playground. Invite the children to collect twigs, leaves, feathers, or rocks.
6. Invite the children to show their collections to their parents.

Note: Add handles of heavy cotton rope if necessary. Use an awl or ice pick to punch holes on the sides of the box. Cut rope about 12 inches long. Knot one end and thread from the inside of the box. Push the rope through the second hole (from the outside) and knot on the inside.





Feelings cube

(Toddlers and older)

Here's what you need:

- small, cube-shaped box
- glue
- scissors
- old magazines
- clear, adhesive-backed plastic

1. Cut out pictures of children from the magazines. Look for pictures of children who are laughing, crying, frowning, pouting, and expressing anger and fear.
2. Trim the pictures to fit the six sides of the box.
3. Glue the pictures in place.
4. Cover the box with clear, adhesive-backed plastic.
5. Talk about the pictures. Invite the children to look at and imitate the emotions of the children pictured.

Variation: Make similar boxes with pictures of colors, occupations, familiar flowers, or family photos that children can identify and name.

Book box

(Toddlers and older)

Here's what you need:

- large, long, sturdy box such as a refrigerator or file cabinet packing box
- liquid tempera paint
- brushes
- soft area rug or quilt
- pillows

1. Cut off one long side of the box.
2. Invite the children to paint the sides of the box.
3. After the paint is dry, add a sign that says "Book box."
4. Place the decorated box in a quiet area of the classroom or a sheltered area on the playground.
5. Add a rug to the floor and pillows across the back.
6. Invite children to bring books to the book box for quiet reading and play.

Variation: Add soft stuffed toys to make the space more cozy and inviting. Make a similar single-person book space with a cylinder or barrel-shaped box. Cut an opening near the base of the box.

Surprise box

(Age 3 and older)

Here's what you need:

- box with lid
- scissors
- 12 colored scarves or fabric scraps

1. Knot the scarves into one long streamer.
2. Cut a 3-inch diameter circle into one end of the box.
3. Put the streamer into the box, pulling the edge of the first scarf through the hole.
4. Gather children in a small group. Introduce the activity by telling the children that they will get to identify and name the colors of the fabric pieces.
5. Let the children pass the box around, each pulling out a scarf and letting the group name the color.
6. When all of the scarves have been pulled out, spread them along the floor and name the colors again.

Goop in a box

(Age 3 and older)

Here's what you need:

- shallow box
- heavy aluminum foil
- measuring cup
- box of cornstarch
- water

1. Line the box with aluminum foil.
2. Pour 1 cup of cornstarch into the box.
3. Slowly add $\frac{1}{2}$ cup water to the cornstarch.
4. Invite children to stir the mixture with their fingers. Challenge the children to try and pick up the mixture.

Box bowling

(Age 3 and older)

Here's what you need:

- 6 to 8 empty milk cartons
- newspaper
- stapler and staples
- construction paper
- glue
- marker
- chalk
- small ball

1. Stuff the milk cartons with newspaper and staple shut.
2. Cover each carton with construction paper and glue in place.
3. Write a numeral or design on each carton.
4. Set up the activity in a wide open area—indoors or out.
5. With chalk, draw squares on the floor to indicate the carton placement. This lets children play the game independently.
6. Place one carton in each square.
7. Challenge the children to bowl, rolling the ball to knock over a carton.

Variation: To make the game more difficult for older children, challenge them to knock over a specific carton without touching the others.

Playhouse

(Age 3 and older)

Here's what you need:

- appliance box with lid
- tape
- craft knife
- straight edge
- broad-tipped permanent marker
- liquid tempera paint

1. Tape the lid of the box in place.
2. Use your imagination to cut out a door and windows from the box. Either remove the door completely or reinforce the hinged side with tape. Cut windows that are traditional and house-like or silly—for example, cut large and small geometric shapes from the walls and roof.
3. Bring the box to the playground. Invite the children to paint the house—inside and out.
4. Use the playhouse as a stage for puppet play, a quiet play area for dolls or manipulatives, or an extension of the dramatic play center.

Ball roll

(Age 3 and older)

Here's what you need:

- large box, at least 12 inches high, 18 inches wide, and 10 inches deep
- scissors or craft knife
- marker
- small balls

1. Remove the top flaps from the box.
2. Turn the box bottom-side-up. Draw geometric shapes along the cut edge. Make the shapes big enough for the ball to roll through easily.
3. Cut out the shapes. Decorate the box if desired.
4. Place the box in a large open area.
5. Challenge the children to take turns rolling the balls through the shape holes.

Variation: To make the game more difficult, challenge the children to aim for a specific shape or to aim for each shape in order, working around the box. Construct a similar game for children ages 4 and older using a shoe box and marbles.



Exercise frames

(Age 3 and older)

Here's what you need:

- several sheets of corrugated cardboard at least 4-feet square. The sides of an appliance box work best.
- craft knife
- metal straight edge
- marker
- liquid tempera
- brushes

1. In each sheet of cardboard, draw and cut out a large geometric shape—a square, triangle, rectangle, and circle, for example.
2. Cut out the center of each shape leaving a 6-inch frame.
3. Invite the children to paint the shapes—each a different color.
4. Use the frames for movement activities that build coordination and balance. Use the frames for activities like the following.



- Let children choose and use a frame as a dancing partner.
- Arrange the frames for an obstacle course. Give directions like “Crawl through the red circle, hop into the blue square, and walk around the orange triangle.”
- Use the frames as frames—hang on an art display board to highlight a group of paintings.



Creatures

(Age 4 and older)

Here's what you need:

- a variety of cardboard boxes such as an oatmeal box, salt box, small gift boxes, milk cartons, egg cartons, tubes, and pizza boxes
- glue
- tape
- markers
- paper
- collage materials

1. Introduce the activity by talking with the children about the kinds of creatures each box shape suggests. For example, several stacked boxes might suggest a robot. A strip of cups from an egg carton might remind a child of a snake or a train.
2. Encourage the children to glue or tape boxes together to make creatures.
3. Decorate the creatures with collage materials like ribbon, pipe cleaners, straws, ribbon, or paper scraps.



Feel the letter

(Age 4 and older)

Here's what you need:

- partitioned carton (such as a bottle case)
- colored, adhesive-backed plastic (or liquid tempera paint)
- scissors
- craft knife
- packing tape
- fabric
- collection of letters or numerals

1. Remove the top of the carton, leaving the partitions in place.
2. Cover the outside of the carton with adhesive-backed plastic. Or, if you prefer, paint with liquid tempera.
3. Turn the box so that the partitions face you.
4. Tape a length of fabric to the top of the carton, covering the partitions.
5. Place a plastic, cardboard, sandpaper, or foam letter or numeral in each of the carton's partitions.
6. Introduce the activity by explaining that sometimes fingers can read. Challenge the children to identify letters or numerals by touch—rather than by sight.

Exotic masks

(Age 4 and older)

Here's what you need:

- pictures or samples of exotic masks
- corrugated cardboard boxes
- craft knife
- metal straight edge
- tape
- small gift boxes
- small cardboard scraps
- prepared papier-mâché
- liquid tempera paint
- brushes

1. Cut 12-inch square sheets of cardboard from flattened boxes using the craft knife and metal straight edge. Keep the knife out of the reach of children.
2. Introduce the activity by sharing the pictures and samples of masks. Challenge the children to make unique masks—each on their own 12-inch square of cardboard.
3. Give each child a square. Show that the cardboard folds neatly along the corrugated lines. Help children use these folds to shape the mask.
4. Tape small boxes to the cardboard to form facial features. Encourage children to be expressive rather than literal in their designs.
5. Use the papier-mâché to cover and build the features. Let dry completely.
6. Let children paint and decorate the masks.
7. Hang the masks where parents and other visitors can see them.

Alphabet hunt

(Age 5 and older)

Here's what you need:

- boxes or cartons from toothpaste, cereal, milk, and other products
- scissors
- page from the newspaper
- sheets of poster board or butcher paper
- glue

1. Introduce the activity by examining the different typefaces manufacturers use for their products. Show some examples to help children notice the difference in the letter E, for example.
 2. Provide a collection of product boxes.
 3. Assign small groups of children a different letter of the alphabet. Challenge the groups to find and cut out as many examples of that letter as they can.
 4. Make display boards by asking each group to glue their letter collections onto poster boards.
- Variation:** When children are familiar with the alphabet, assign several letters to each child. After the children find examples of all the letters, place the letters on the floor in alphabetical order.