

INFANT NURSERY GAMES

Standing the test of time

Do you ever wonder about the staying power of traditional nursery games like peek-a-boo, “Pat-a-cake,” and “Old MacDonald Had a Farm”?

Could it be that generations of parents and caregivers had inside knowledge of current brain science and the developmental tasks facing infants?

As babies grow and learn, several developmental tasks or challenges reflect the enormous changes going on in their brains. Social interactions with attentive, responsive caregivers support these changes and spur development not only in brain function but also in social, emotional, and physical domains.

Many of a baby’s cognitive activities from birth to about age 2 fall into five broad categories:

- discovering information through the five senses,
- refining motor skills,
- learning that objects have permanence (they exist even when we can’t see them),
- recognizing cause and effect, and
- observing that objects and people have shape and size.

You can support and encourage babies in these essential developmental tasks by engaging them in play activities that reflect a nursery game heritage.

Sensory explorations

“This Little Piggy” is often the first deliberate integration of sensory exploration with a nursery game. With this game, parents and caregivers help newborns recognize that their bodies include a distant appendage—the toes. The stimulation that characterizes this game—massaging each toe individually and tickling up the leg to the baby’s tummy—reinforces neural pathways that are both physical and social.

Safety note: Remember, babies will use their mouths for all sensory exploration. Make sure all classroom materials are safe for mouthing. Materials should be nontoxic and not pose a choking hazard. Clean and sanitize any material that’s been in one baby’s mouth before making it available for another’s play.

Broaden and expand sensory explorations with some of the following games, activities, and props.



Texture quilt

Employ your own sewing skills or enlist a volunteer to make texture quilts for your classroom. Cut and sew together 8- to 10-inch squares of washable satin, corduroy, soft cotton, washable wool, and even flannel-backed vinyl. Make sure you choose fabrics of bright colors. Use the quilt for floor play, encouraging babies to explore each texture.

Texture flaps

Here’s what you need:

- file folders
- scissors
- squares of foil, vinyl, burlap, sandpaper, mirrored tile, and fake fur
- glue
- clear, adhesive-backed vinyl

1. Cut each file folder in half horizontally, preserving the folded edge.
2. To make the folders more durable, laminate or cover the outsides in clear, adhesive-backed vinyl.



3. Glue texture squares to the insides of each folder.
4. Open and close the flaps while holding a baby in your lap. Talk about colors and textures and encourage the baby to touch them. Encourage older babies to practice on their own. Simple texture games like this provide both sensory exploration and motor skill developments

Variation: Make a larger board with two sheets of recycled cardboard. Glue several texture squares to one sheet and cut flaps in the second to correspond to the placement of the squares. Tape the two boards together along all sides and show babies how to lift the flaps to see—and feel—the textures.

Sticky walk

Here's what you need:

- self-adhesive paper such as Con-Tact®
 - 2-inch tape
1. Cut 12- to 18-inch lengths of self-adhesive paper.
 2. Remove the paper backing and tape it, sticky-side up to the floor or a low wall.
 3. Encourage babies to discover the different texture. Talk about how it feels and invite additional discovery of the paper's adhesive qualities.

Shake bottles

Here's what you need:

- empty, clear-plastic bottles with lids
- hot glue or super glue
- objects that fit inside the bottles and make noise or are visually stimulating, such as aquarium gravel, marbles, large confetti flakes, mini pompoms, buttons, and crayons

1. Wash the bottles and remove any paper label or glue.
2. Put small objects into each bottle.
3. Glue the lid on each bottle and remember to check the seal often.
4. Introduce the shake bottles for visual, auditory, and motor skill development.

Variation: Pour mineral oil—colored with food coloring or not—into the bottle first. Then add beads, marbles, glitter, or short lengths of drinking straws and glue on the lid.

Mouth noises

Take every opportunity to initiate and encourage vocalizations. Mimic a baby's sounds during routine tasks like diapering. Cooing and later more deliberate sounds like *ma*, *ga*, and *ta* are precursors to meaningful language. Sing simple songs and notice when babies respond. They will come to recognize the words and rhythm, let you know that they are engaged, and soon vocalize along with you.

"Old MacDonald" variations

Help children learn to recognize their own names in simple variations of "Old MacDonald." Substitute babies' names for *MacDonald* and clothes items, friends' names, or activities for the farm animals.

Do the same with toddlers. Invite them to identify the clothes, friend, or activity that matches the song.

Or sing "Old MacDonald Had a ..." grocery, a zoo, or school and substitute the names of appropriate items.

Photo matching

Stimulate visual acuity and social interactions with photos of familiar people and objects in the environment. A digital camera is a terrific piece of classroom equipment that allows you to focus on specific rather than generic items.

Here's what you need:

- digital camera and printer
 - scissors
 - glue
 - matching plastic lids, at least 3 inches in diameter
 - clear, adhesive-backed vinyl
1. Take pictures of the children and other familiar people as well as common objects. Print the images.
 2. Trim the images to fit inside a lid. Protect the images with clear, adhesive-backed vinyl or laminate. Glue each picture into place in a lid.
 3. Use the images for matching activities. Talk with babies about the attributes of the items pictured. Make the pictures accessible to the babies for independent explorations.

Variations: Glue magnet strips to the backs of the lids and hang a metal cookie sheet on the wall. Using lids with photos of the children, encourage children to find their own pictures and hang it on the sheet as they arrive. Later in the day go back to the sheet and talk about who's present and who's not.

Make enough framed photos that children can use them as picture cards, to carry in bundles, or to gather and carry in baskets.

Motor development

Motor skills that result from large and small muscle strength and coordination begin in newborns. Generations of parents and teachers have recognized the learning opportunities offered by the simple nursery game of “Pat-a-cake”—hand-eye coordination, muscle control, finger placement, rhyming words, body parts, and mimicry.

Because large muscles tend to develop before fine motor skills emerge, give babies lots of opportunities to use their arms, legs, backs, and necks in play.

Baby basketball

Here’s what you need:

- clear plastic tubing or discarded garden hose, 1 inch in diameter and 6 feet long
- dowel 1 inch in diameter
- strips of fabric
- heavy cord
- scissors
- stapler and staples
- large balls

1. Use the dowel to connect one end of the tube to the other, making a circle.
2. Tear strips of fabric into 18-inch lengths and staple along the circumference of the circle.
3. Cut three lengths of cord. Tie one end of each cord, spaced equal distance apart, to the circle. Tie the other ends together to hang from the ceiling or a doorway so that the circle is about 2 feet from the floor.
4. Encourage children to put the ball into the hoop and chase it when it comes out the open end. Observe carefully the progression from surprise to anticipation to expectation.

Tube run

Here’s what you need:

- 6-foot length of 3-inch PVC pipe (available at home supply stores), or heavy cardboard tubing
- plastic cable ties
- drill and drill bit
- objects to slide through the tube such as tennis balls or toy cars
- basket

1. Drill holes in the tube so that you can thread the tie wrap through the hole and attach the tube to an outdoor fence. Place one end about 3 feet from the ground and the other end 18 inches from the ground.
2. Place a collection basket at the lower end of the tube.
3. Invite children to roll objects down the tube.
4. Observe children’s responses. Look for cues that tell you children have mastered this activity and it’s time to move on.

Object permanence

Why do babies love to play peek-a-boo? Why do they develop separation anxiety? Why do older children play hide-and-seek and try to explain magic tricks?

It’s all about healthy cognitive development. They learn through play and work that things continue to exist even when we can’t see them. Help babies gain control of their environments by offering endless variations of peek-a-boo, eventually allowing the baby to be in charge of making objects disappear and reappear.

Scarf play

Collect sheer scarves or cut 2-foot squares of soft tulle purchased at a fabric store. Cover your own head with the scarf. Ask “Where is Ms Mazie?” and encourage the baby to pull the scarf away. Cover the baby’s head and ask the same question, giving the child time to pull the scarf away. Cover—and let children rediscover—hidden objects like a shoe, a towel, or a stuffed animal. Extend the game with mobile babies by hiding so they can find you by following your voice or by encouraging them to look for and find a noise-maker.

Hide and discover

Here’s what you need:

- digital camera and printer, or photographs clipped from magazines or junk mail
- clear, adhesive-backed vinyl
- duct tape
- squares of fabric
- flat hanging surface

1. Take pictures of familiar people and objects or clip photos from old magazines or junk mail.
2. Protect the pictures by laminating or covering with clear, adhesive-backed vinyl.
3. Tape the pictures to a wall, a low cabinet, or the back of a bookshelf. Make sure the pictures are at children’s eye level.
4. Cut a piece of fabric large enough to cover each picture. Tape the fabric over the top of the picture.
5. Encourage babies to discover the photos. This will be a challenge because they will need to hold the fabric, balance, and look all at the same time.



Folder face

Here's what you need:

- digital camera and printer or large facial photos in magazines
- file folder
- scissors or craft knife
- glue
- clear, adhesive-backed vinyl

1. Using a digital camera, take full-face photos of children and print.
2. Trim the photos to fit on the back of a file folder and glue into place.
3. Laminate the folder or cover with clear, adhesive-backed vinyl.
4. Cut little doors in the folder cover positioned to reveal a facial feature, such as nose, eyes, ears, and mouth.
5. Encourage babies to discover the features. Share vocabulary and challenge the baby to point to a real eye, nose, or mouth.

Cause and effect

Babies prove they are adept scientists when they engage in physical science and physics activities.

They teach themselves that gravity always works when they endlessly perform drop-the-spoon from a high chair. The nursery rhyme "Hickory Dickory Dock" with its three mice is a traditional cause-and-effect standard.

Gather and dump

For this favorite baby game, provide various containers such as shoe boxes, baskets, plastic berry baskets, transparent plastic bottles, gallon milk jugs with a large opening cut in the side, and plastic bowls. Also provide various objects such as hair rollers, table blocks, clothespins, empty thread

spools, extra-large wooden beads, large plastic lids, balls, plastic animals, and cookie cutters. Be prepared for mobile babies to gather any available object to put in the container.

Help children explore and enjoy the activity by gathering, dumping, and gathering again. Later they will begin to sort the materials—an early math activity.

Other cause-and-effect materials

Blocks. Blocks offer immediate feedback as babies kick or swipe to make the stack tumble.

Introduce small wooden blocks and fabric-covered foam blocks. Cardboard tubes also fall over with gratifying motion and sound.

Art activities. Offer soft play clays, chubby crayons, finger paint, and washable markers for art investigation. Cover the work table with plastic or newspaper to make cleanup easier.

Water. Provide aprons and watch as children learn to pour from one container to another.

Shape and size in space

Babies everywhere are enchanted by stretching their arms wide and communicating "Sooo big" or "Sooo much." Investigating size and shape builds brain pathways that, when strengthened by activities and interactions, will lead to math and spatial competence.

What fits?

Provide nesting materials like measuring cups or graduated bowls. Invite children to investigate and discover that size matters: smaller things fit inside larger ones. Offer a collection of cardboard tubes and observe the play. Most babies will try to fit objects like cars and large beads through the tubes.

Simple sorting

Invite children to sort familiar objects such as toy cars and farm animals. Put the toys on a tray in front of the child. Watch, guide, and interact as the child separates the vehicles from the animals. In your conversation, talk with the baby about the differences in the objects.

How big?

Here's what you need:

- large mural paper
- markers
- tape

1. Cut lengths of paper each about 3 feet long.
2. Invite willing babies to lie on the paper so you can trace around their bodies with a marker.
3. As the tracings are completed, label with the child's name and hang on a wall with tape.
4. Refer to the tracings often as you talk about the size of each body.
5. If the babies are unwilling to have their bodies traced, draw outlines of shoes, jackets, and hats. Talk with the children about the features and sizes of each, introducing new comparative vocabulary like *smaller*, *bigger*, *larger*, and *rounder*.