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# The best toys—and teaching materials—are (almost) free

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Is your toy budget already spent? Are children getting bored with learning center materials, even though you've rotated them recently?

Look around. Remember that the best toys are simple. Familiar items, such as cardboard boxes, can stimulate creativity and social skills. Recyclables, such as milk jug lids, can be turned into games. Common household items, such as sand and water, can provide sensory and discovery experiences.

The ABC list below can help you get started. Copy the list for parents so they can begin saving recyclables and donating household items. Scavenge for gently used or slightly damaged items at thrift stores and garage sales.

Before long, you'll have a collection of toys that children will find exciting and that won't cost a cent—well, almost.

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**A is for Air.** Nothing is freer than the air we breathe. Help children begin to understand respiration—and relaxation—with breathing activities. Use a tape to measure chests full (deep breath in) and empty (blow all the air out). Compare the number of breaths taken while sitting and then after running. Show how to slow respiration and decrease tension with simple, slow yoga-like breathing in and out.



**B is for Blocks.** Cardboard boxes, milk cartons, and lumber scraps are readily available and invite creative construction. Challenge children to recreate "The house that Jack built." Compare sizes and weights of different materials and discuss the pros and cons of each as a building material. Collect small samples of building materials—shingles, gutter pieces, bricks, siding, foam insulation board,

and ceramic tile—for examination and experimentation.

**C is for Color.** Crayons, paper, paint, grass, walls, shirts, flowers, vehicles, balls, and ribbons—colors everywhere in the early childhood classroom. And if there's a lack of color, add some. Paint cardboard tubes, cover boxes with colored paper or adhesive vinyl, frame children's artwork, and laminate collages of nature's grasses, leaves, and flowers.

**D is for Dough.** Make simple play clay and dough with flour, salt, and water. Show children how to knead, cut, shape, and pinch. Add food coloring or powdered tempera to small batches of dough. Encourage children to mix the batches and discover that red plus yellow plus blue equals brown.

**E is for Egg cartons.** Use egg cartons for sorting pebbles, shells, nuts and bolts, and paper clips. Invite children to cut and paint egg cartons to make train cars, caterpillars, elf houses, or flowers. Arrange plastic eggs in a color pattern along one side and invite children to reproduce the pattern down the other side. Note: Wash the cartons with soapy water and let dry thoroughly before using.

**F is for Finger play.** Learn new finger plays, songs, poems, and chants to help children

improve language and listening skills. Select finger plays to match a unit theme, such as animals. Find new finger plays by searching the Web or browsing the local library's catalog for books and videos.



**G is for Garden.** Take children on a neighborhood walk to view a flower or vegetable garden. Ask the cook to save fruit seeds, carrot or turnip tops, and potato “eyes” for children to plant. Invite children to gather acorns and pecans from trees or to collect seeds from grasses and wildflowers. Plant seeds in containers or a corner of the play yard and watch them grow.



**H is for Hats.** Collect and construct—with the children—hats to reinforce dramatic play and conversations about occupations. Talk about why different

workers need specific kinds of hats—for protection, style, or identification, for example. Read the classic *Caps for Sale* and challenge children to balance several hats on their heads. Talk about and use sun hats. Designate one day as “Hat Day” and invite everyone to wear a favorite ball cap or hat.

**I is for Ink and stamps.**

Make stamps by cutting shapes from sponges or pieces of cushion foam. Cut and glue strips of rubber bands onto a piece of cardboard, making designs, letters, or numbers. Or wad up a piece of old rag, lunch sack, or plastic bread bag to use as a stamp. Children may also want to make fingerprints and compare them.

**J is for Jars.** Gather clear plastic jars with lids, freezer containers, and squeeze bottles in a variety of sizes. Invite children to store collections, sort materials according to attributes, mix liquids, or measure and compare capacities. Pour a cup of sand into large soda bottles. Cover the bottles and arrange them to be knocked down with a ball in a bowling game.

**K is for Keys.** Give babies keys to jingle on a ring. Encourage preschoolers to pretend to start cars, open door locks, and unlock secret treasure boxes. Help children sort keys by shape, color, size, or function. Play word games and ask, “Who holds the key to my heart?”

**L is for Leaves.** Sort leaves by color, shape, or texture. Apply paint to a leaf and then press it to paper to make a leaf print. Place a leaf between two pieces of wax paper, cover with a towel, and press with a medium dry iron to seal. Place a

leaf under a piece of light-colored construction paper and rub over it with the side of a crayon. Collect dry leaves, seeds, small twigs, and craft items and glue them to paper to make a collage.



**M is for Mud.** Dress children in old play clothes and invite them outdoors to mix dirt and water. Let them mold and squeeze the mud as they would with play dough. Provide cups, muffin tins, and pie pans for making mud pies and other goodies. Allow children to step with their bare feet into mud and feel it squish between their toes. Use mud to make handprints and footprints.

**N is for Numbers.** Count, count, count—children, items in a collection, napkins for snack, and blocks in the stack. Sing number rhymes, point out numerals on the class clock, reinforce correspondences by saying “one for each person” many times during the day. Draw numerals in chalk on the floor and call out a number as a temporary group gathering place.

**O is for Obstacle course.** Gather chairs, rope, pillows, and boxes to challenge children’s agility, balance, and endurance—indoors and out. Mark start and finish lines. Have older children

draw a simple map of the play yard with symbols for familiar objects and a dotted line with arrows to indicate a route children can follow.

**P is for Pictures and photographs.** Cut colorful pictures from old magazines to highlight classroom areas. Encourage children to practice scissor skills. Use photos of the children to identify and label belongings. Ask parents to send photos and have each child make a book about “My Family” or another topic.

**Q is for Quilt.** Hang an old quilt against a fence to make a shaded tent. Challenge children to identify matching fabric patches. Place a quilt on the ground to make a soft, padded surface for babies. Gather fabric scraps and make a quilt of your own.

**R is for Rhymes.** Smooth transitions, introduce vocabulary, and explore new concepts with rhymes—traditional and made-up—about colors, the weather, clothing, families, and pets. Clap, march, or dance in time to rhymes. Substitute nonsense words in familiar rhymes.

**S is for Sewing.** Gather fabric scraps, wooden or plastic spools, ribbon, buttons, bias tape, feathers, and thread for collages. Help children practice opening and closing safety pins—with no finger pricks. Introduce simple needle and thread work with yarn and hole-punched cardboard. Sort buttons by color, size, or number of holes.

**T is for Tools.** Kitchen, carpentry, and gardening tools invite experimentation and discovery. Offer sturdy, well-constructed, and lightweight hammers, pliers, trowels, eggbeaters, sieves, and plastic graters. Hammer golf tees

into Styrofoam, beat soapy water into bubble foam, and sift through garden soil to find rocks and worms.

**U is for Utensils.** Raid the kitchen for measuring spoons and metal or plastic cups, wooden spoons, cookie cutters, and pots with lids. Set up a pretend kitchen, restaurant, or housewares store. Prepare for meals by encouraging children to set their places with a placemat, plate, fork, spoon, napkin, and cup—each in the proper position for easy eating.

**V is for Vests.** Make simple felt, fleece, or paper vests to spice up dramatic play costumes. Ask for donations and scour thrift stores for men’s and women’s vests in a variety of colors, textures, and styles. A prize goes to the finder of a fringed, tie-dyed leftover from 1968.

**W is for Water.** Freeze water in ice cube trays and other containers and observe shapes and melting. Add food coloring to water and invite children to mix colors. At the end of hot summer days, turn on a water sprinkler hose for children to play in (while watering the lawn). Invite children to wash dolls and doll clothes, trikes, and wagons.

**X is for Xylophone.** Investigate sound, pitch, and rhythm by making and listening to music. Rhythm instruments provide opportunities to explore melody, harmony, and tempo. Listen to classical music, folk music, and ethnic music. Invite musicians to share their instruments in a short performance. Invite children to listen to music with their eyes closed and tell how the music makes them feel. Strike a variety of surfaces with a

mallet and discuss high- and low-pitched sounds. Listen to a variety of instrumental music and move with the children in response to what you hear.



**Y is for Yard.** Lay an old plastic shower curtain on the grass and invite children to finger paint and do other messy art activities. Read a story under a shade tree or tent. Have a picnic outdoors. Take children on a pretend camping trip by setting up a tent with bedrolls. Encourage children to lie on their backs on a quilt on the grass and identify shapes in the clouds. Lay out a hopscotch or shuffleboard course and teach children to play.

**Z is for Zipper.** Cut out short zippers from an assortment of small pants, jackets, and skirts. For each zipper, staple the sides onto a sturdy piece of cardboard, or sew the sides onto a piece of fabric. Encourage children to practice zipping to enhance fine-motor skills. Use zipper-type plastic bags to carry snack on a field trip or collect treasures on a nature walk. Make it into a bean bag by filling it with packing peanuts.