From Trash to Treasure

How many of you have purchased expensive toys for your kids and after a few minutes playing with the toy, the child becomes engrossed in playing happily with the box, the tissue, the wrapping paper, and the bow? Having an only child myself, I was often faced with this scenario. My son would look at the toy and toss it aside to climb in the box. Engagement with these ordinary objects of everyday life can provide endless hours of fun and stimulation. Today I would like to discuss how to take some everyday household items and turn them into fun toys for your children. Paying attention to the endless possibilities for entertainment and learning offered by the simplest things can really pay off in fun and growth for the child-and for the whole family.

The Principles of Play:

• Play is the child's natural way of learning by exploring the environment, testing capabilities, reinforcing skills, and trying out new behaviors.

• Play can be, and in fact, must be both interesting, fun and a successful experience for the child.

• Parents and families have constant contact with their children and are in the best position to identify their child's needs, encourage change, reinforce already acquired skills, and build new ones.

• Play activities can be adapted to make them easier or harder, simple or more complex, longer or shorter, in order to give the child a successful experience at the just right level of challenge.

• Play periods do not have to be long to be valuable.

Below are some inexpensive but very effective ways to expand the learning opportunities in children's play. These activities and toys can enhance skills in four areas: (1) sensory development; (2) gross motor development; (3) fine motor development; and (4) cognitive development. In each category I suggest several activities using common objects.

Sensory Skills Activities:
1) Hide and Find: Fill any size box with beans, rice, small uncooked pasta, clean sand, or other materials and hide various objects inside for the child to find. Anything can be used: pennies, plastic animals, blocks of different shapes, buttons, small toys, etc. The child can use one or both hands, with eyes open or closed, and can be asked to identify the various objects uncovered.

2) Clay, silly putty and play dough activities: These can be made or purchased. Edible clay in the form of cookie dough is always fun and can be baked and eaten as well. Children can shape the clay; roll it with fingers, hands, or tools; cut it with scissors; cut with cookie cutters, use toothpicks or golf tees to form letters, numbers or shapes; and hide objects inside it.

3) Bubbles: Commercially available bubble soap can be used, or you can make your own at home by adding glycerin to tear-free soap or baby shampoo. Use wands of varying shapes and sizes for blowing the bubbles. Games with bubbles include counting the bubbles, chasing them, breaking them between the fingers, stomping on them, and blowing them along a set course.

4) Finger painting using paints, shaving cream, peanut butter, whipped cream or chocolate pudding (for edible paint), or other substances suitable for smearing with the fingers or hands can provide endless fun. Substances with varying smells and colors can be purchased or made, and the child can paint using one or both hands. The paints can be placed in zippered plastic bags if the texture or the mess of the paints is a difficulty, and the delightful texture can be experienced through the plastic. Surfaces to be "painted" are available everywhere, from paper to the child's own arms or body parts, to mirrors where scraping away the paint or shaving cream allows the child to discover a familiar face. Shaving cream activities promote finger control as well as improve or increase sensory tolerance and discrimination. These can be used in the tub to write numbers, etc.

**Fine Motor Activities:**

Sorting activities can be especially fun because you can choose from so many items to sort and so many ways to grasp them: buttons, coins, candy, cotton balls, dry cereal, small toys, articles of clothing, jacks and literally anything that catches the child's interest. The use of tools for picking up the items is equally variable: tongs, pickle grabbers, tweezers, spring-type
clothespins, fingers, hands, and toes. All of these activities develop sensory skills, muscle skills and coordination, visual discrimination skills as well as cognitive skills when objects are sorted and then grouped by color, size, function, shape, or other categories.

1) Clothespin fun: Have the child hang things up on clotheslines or attach them to other things like curtains, furniture, or the child's own clothes. Use spring type or straight clothespins while sitting or standing. The amount of reaching involved can be varied to provide larger motions as well. Work on letter sequence, number and even spelling using clothespins.

2) Scissors games: The child can snip straws and make a necklace, cut out paper shapes to make puzzles or paste onto paper to make pictures, or snip play dough into small pieces and put it back together.

3) Stringing: string buttons on fishing chord, cheerios or fruit loops on spaghetti or on a pipe cleaner. Use tweezers to pick up and place.

4) Pennies: flip from head to tail, push into clay, put in rice box, pick up with tweezers and place in small jar, stand over a milk jug and drop pennies into jug. Count how many in 1 minute. Sort according to date.

5) Use squirt guns or spray bottles to erase chalk letters or numbers from outside wall. Use eyedropper to fill small medicine bottle.

6) Nuts, bolts and washers to sort organize and put together,

7) Use hole punch to make numbers, letters and shapes. Use different thickness of paper to make the activity more difficult.

8) Use the cup from the laundry detergent to make a Toss and Catch. Attach a small ball to a rubber band that has been cut and then to the cup, try to catch the ball in the cup.

9) Use old magazines to cut and paste or tear pages to make designs or build stories.

10) Use golf tees to push into Styrofoam to make letters, shapes or numbers.
**Gross Motor Activities:**

1) Hopping games are always a favorite of the active child. A child who has coordination or balance issues can also use hopping games to gain skills. Games with added sensory input such as sack racing or three legged races improve cooperation and motor skills.

2) Jumping rope is a skilled hopping activity that requires coordination of the upper and lower body. It is great to develop the upper body and arm strength and control needed for the later development of writing activities.

3) Ball games can include activities such as catching, throwing, bouncing, or rolling balls of varying sizes, weights, and textures, alone or in groups, sitting or standing, with one or both hands. Balls can be made by placing rice or beans inside socks and tossing the beanbags into containers to add sensory stimulation and texture to the activity. My particular favorite is tossing a bouncy ball and letting it bounce and then catching it with a scoop made from a Clorox or milk jug.

4) Fishing games can be made at home by cutting out differently shaped fish, birds, etc. and attaching a paper clip to each one. Help the child to catch the objects with a fishing rod made from a magnet on a string tied to a stick. Fish can have #’s or letters on them and can be caught on request or from an index card set of #’s or letters.

5) Hula Hoop activities can be used for a jump rope, to teach concepts of in, out over and under. Use old socks with a tennis or bouncy ball to make “flyers” to hit the target inside the hula-hoop.

6) Hang a rope in a tree, tie knots in it and have child climb arm over arm to a low limb. Swing from rope to target on ground: circle; square; triangle.

7) Walking on pillows or using newspapers to scrunch into palms and then straighten out by shaking arms.

8) Use paintbrush to paint with water on outside wall. Draw letters, numbers, and shapes.

9) Use empty soda bottles to make bowling set. Fill about 1 inch with sand and then toss ball at them to knock them down.
Cognitive Activities:

Most of the activities above include cognitive aspects that can be adapted to suit the child's needs. Sorting, counting, identifying, planning, and discussing the activities can add the necessary challenges to help develop important thinking skills. Here are a few more!

1) Close eyes and name 10 items in the room; describe the items
2) Have child locate an object in the room or along the highway that is a specific shape
3) Place items on a tray or table, have the child close eyes, move one object and then have the child identify what is missing.

Be creative, there are fun adventures out there waiting for you and your child. The most important part of the adventure is sharing the experience with your child. Play is fun; play with a parent is an exceptional experience for both you and your child! Both of you will come away from the activity with a new understanding of how much fun learning can become.