

21 Days of Preschool Fun!

By Joyce Herzog

Days at home with preschoolers can seem long and tiring, but these ideas are sure to bring a smile to your face as your little ones jump and enjoy twenty-one fun activities.

First let's think about what kinds of things children of preschool age can do independently. The youngest preschoolers (ages 2–3) can sort, match, stack blocks (and knock them down!), pour, fill, put in place (large, separated puzzle pieces). They can put things in order (from small to large or a number of objects from 1 to 5). Why do we call them toddlers? Because they quickly toddle away. Engage these little ones in cuddles and one-on-one play first; they'll soon wander away and find their own fun. Make sure there are enticing, safe toys available for them.

Most older preschoolers (ages 3–5) are ready for much more learning! They'll be developing skills such as speaking, drawing, tracing, coloring, copying, writing, counting, building, jumping, riding, and cutting and pasting. They seem to absorb information in a flash and love repeating it frequently. Let's fill their lives with wholesome sounds, sights, and activities.

It is important to stock your home with supplies to pull out in a moment to keep those little ones busy. Some possibilities are blocks, beads, puzzles, counters, beanbags, play dough, and preschool books. Don't keep all of those things in sight all the time! Have a cupboard that you alone can access; keep it closed in a childproof way so that you can get in quickly but the little ones cannot. You may prefer to have five to seven "daily boxes" or large, lidded containers that hold a variety of playthings. Stack them in a corner and shuffle through them day by day. Once a month, shuffle the contents and add a new toy to keep the fun fresh.

Now that you have a strong activity base, let's get on to 21 FUN times.

1. **Water Play** is a wonderful joy for most children; enjoy it at bath-time yearround, or use a small dish of water or even a pool outdoors on a summer day. Keep careful watch on the children if they are in water deeper than an inch! They'll enjoy plastic spoons, pitchers, squeeze toys, sponges, and containers of all sizes. Keep the room warm and stay near while the little ones splash, squeeze, pour, and enjoy.
2. **What's Hiding?** A plastic reclosable container about the size of a loaf of bread can be a wonderful reusable toy. Fill it with rice, cornmeal, or sand; then bury and hide ten small child-safe toys or implements in it. Using a timer, give each child a minute to search for the toys. Keep taking turns until all ten items have been recovered; then allow free play with the toys. On another day, add various sizes of plastic spoons, pitchers, a funnel, a strainer, and containers. Lead the children into exploring the best ways to pour from one container to another.
3. **Rolling Wheels:** Most children enjoy rolling toys (such as cars, balls, or animals on wheels, etc.). To make it even more fun, lean a board against a step to form a ramp. Your children will spend hours racing toys down the ramp while you water the garden or mow the lawn. Provide empty cans or containers, ribbon spools, and so forth; basically anything that will roll will be fine.

4. **Make sidewalk chalk!** You'll need plaster of Paris, one-cup containers for mixing (one for each color), molds (toilet paper tubes, muffin or drinking cups, or candle molds), and food coloring. Spoon $\frac{1}{2}$ cup of plaster of Paris into each mold. Add water according to instructions on plaster of Paris container. Stir well. Add food color as desired. Stir gently for swirled color or thoroughly for solid color. Allow each to stand until completely dry (overnight or more). Supervise children at play; not intended for children who may attempt to eat it.
5. **Fun with Tracing:** Provide a dull pencil and tracing paper (but no crayons) with some basic shapes (circle, square, triangle, etc.) drawn darkly on white paper; have them trace these simple shapes at first (circle, square, etc.). Then have them enhance the circle by turning it into a drawing of a face or turning the square into a house. Finally, let them color their drawing. Once they are successful at drawing the simple shapes, coloring books provide great tracing opportunities. Be sure to praise their efforts, use of colors, good tracing skills, original ideas, etc.
6. **Spelling Game:** Glue a small picture (dog, cat, tree, box, book, etc.) to a 4" x 6" index card. Use of stickers simplifies this greatly! Use a dark permanent marker to print the word for the picture (in lowercase letters) beneath it. Have your child use (magnetic, block, sponge, stamp, etc.) letters to spell the word that you have written.
7. **Matching Words:** Use the picture cards with words (#6). Print the same word again on an additional card. Have your child match the word card to the picture/word card. With this simple game, he is getting ready to read!
8. **Jump the Rope:** Lay a rope on the ground and have the children take turns jumping over it. Alternately, use two ropes and move them farther and farther apart.
9. **In and Out:** Obtain a hula-hoop for each child and show them how to jump in and out of it. Later use it as a "safe space" for the child to sit in while playing or listening.
10. **Make a Face:** Use a safe mirror; make a sad (happy, scared, surprised, pleased, angry, etc.) face and encourage your little ones to put the same "feeling on their face." Talk about how the emotions feel.
11. **Dominoes** are wonderful learning tools. Your youngest children can line up dominoes and watch as they fall in synchronized fashion. Older ones can match them by color or number. School-age children will enjoy adding (or even multiplying) the dots on each side and writing the number sentence (like $2 + 3 = 5$) represented by one domino.
12. **Food Preparation:** Let the little ones help make lunch by tearing lettuce for salad, spreading peanut butter or jam on a thin half-bagel, and/or slicing a banana with a plastic knife for dessert (sprinkles on top).
13. **What's Inside?** Use one sock or a dozen non-matching ones; any size will do. Put something in the sock and ask your children to identify it by feel. One by one, let each child reach in and try to identify the piece inside. The person to name it first gets to keep it for creative play after all the hidden items have been identified.

14. **Bubble Blowers** come in all kinds of shapes and produce wonderful results, but when you run out, just replace with your own homemade solution (1 cup water, 2 tablespoons light Karo syrup or 2 tablespoons glycerin, plus 4 tablespoons dishwashing liquid—gently stir to combine well). This is great for poolside, backyard, or a park but tends to get messy indoors!
15. **What's Missing?** Show and have the children name two items. Hide one. Ask which one is missing. Build to removing three items from ten shown and named.
16. **Estimating:** Have your children take turns predicting how many (beans, rocks, marbles, etc.) will fit in a (bottle cap, cup, basket, small box, jar, etc.). Then check it out and see who is closest!
17. **First Counting Game:** Roll a large die or spin a spinner. Name the number rolled. Count that number of items. Put them in a large container. Cheer a lot, clap, and encourage your child! When the container is full, the game is won!
18. **Dress Up!** Fill a trunk or a large cardboard box with scrounged extra clothing. Be sure to have wigs, hats, and scarves, purses, bags, and shoes, as well as skirts, shirts, aprons, and whatever you can find. Children will have hours of fun trying things on and making new outfits. They'll add many props over the years. Keep the camera and camcorder handy!
19. **Who can resist a parade?** An impromptu parade is always fun. Line up and march around the house or yard. Use costumes, decorated tricycles or bicycles, or pets on a leash to make it even more fun!

20. **Make Play Dough!**

Play Dough Recipe

- 1 cup flour
- 1 cup water
- ½ cup salt
- 1 T. vegetable oil
- 2 t. cream of tartar
- Food coloring

Stir all ingredients together in a medium- size saucepan. Stir over medium heat until the mixture pulls away from the pan (or microwave on high for 3 to 5 minutes stirring every minute until it is too hard to stir). Knead for a few minutes on a dry surface. (*Be careful! It is HOT!*) Store in an airtight container (reclosable plastic bag or container with tight-fitting lid). This play dough is even better than the store-bought kind. Help each child make a batch, and experiment with colors.

21. **Five-Minute Cleanup:** Great times to clean up are before lunch, nap, supper, and bed. Why clean up when they will only get it all out again? Because they are exercising and building thinking skills while also forming a good habit for life. Sorting toys, separating trash, and cleaning up teach decision-making while developing gross and fine motor skills and a work ethic. If the toys are not put away at least daily, the mess grows until it is "too hard" to clean up and takes all day (or a week!). It's best to start young and be consistent. Two or three "five-minute cleanups" every day may just save your sanity!

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