

Games for Toddlers

Toddlers learn by playing and they learn a lot between ages 1 and 3. At 1, a child may be working on a wobbly walk and just starting to use words. But by 3, most can balance briefly on one foot and speak in short sentences.

During these important years, toddlers will enjoy playing simple games with their parents and other caregivers. But they also can start enjoying group games with other young children, though they'll need adult assistance.

Group games offer a chance for kids to be social, though toddlers will more often play alongside their friends rather than *with* them. They enjoy being around other kids, but will focus more on the leader or parent.

Later, kids progress from side-by-side play (parallel play) to a kind of play that allows more give and take between them. Along the way, toddlers will enjoy group games and can begin learning important lessons from them, such as how to take turns.

Getting Started

Expect a little chaos at first. In other words, when toddlers play a game, you have to define "game" very loosely! They're full of energy and want to explore, so don't be surprised if they can't focus for long or follow rules to the letter.

With that in mind, try the group games below if you're having a party or hosting a playgroup.

Circle games are a mainstay for toddlers. It's an easy format — just gather your toddlers in a circle. Make sure all the children can see the adult leader and that everyone has room to move.

Game: Two Little Blackbirds

Number of kids: Any.

How the game is played: With singing and hand motions, the adult leads the children in a song about opposites.

- Two little blackbirds sitting on the hill
(*Start with your hands behind your back.*)

- One named Jack
(Bring one hand to the front with your pointer finger extended.)
- One named Jill
(Bring your other hand to the front with pointer finger extended.)
- Fly away, Jack!
(Put the hand and finger representing Jack behind your back.)
- Fly away, Jill!
(Do the same with your "Jill" hand.)
- Come back, Jack!
(Bring "Jack" back to front.)
- Come back, Jill!
(Bring "Jill" back to front.)

You can make up additional verses, such as the ones below. Just choose a spot for the birds to sit ("snow" in the first example). Then choose a pair of opposites and make the second of the words rhyme with the spot where the birds are sitting (snow and slow).

- Two little blackbirds sitting in the snow. One named Fast. One named Slow.
- Two little blackbirds sitting on a cloud. One named Soft. One named Loud.
- Two little blackbirds soaring in the sky. One named Low. One named High.

Tips for adults: Act out the words you're singing to emphasize the opposite pairs. If you're using the "fast/slow" variation, move your finger quickly or slowly.

What the game teaches: Opposites and imitation.

Game: Walking, Walking

Number of kids: Any, though a smaller number will probably be easier.

How the game is played: The verse is sung to the tune of "Frère Jacques" and the participants move according to the words of the song. They walk when singing about walking, hop when they sing about hopping, etc.

Walking, walking,

Walking, walking,

Hop, hop, hop!

Hop, hop, hop!

Running, running, running,

Running, running, running,

Now we stop.

Now we stop.

Tips for adults: Keep the circle of motion the right size for your group: large enough not to create traffic jams but small enough to keep the kids in the circle.

What the game teaches: Different types of gross motor movement, including how to be still.

Game: The Hokey-Pokey

Number of kids: Any.

How the game is played: An oldie but goodie. Everybody stands in a circle and does the motions to the corresponding words of the song. Toddlers won't know right from left at this point, but they'll understand the body part and can follow your lead.

- You put your left foot in,
- You put your left foot out,
- You put your left foot in, and you shake it all about!
- You do the Hokey Pokey
(*Raise hands in the air and wiggle fingers.*)
- And you turn yourself around
(*Turn around in a full circle.*)
- That's what it's all about!
(*Clap with each syllable.*)

Other body parts: other foot, hands, head, backside, whole self.

Tips for adults: Choose body parts that toddlers know, and throw in a new one now and then. Make sure to sing slowly enough that the kids can follow along.

What the game teaches: Names of body parts, following directions.

Game: Over the Water

Number of kids: Any.

How the game is played: A simple verse is sung and each child gets a turn to be the "star" of the song. Before each verse, the adult asks, "Anna, what would you like to catch?" and Anna might say, "A tiger." The verse is repeated with each child's name and chosen animal until everyone has had a turn.

- Anna over the water
(Move one hand across the body like a rippling wave.)
- Anna over the sea
(Move the other hand across the body in same way.)
- Anna catch a tiger
(Grab in front of you to "catch" the animal.)
- You can't catch me!
(Point at self or let the child chase you.)

Tips for adults: Sometimes kids will need help with choosing an animal. Keep momentum going by encouraging swift decision-making. Giving the child a choice between two animals he or she knows is a good strategy.

What the game teaches: Listening, waiting, and taking turns.

Parachute Games

Play parachutes are often used in childcare centers and child gym programs. They work well because they float down and create a dome effect underneath. If you don't have one, try a large bedsheet.

Game: Parachute

Number of kids: Enough to maneuver the parachute or sheet. A few adults will help.

How the game is played: Have the children and your adult helpers encircle the parachute or sheet. Raise it high overhead and say, "Up, up, up." Bring the parachute down low and say, "Down, down, down." Repeat several times. Lift the parachute up high again, cue your adult helpers, and say, "Under, under, under," then have everyone rush under the dome of the parachute or sheet.

What the game teaches: Gross motor movement, waiting, and listening.

Game: Umbrella

Number of kids: Enough to maneuver the parachute or sheet. A few adults will help.

How the game is played: Have the children hold the edges of the parachute or sheet. Say, "I hear thunder! I think it's going to rain!" while helping them shake the parachute or sheet. Lift the parachute or sheet high and let it fall, while calling the kids, one at a time, to run under the parachute or sheet. ("Sarah! It's raining! Run under the umbrella!") When everyone is under, play again. This time, have everyone get under the umbrella at once.

Tips for adults: Some kids just don't like having things put over their heads or faces, so watch to make sure that all kids are feeling safe and happy. If someone doesn't want to run under the parachute, you can say, "Josh likes the rain. He's going to help hold our umbrella!"

What the game teaches: Gross motor movement, waiting, and taking turns.

Games can be lots of fun for toddlers, but watch for signs of weariness. In other words, know when to stop if kids are getting tired, hungry, or bored. Maybe the next group activity needs to be having a snack or taking a nap!

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