125 Brain Games for Toddlers and Twos

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Jackie Silberg is an acclaimed speaker, teacher, and trainer on both early childhood development and music. You can arrange to have her speak, present, train, or entertain by contacting her through Gryphon House, PO Box 207, Beltsville MD 20704-0207 or at jsilberg@interserv.com.

125 Brain Games for Toddlers and Twos

simple games to promote early brain development

Jackie Silberg

Illustrated by Laura D'Argo

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Dedication

To the wonder and joy of young children

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Introduction

Playing with toddlers and two-year-olds is delightful. These little ones are affectionate, assertive, bouncy, challenging, curious, enchanting, energetic, funny, independent, joyful, lovable, nosey, observant, precious, self-confident, squirmy, surprising, and unpredictable.

This book is about helping to "grow" the brain of these lovely human beings by playing meaningful games with them. Whether it's through singing, dancing, cuddling, rocking, talking, smelling, or tasting, you can encourage the pathways of the brain to make new connections.

By the time a child is three, her brain has formed about 1000 trillion connections—about twice as many as adults have. A baby's brain is super-dense, and will stay that way throughout the first decade of life. Beginning at about age eleven, a child's brain gets rid of extra connections, gradually making order out of a thick tangle of "wires."

Some brain cells, called neurons, are hard-wired to other cells before birth. They control the heartbeat, breathing, and reflexes, and regulate other functions essential to survival. The rest of the brain connections are just waiting to be "hooked up." Brain cells are entirely planned for making connections. Each cell sends signals out to other brain cells and receives input from other cells. The signals, in the form of electrical impulses, travel down the length of the nerve cell. Certain chemicals (such as serotonin) travel from cell to cell, creating connections. A single cell can connect with as many as 15,000 other cells. The incredibly complex network of connections that results is often referred to as the brain's "wiring" or "circuitry." The connections neurons make with one another are called synapses. The receptive branches of the nerve cells, called dendrites, are growing and reaching out to form trillions upon trillions of synapses. The brain's weight triples to nearly adult size. While various parts of the brain develop at different rates, study after study has shown that the peak production period for synapses is from birth to about age ten.

How does the brain know which connections to keep? This is where early experience comes into play. Through repetition, brain connections become permanent. Conversely, a connection that is not used at all, or often enough, is unlikely to survive. Chances are a child submerged in language from birth will learn to speak very well. A child whose coos are met with smiles, rather than apathy, will likely become emotionally responsive. A

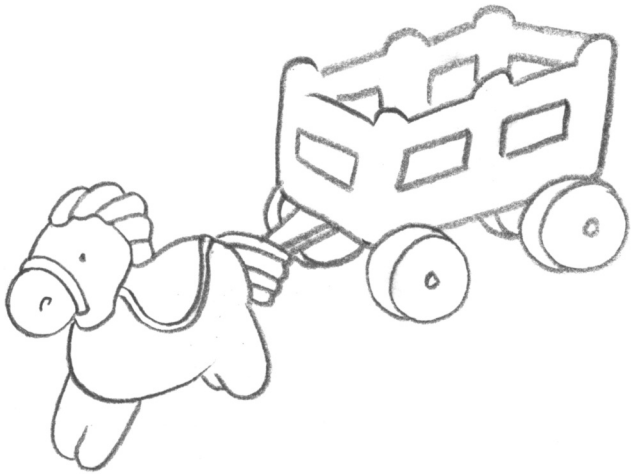
child who is rarely spoken to or read to in the early years may have difficulty mastering language skills later on. A child who is rarely played with may have difficulty later on with social adjustment. "The child who learns piano will learn those connections and, 20 years later, will learn to play again easier than someone who has not studied it," says Harry Chugani, a neuroscientist at Children's Hospital and Wayne State University in Detroit. The synapses that are not used repeatedly will die off while others will remain.

Scientists have learned more in the past ten years about how the human brain works than in all of previous history, and their knowledge is doubling every ten years! Their recent discovery that early childhood experiences profoundly shape the infant brain is changing the way we think about the needs of children. The research also supports the long-held beliefs that an individual's capacity to learn and thrive in a variety of settings depends on the interplay between nature (their genetic endowment) and nurture (the kind of care, stimulation, and teaching they receive); that the human brain is uniquely constructed to benefit from experience and from good teaching, particularly during the first years of life; and that, while the opportunities and risks are greatest during the first years of life, learning takes place throughout the human life cycle.

The very best way to develop young children's brain connections is to give children what they need, which is an environment that is interesting to explore, that is safe, and that is filled with people who will respond to their emotional and intellectual needs. Brain research supports what we already know: Young children need loving, supportive people in their lives who will sing to them, hug them, talk to them, read to them, not flash cards in their faces. All the games in this book develop the brain capacity of toddlers and two-year-olds. They are the building blocks for future learning—a good, solid beginning for little ones and enjoyable at the same time. Each game in the book refers to related brain research. We can help children grow and learn by asking them meaningful questions; by exposing them to a variety of experiences, activities, and toys; and, of course, by giving them love and security.

If you touch me soft and gentle,
If you look at me and smile,
If you talk to me and listen,
I will grow, really grow.
Anonymous

The Pushing Game



- Toddlers love to push things. They enjoy watching the movement and knowing that they have made the object move.
- Pushing games make a young child feel powerful and in control. They are a wonderful way to develop a toddler's confidence and coordination.
- Select several items for your child to push. Choose very lightweight objects such as a stuffed animal, a small toy, or a push toy.
- Say, "One, two, three, push," and then push one of the toys.
- Repeat the counting and encourage your child to do the pushing.
- When your little one keeps saying "tree" (meaning the word "three") all day long, you will know that she loves this game!

1

WHAT BRAIN RESEARCH SAYS

If the brain's neurons that are connected with sight and motor skills are not trained at an early age, by adulthood they will simply not be "plastic" enough to be rewired for many experiences.

12 to 15 Months

2

What brain research says

According to Dr. Bruce Perry, a psychiatrist at Baylor College of Medicine, children who don't get their quota of TLC early in life may lack the proper wiring to form close relationships.

Lots of TLC

- This game develops nurturing skills.
- Sit on the floor with your toddler and put two or three of your toddler's favorite stuffed animals on the floor with you.
- Pick up one of the stuffed toys and cuddle it in your arms. Say loving words like, "Playing with you is so much fun," "I love your brown fur," or "I love to hug you."
- Now do the same thing to your child.
- Give your child one of the animals and ask her to cuddle it and give it kisses.
- Keep the game going as long as your toddler is interested. You will soon notice that your toddler will be playing the game by herself.

3

Practicing Parentese

- The word "parentese" means to speak and sing to your child in a high-pitched voice.
- Practice singing some of your favorite songs like "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star," "Do you Know the Muffin Man?" or "I've Been Working on the Railroad" in a parentese voice.
- Hold your child close to you and sing the songs two ways—first, the regular way and second, the parentese way.
- Your toddler will pay particular attention to the second time you sing.

WHAT BRAIN RESEARCH SAYS

Because young children pay close attention to the high-pitched, singsong speech known as "parentese," they will learn the importance of words.

12 TO 15 MONTHS

4

WHAT BRAIN RESEARCH SAYS

Minerals in the body are the raw materials necessary for building brain connections. One reason some children learn to crawl and walk earlier than others is that they produce minerals earlier in their development.

Crawl to the Toy

- When your toddler is crawling, encourage this movement with the following game.
- Place a favorite toy at one end of the room.
- Get down on the floor and crawl to the toy. When you reach the toy, pick it up and pretend that it says, "Come on (child's name), can you come get me?"
- Encourage your little one to crawl to the toy.
- If your child is getting ready to walk, place the toy at a higher level so that she will try to pull herself up to reach it.
- It's also a lot of fun to crawl around in a circle with your child.

5

1, 2, 3, Bump

- Sit your toddler on your lap facing you.
- Say, "One, two, three, bump." On the word "bump," hold her head and bump it very gently against yours.
- Say the words again and this time gently bump noses on the word "bump."
- Continue the game, gently bumping different parts of the body such as elbows, knees, cheeks, ears, and chins.

WHAT BRAIN RESEARCH SAYS

Touch stimulates the brain to release important hormones that allow your child to grow. Your love is the key to the powerful connection between the two of you, but the expression of your love affects the way her brain forms connections.

12 to 15 Months

6

What brain research says

Recent studies have shown how exposure to music affects spatial-temporal reasoning—the ability to see a disassembled picture and mentally piece it back together. Such reasoning underlies math, engineering, and other disciplines.

Rock-a-bye Baby

- Hold your child in your arms and rock her back and forth as you sing lullabies and other soothing songs, such as the following.
  - "Goodnight, Irene"
  - "Hush Little Baby" (The Mockingbird Song)
  - "Kumbaya"
  - "Rock-a-bye Baby"
  - "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot"
- Use a rocking motion to calm your child and develop trust between the two of you.
- After the last line of the song, hold your toddler close and give her a big hug.

7

Peekaboo Games

- Peekaboo is not only fun for your toddler, it is also very important for "growing" the brain.
- You can play peekaboo by...
  - covering your eyes with your hands.
  - putting a towel over your face.
  - hiding behind a door or large piece of furniture and popping out.
  - putting your toddler's hands over her eyes and then taking them away.
  - placing a toy or stuffed animal under a cover and pulling the cover away.
  - drawing a face on your thumb with a marker and hiding your thumb under your other fingers.

WHAT BRAIN RESEARCH SAYS

With every game of peekaboo, thousands of connections among brain cells are formed or strengthened, adding a bit more definition and complexity to the intricate circuitry that will remain largely in place for the rest of the child's life.

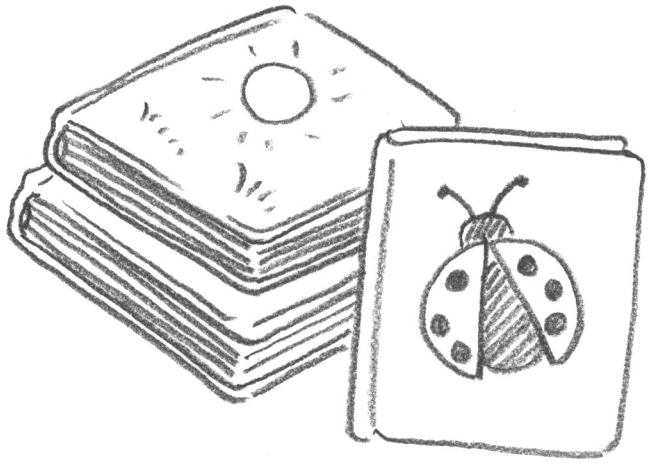
12 to 15 Months

8

What brain research says

Reading or telling a story to your child will help "grow" her brain and encourage her to associate books with what she loves the most—your voice and closeness.

Reading Games



- There are many ways you can help your toddler develop a love of reading, including the following.
  - Encourage your toddler to play with books such as *Pat the Bunny,* Dorothy Kunhardt's classic touch-and-feel book, and cloth or sturdy cardboard books.
  - Point to pictures in books and name the various objects.
  - Sing the nursery rhymes in books.
  - Vary the tone of your voice, make funny faces, or do other special effects when you read to stimulate your child's interest in books and stories.
  - Read to your toddler often, but for short periods of time.

9

Yum, Yum

- Develop your toddler's language skills when you prepare a meal or snack by chanting the following verse or singing it to the tune of "The Farmer in the Dell."

  It's time to find the milk
  It's time to find the milk
  Hi, ho, the derry oh
  It's time to find the milk.

- Walk to the refrigerator and take out the milk carton. Say, "Oh boy, I love milk. Yum, yum."
- Use the chant with other foods or household items. Take out the item, chant the verse, then talk about the food.
- Expressing pleasant emotions with your toddler is very good for brain development.
- In addition, games such as this one develop language skills.

WHAT BRAIN RESEARCH SAYS

Tone and facial expressions are understood before words. Emotional learning is intertwined with all domains of learning.

12 to 15 Months

10

What brain research says

For a young child's brain to grow and thrive, the child needs to be loved, held, talked to, read to, and allowed to explore.

Song Patting

- Try song patting when changing a diaper, giving your toddler a bath, or any time.
- Sing your favorite song to your toddler and, at the same time, pat her tummy or back with your index finger to the rhythm of the song.
- Always end the song with a snuggly kiss.
- You can also sing one line of the song and pat only one word. For example, "Twinkle, twinkle, little (pat the word "star" but don't sing it)."
- This game helps develop a child's sense of rhythm and her listening skills.

11

Bouncing, Bouncing

WHAT BRAIN RESEARCH SAYS

Positive interactions with caring adults stimulate a child's brain, causing synapses to grow and existing connections to be strengthened.

- This enjoyable bouncing game is a great bonding experience for you and your toddler.
- Put your child on your lap facing you. Hold her firmly under the arms.
- Say the following as you bounce your child on your lap.

Bouncing, bouncing, let's go bouncing.
Up and down,
All around.
Bouncing, bouncing, let's go bouncing.
Whoops, don't fall down. (tip your toddler to one side)

- Say the poem again and "tip" to the other side.
- Repeat the poem and on the word "whoops" open up your knees while holding your toddler firmly and let her fall back.

12 to 15 Months

12

What brain research says

Children who have loving, consistent, sensitive caretakers will have social and cognitive skills in childhood that are superior to those of children who did not benefit from such care.

Go to Bed Late

- Hold your toddler in your lap and say the following rhyme. Hold her hands up high in the air for the word "tall" and down to her toes for the word "small."

  Go to bed late,
  You will stay very small.
  Go to bed early,
  You will grow very tall.

- You can also hold her while you are standing. This time hold her high in the air for the word "tall" and down to the ground for the word "small."
- Doing things with your toddler that you both enjoy will form a strong bond between you.

13

The Singsong Game

- This delightful game enhances a child's language skills.
- Instead of speaking words in your regular voice, try using a singsong voice; make your voice sing the sounds of the words upward and then downward.
- The famous "naa naa naa naa naa naa" to the same melody as "Ring Around the Rosy" is a singsong sound.
- Sing sentences like "Let's go play with blocks" or "I am going to tickle you."
- Sit on the floor with your toddler and put one of her favorite stuffed toys in your lap. Sing to the toy in your singsong voice and then give the toy to your little one.
- If she tries to copy you, you will soon hear your toddler playing the same game when she is by herself.

WHAT BRAIN RESEARCH SAYS

Talking to a young child increases the number of words that she will recognize and eventually understand. She also will learn better when occasionally spoken to in singsong tones.

12 TO 15 MONTHS

14

WHAT BRAIN RESEARCH SAYS

Small muscle exercises stimulate brain growth. Researchers have verified the positive effects of finger and hand movements on the brain.

Jack in the Box

- This game develops fine motor skills.
- Say the following rhyme and do the accompanying motions.

Jack in the box, Jack in the box (make a fist with your right hand and hide your thumb inside)

It's time to wake up and smile. (knock on your fist with your other hand)

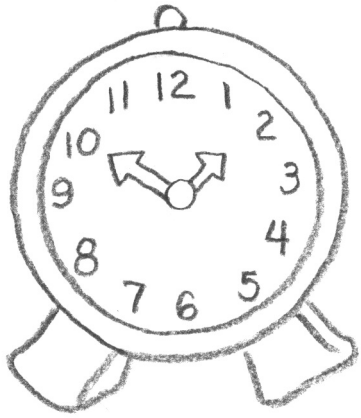
One, two, three, four (keep knocking)

Out Jack pops from his little round door. (pop your thumb out from inside your fist.)

- Repeat the poem and encourage your toddler to do the actions with you.

15

Good Sounds, Bad Sounds



- Toddlers may become frightened by certain sounds.
- Helping your toddler become aware of sounds may reassure her that sounds are good.
- Listen to a clock and see if you can copy the sound.
- Go from room to room and listen for sounds. Listen to a heat register, to an icemaker, or to a radio playing.
- You can also create sounds by opening and closing a door, a window, or a drawer.

WHAT BRAIN RESEARCH SAYS

Emotional stability is greatly affected by how the brain develops in the first two years of life.

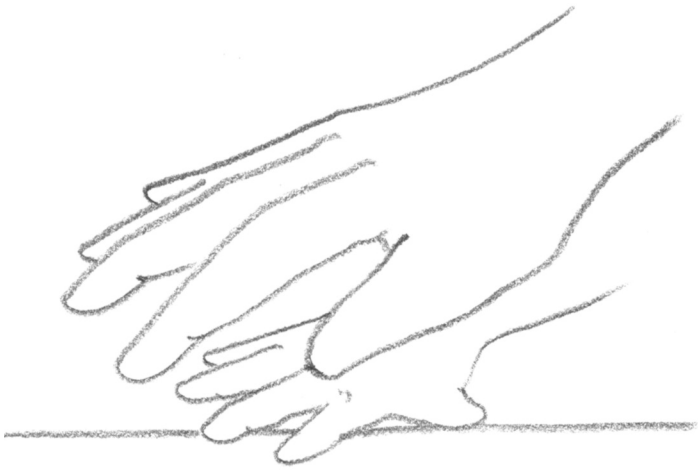
15 to 18 Months

16

What brain research says

Research shows that sensory experiences and social interactions with supportive adults develop thinking abilities.

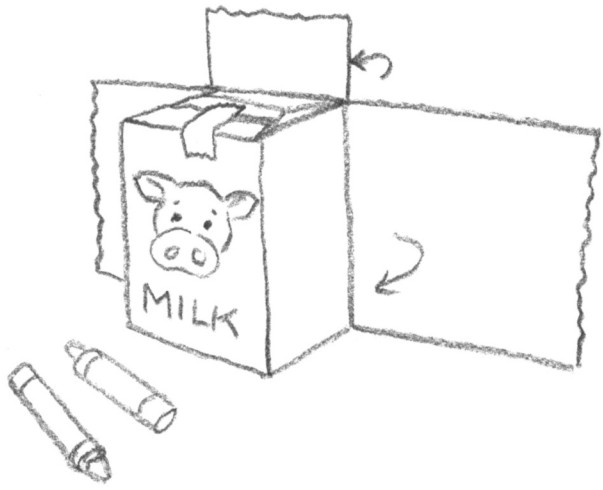
Saying Names



- This game develops toddlers' thinking skills.
- When toddlers are learning to talk, they like to say their own name again and again. Sometimes they call others by their own name because they haven't learned that the name and the person are the same.
- To help toddlers learn that people and objects each have separate names, touch an object, such as a table.
- Take your toddler's hand and put it on the table as you say the word "table."
- Now say, "(child's name) is touching the table." As you say the words, touch the table.
- Repeat this game by touching other objects or parts of the child's body.
- Do this with other objects or with people the child knows.

17

Early Block Fun



- Make disposable blocks out of small milk cartons.
- Tape all of the ends together and cover the cartons with contact paper.
- Encourage your toddler to decorate the blocks with crayons or stickers.
- Play a stacking game with your toddler. Praise him each time he stacks one block on top of another.
- Sometimes your toddler may have more fun knocking down the stacks.
- The great thing about these blocks is that you can throw them away when they get worn out.
- Decorating these blocks and stacking them help develop fine motor skills.

WHAT BRAIN RESEARCH SAYS

Although fine and gross motor skills require the same physical foundations, they develop separately. If a child is putting lots of effort into gross motor skills one week, he won't be working much on fine motor skills at the same time.