

Smartphone Free Childhood

Connecting, empowering and uniting parents, educators and regulators to delay smartphones and social media, establish phone-free schools, and safeguard the use of technology in education.

A Parent's Guide: Screen free activities that support child development



Occupational Therapists (OT's) view purposeful play and daily routines as a child's primary "occupations." To support healthy, holistic childhood development, activities must stimulate multiple systems simultaneously: **sensory processing** (vestibular, proprioceptive, tactile), **motor skills** (fine and gross), **emotional regulation**, and **cognitive growth**.

Here is a list of screen-free activities categorised by developmental stages, that foster foundational growth:



Infants & Crawlers (Ages 0 to 1)

Developmental Focus: Sensory integration, core strength, head control, hand-eye coordination, and spatial awareness.

Elevated Tummy Time with Mirrors: Place a child-safe mirror or highly textured board books just out of reach during tummy time.

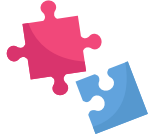
Developmental Benefit: Builds neck, shoulder, and core strength necessary for later milestones like sitting and crawling. Visual tracking and self-awareness are also stimulated.

Sensory Laundry Basket Sitting: Place a sitting infant inside a laundry basket surrounded by safe objects of varying textures (a bumpy sensory ball, a silky scarf, a crinkly paper bag, a smooth wooden spoon).

Developmental Benefit: Provides vestibular support for sitting balance while encouraging tactile exploration and bilateral integration (using both hands to investigate).

Sticky Tape / Ribbon Pull: Tape dynamic ribbons or large pieces of painter's tape securely to the floor or a low wall for the baby to peel off.

Developmental Benefit: Enhances pincer grasp (fine motor), finger isolation, and hand strength, while building cause-and-effect cognitive skills.



Toddlers (Ages 1 to 3)

Developmental Focus: Bilateral coordination, heavy work (proprioception for calming), midline crossing, and language-rich sensory play.

Heavy Work "Animal Walks" & Carrying: Have toddlers pretend to be bears (on hands and feet) or crabs, or give them a functional task like pushing a heavy basket of books across the room.

Developmental Benefit: Activates proprioception (sensory input to muscles and joints), which helps develop body awareness, core stability, and acts as a natural nervous system regulator to help toddlers calm down.

Water Pouring & Scooping Stations: A simple basin filled with water, cups of different sizes, sponges, and funnels on the kitchen floor or outside.

Developmental Benefit: Fosters bilateral integration (one hand holds the cup, the other pours), hand strength (squeezing sponges), and early math concepts like volume and containment.

The "Vertical" Sticker Peel: Place stickers or post-it notes on a wall or glass door slightly above their chest level, encouraging them to reach up and peel them off.

Developmental Benefit: Working on a vertical surface naturally extends the wrist, which is crucial for developing the structural hand strength needed for writing later on. It also promotes shoulder stability.



Preschool & Kindergarten (Ages 4 to 5)

Developmental Focus: Fine motor precision, motor planning, spatial concepts, tripod grasp preparation, and emotional regulation.

Playdough Construction with Tools: Moving beyond just squeezing dough—incorporate hidden objects to find (beads or coins), rolling pins, scissors to cut the dough "snakes," and toothpicks to build 3D structures.

Developmental Benefit: Deepens intrinsic hand muscle strength and separation of the two sides of the hand (essential for holding a pencil and using scissors correctly).

Playground "Heavy" Circuits: Climbing ladders, hanging from monkey bars, swinging, and sliding.

Developmental Benefit: Stimulates the vestibular system (balance and movement in space). Hanging builds the upper body strength required to sit upright at a school desk without fatigue.

Sensory Bin Foraging & Sorting: A tub filled with dry rice, beans, or lentils. Hide small toys or buttons inside and have the child retrieve them using kitchen tongs or tweezers.

Developmental Benefit: Refines the pincer grasp, hand-eye coordination, and motor planning, while the tactile input can be highly grounding for emotional regulation.



Early Elementary / Primary (Ages 6 to 9)

Developmental Focus: Complex motor planning, bilateral coordination, executive functioning, and visual-spatial skills.

Origami & Paper Airplane Engineering: Folding paper precisely to create shapes or functional flyers.

Developmental Benefit: Demands high-level bilateral coordination, visual-spatial reasoning, and motor planning. It also builds frustration tolerance and task persistence.

Chalk Obstacle Courses & Hopscotch: Drawing a sequence of actions on the pavement (e.g., spin 3 times, jump on one foot, clap twice, touch your toes).

Developmental Benefit: Builds motor sequencing (following steps in order), dynamic balance, and rhythm. Having the child draw the course adds a layer of visual-motor planning.

Threaded Crafts (Friendship Bracelets, Finger Knitting, Beading): Using yarn, beads, or embroidery floss to create patterns.

Developmental Benefit: Excellent for refining hand-eye coordination, bilateral hand use (one hand stabilizes while the other manipulates), and sustained attention span.

More screen-free ideas:

The best way to reduce screen time is to fill that time with engaging, high-quality alternatives that support development. Here are some more screen-free activity ideas for younger children, categorized by the core skill they help build:



Creative & Fine Motor Skills

- **Play-Doh/Clay Station:** Use cookie cutters, plastic knives, and rolling pins. You can easily make homemade play-dough too!
- **Painting/Stamping:** Instead of traditional brushes, try sponges, cotton balls clipped with clothespins, or painting with Q-tips for detail work.
- **Sticker Fun:** Give your child a stack of dot stickers and a piece of paper. This simple task is fantastic for pincer grasp development.
- **Process Art:** Provide simple, open-ended materials like glue, tape, tissue paper, recycled cardboard, and let them create without a specific goal. The process, not the final product, is the focus.



These activities help strengthen the small muscles in the hands (essential for writing later on) and encourage creative expression.



Active & Gross Motor Skills

- **Indoor Obstacle Course:** Use couch cushions, pillows, blankets, and tunnels. Have them crawl under a chair, step over a pillow, or throw a beanbag into a basket.
- **"Tape Track":** Use painter's tape on the floor to create roads, train tracks, or mazes for them to push toy cars or walk along.
- **Dancing/Movement Games:** Put on some music and play "Freeze Dance." You can also lead a fun "follow the leader" game with actions like hopping, skipping, or crawling.
- **Outside Exploration:** Take a walk and focus on a specific task: collecting three pinecones, finding a red leaf, or counting how many birds you see.



Activities that get the whole body moving, improving coordination and strength



Language & Cognitive Skills

- **Reading:** Don't just read the words; ask questions! "What do you think the dog is feeling here?" "Where else have we seen that color?"
- **Socks and Laundry Sorting:** Put out a big pile of clean, unmatched socks and ask them to find the pairs. This is great for visual discrimination and matching.
- **Simple Puzzles & Matching Games:** Start with large, knobbed puzzles and gradually move to 25-piece puzzles. Picture-based "Memory" or matching games are also excellent.
- **Imaginary Play (The Best!):** Give them a prop (a blanket becomes a cave, a box becomes a spaceship, a wooden spoon becomes a magic wand) and let them direct the action. Join in as a character!



These ideas promote problem-solving, vocabulary, and memory.



Pro Tip: The "Rotation Bin"

Keep a few special toys or activity supplies (like blocks, specific puzzles, or craft materials) out of sight and rotate them every week or two. This makes the old toy feel new again and helps limit overwhelming clutter.

