

SKILL BUILDING OPPORTUNITIES

Making A Mess With Toys

Question: My toddler doesn't play with her toys. She dumps them all out and puts them into different ones, over and over. How can I get her interested in actually playing with her toys instead of making a mess?

You can support your toddler learning and having fun by promoting the life skill of Critical Thinking.

Critical Thinking is the ongoing search for valid and reliable knowledge to guide beliefs, decisions and actions.

1

Support your child's explorations.

Before your child can play pretend or use toys in more sophisticated ways, she needs to explore objects, test out her ideas and see what happens. You can help support your child's developing play skills by promoting the life skill of Critical Thinking.

Fundamental to Critical Thinking is being able to come up with theories. Young children are constantly developing concepts and ideas through their everyday experiences. They seem driven by the need to understand and to master information about what's in their world. Alison Gopnik of the University of California at Berkeley says:

Children are using the same kinds of processes as scientists. They're making up theories about what's going on around them; they're checking to see if those theories fit what they see and what other people are telling them. And they're testing those theories by asking questions and making predictions. You [can] see this in their play.

When your child dumps and fills containers or takes things apart, she is trying to understand how things work. She needs this foundation before she can begin to engage in more advanced play. Nurture your child's curiosity:

- **Watch your child at play and look for "theory making" in action.** What is she trying to understand? For example, when your child fills containers, is she filling them with the same amount of items each time? Is she putting in different sized objects? What big ideas like size or shape or another category could she be exploring?
- **Join with your child in her discoveries by asking questions or commenting on what she is doing like:** "I wonder what will happen if you fill that bucket all the way to the top?" When you help your child think of different possibilities, you encourage her to think flexibly and try out ideas to get new information.

2

Give your child opportunities to repeat interesting activities in ways that are acceptable to you.

Kurt Fischer of Harvard University talks about the basics of how adults and children learn:

For more ways to help your child learn and develop, visit
mindinthemaking.org and vroom.org

MIND in the Making
The Seven Essential Life Skills Every Child Needs

There's a basic mechanism for learning: [when] we find something interesting to us, we try to control it, we try to make it happen again, we try to change it or we try to manipulate it. You see very early in babies that they're trying to reproduce interesting things; take control of interesting things.

Even if you know what will happen each time she takes all of the shirts out of her drawer, your child is still working toward mastering these ideas through repetition. If you feel like things are getting too messy, find an alternative activity that you are comfortable with, like giving your child a small box and pairs of socks to put in and dump out.

- **Set up a space in the house that is the "dumping spot."** Put a pillow on the ground so your child can clearly see where it is. Let her know that she can dump things here as much as she wants. Gently remind her and guide her to the spot when she starts her dump and fill routine.

3

Take your child's interests to the next level.

Patricia Kuhl of the University of Washington notes the important role that parents have in their children's learning journey when they support their children's interests:

As I've watched my own child grow, there are various times and various things that light her up. As parents and as caretakers of a whole generation of kids, we need to be tuned in to that engagement process.

You have already noticed what your child is interested in: dumping and filling. Now you can build off of that interest to deepen her learning and work toward new play ideas:

- **Offer your child lots of opportunities to explore dumping and filling in new and different ways.** Give her boxes, bags and empty containers of different sizes to fill with items.
- **Create experiments that involve dumping and filling: "Do you think this empty shampoo bottle will float? What would happen if we filled it with water? Let's see."** Even though your child cannot yet answer your questions, you are demonstrating important Critical Thinking skills like making predictions, testing out ideas and coming up with new strategies based on the answers.

4

Model more advanced play.

Your child needs you to help her understand what different objects are used for so she can then move on to more complicated pretend play. As your child gets older, she will be able to add more details to these pretend scenes but, for now, she needs your guidance and suggestions.

- **Set up simple play situations for your child.** Just stirring a spoon in a bowl or pretending to drink water from a cup or putting your head down and saying "night, night" are early steps in pretend play and show your child how to use these important and familiar objects.

- **Encourage your child to fill a bag and pretend to take a walk to the store together:** "Let's put our keys inside the bag and remember to take something to play with. OK, here we go!"
- **Use dumping and filling as an opportunity to strengthen your child's ability to make connections by sorting objects and putting them into categories.** Show your child different ways to group objects, like by size or color. Clean up is a great time to work together and put all of the big items in the big container and little objects in a smaller one.

5

Narrate your child's experiences.

By giving your child the words for her actions and the objects she is using, you are helping her understand cause and effect and how things work. You are building your child's vocabulary and Critical Thinking skills at the same time.

- Think of yourself as a sports announcer and give a play-by-play description of what your child is doing: "You dumped out all of the blocks. Now the bucket is empty!"
- Use these moments as opportunities to talk about ideas like "big" and "small," "full" and "empty" and "more" and "less". These are basic concepts in subjects like math and science, areas in which Critical Thinking skills are essential.

6

Promote scientific thinking.

Maureen Callanan of the University of California at Santa Cruz has been examining parents' role in promoting children's scientific reasoning in everyday activities. Callanan says that when parents search for answers, they demonstrate a process of inquiry to their children:

What I think is important about the way parents tend to respond is that they are usually encouraging the kids to do this kind of questioning, guiding them in thinking about how [to find] answers to questions.

Even at this young age, you can encourage your child to think like a scientist. As she plays, you can model what is sometimes called "the scientific method"—a problem-solving process that relies on Critical Thinking skills.

- **Help her focus on a question or an idea she might be exploring:** "You're putting all of the spoons in the big bowl."
- **Guide her to gather new evidence, just like a scientist:** "I wonder what will happen if we put the spoons in the small bowl?"
- **Help your child interpret the results of your experiment:** "The little bowl doesn't fit all of the spoons. It is too small."