Activities for Early Intervention
Parent handout

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Think back to your own childhood and your favorite toy or activity. Children are often happiest and most engaged with simple toys like boxes and I’ll bet your memories involve things like playing in a box, making your own toys, and/or rolling down a hill on the grass. Good toys for children need not be expensive or elaborate. Most of today’s toys do everything for a child. The following activities are inexpensive, allow the child to do and promote development of language, cognition, motor skills, and imagination. Here are some of my favorites.

1. **An Empty box.** All you need is an empty cardboard box for hours of fun. You can use it to make Box tunnels, and let your child crawl in and out. My children loved to make cardboard playhouses, and to decorate it by scribbling or using a small roller or brush to paint it. Your child can use it as calm down corner, or a place to go to look at books and play quietly. The opportunities for make-believe are endless. You can take small square tissue boxes and use as blocks for stacking. You can make a pull toy out of small shoe boxes by taping them together, and attaching a short rope in the front-have your child take his stuffed animals for a ride. Your children can also take turns getting in the box and pushing each other around the house. Benefits: opportunities to improve gross motor skills, especially crawling and creeping, and to develop spatial awareness. In addition it provides opportunities to engage in heavy work as part of a sensory diet.

2. **Peek-a-Boo in a Rice tray.** I use a large tupperware type container with top which is easy to transport. Parents also like to use a container with top so that it can be safely stored and does not attract rodents. Take pictures of your children’s favorite characters (can take the cover off a coloring book) and place in bottom of the tray. Cover it with rice. Play peek-a-boo with the child by pushing the rice aside to see the pictures. Can use pictures of family members, animals, etc.

   (Benefits: object permanence and calming sensory activity. Can also stimulate language by naming objects).

   Variation: Laminate the pictures and make a placemat. Cover with shaving cream or whipped cream and play the same game.

3. **Coffee Can Fun.** Put an X in the top of a coffee can lid with a razor knife (scissors will make a jagged edge that can cut little fingers). Buy golf waffle balls or ping pong balls (golf waffle balls are slightly bigger so pose less of a choking risk and are cheaper). Have the child pop them into the can-makes a great noise and I find children love it and want to do it over and over. Benefits: pre-buttoning activity that strengthens little hands, helps develop the arches of the hand, and encourages eye-hand coordination.
4. **Snapple lid fun.** A variation on the above activity but a bit harder. Make a slot in a coffee can lid to fit a Snapple lid. Have the child try to push the lid thru the slot. Milk container tops are also great to use and come in different colors so you can work on color recognition as well as fine hand skills.

5. **Homemade pegboard.** This pegboard is the best and so easy to make. Save your large margarine, or cool-whip container, or use an inexpensive food storage you can get at the dollar store. Take golf tees and push holes in the top of the container. Voila-instant pegboard. Tees can be stored in the container. Children can pretend they are putting candles in a birthday cake. When all the holes are filled, sing a chorus of “Happy Birthday to You”. (Benefits: sorting, color recognition, fine motor, focused attention). Caution: watch that the child does not put in their mouth and chew or poke in eyes or ears. Need close supervision. (appropriate for 22 months and up).

6. **Clothespin dolls.** Another great coffee can activity. You need to get the old fashioned clothespins which are not easy to find these days (spring kind are too hard for children under 3). Using a black marker, put two dots for eyes and a smiley face on the top knob of the clothespin. Fill the coffee can with the “dolls”. Children have fun opening up the can and dumping out the “dolls”. (or learning to ask “Open”-can teach them the sign if they cannot yet speak) Then show them how to “sit the dolls on the fence” by placing them on the lip of the coffee can. Children 12 to 15 months of age should be able to do this, but I use this activity with many of my 2 year olds as well. I have seen siblings age 3 to 5 enjoy this activity as they play it in a more imaginative way, giving the dolls family members names and role playing with them.

7. **Water Fun.** The dollar store has packages of sponges for children in delightful shapes and colors. Stand the child on a kitchen chair at the sink and fill with lukewarm water. Have your child squeeze the water out of the sponges. For older children, simple squeeze toys that squirt water are fun, as are toys you can wind up and make them swim. By the time they are 2, they can “wash dishes”. My own kids used to spend hours “washing” my plastic cups and bowls, and making “soup” with the contents of the salt and pepper shaker.

And remember to always have Fun!