EARLY INTERVENTION FOUNDATION

Activities and toys that support caregiver–child interaction in the early years

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About EIF

The Early Intervention Foundation (EIF) is an independent charity established in 2013 to champion and support the use of effective early intervention to improve the lives of children and young people at risk of experiencing poor outcomes.

Effective early intervention works to prevent problems occurring, or to tackle them head-on when they do, before problems get worse. It also helps to foster a whole set of personal strengths and skills that prepare a child for adult life.

EIF is a research charity, focused on promoting and enabling an evidence-based approach to early intervention. Our work focuses on the developmental issues that can arise during a child's life, from birth to the age of 18, including their physical, cognitive, behavioural and social and emotional development. As a result, our work covers a wide range of policy and service areas, including health, education, families and policing.

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Contents

The learning that takes place during the first five years of life lays the foundation for all future learning.

In our 2018 review, *Key competencies in early cognitive development: Things, people, numbers and words*, we describe how this learning occurs through four core cognitive competencies that develop during the first five years of life.[1]

- Children's **understanding of objects** includes their knowledge of the physical properties of objects, their function and their relationship to each other. This knowledge plays a critical role in the development of problem-solving skills as children grow older, predicting their performance on intelligence tests in primary school and academic success in secondary school.
- Children's **theory of mind** involves the ability to accurately predict the thoughts and feelings of others. Theory of mind skills are essential for children to empathise and communicate effectively. Studies show that theory of mind skills at age 4 predict children's friendships in primary and secondary school.
- Children's **knowledge of numbers** and numerical relationships include a child's ability to distinguish differences in size, the recognition of numeric symbols, and the ability to count, add and subtract. Children's understanding of numbers during the first five years is consistently associated with their mathematical achievement in primary and secondary school. Mathematical achievement in turn is consistently found to be the strongest predictor of children's success in entering the workforce later in life.
- Skills to understand and communicate effectively through **language** include the ability to distinguish differences in sounds, a child's understanding of vocabulary, the ability to put words together in the appropriate order, and their understanding of the various uses of language to communicate effectively. Children's communication skills strongly impact on other important child competencies, including the competencies described in our review as well as children's social, emotional and behavioural development. The ability to communicate effectively is also highly predictive of children's academic attainment.

Our *Key competencies* report also considered how inherited and environmental factors either support early cognitive development or place it at risk. A key finding was the important role parents and other caregivers play in creating a home learning environment that includes enriching toys and activities, provided within the context of warm and nurturing caregiving support.

This guide was written as a companion to our *Key competencies* report, with the primary aim of providing early years practitioners with practical examples of what these activities are, so that they can promote them through their ongoing work with families and children.

1 See: https://www.eif.org.uk/report/key-competencies-in-early-cognitive-development-things-people-numbers-and-words

About this guide

This guide describes over 80 activities that support children's optimal development within the four competencies described in our main review. This guide is intended to be used as a companion to our *Key competencies* report, and not as a shopping list or 'how to' guide to be given to caregivers in the absence of other advice.

When providing this advice, it is important to recognise that families will differ in their ability to buy toys and pay for activities, and that caregivers are reassured that they are able to support their child's development without making new or significant investments. Many of the activities described in this guide require no new purchases or materials, or may be available through lending libraries, charity stores or services that provide toys, books and other resources.

The guide is divided into four sections corresponding to each of the four key competencies. Each section is then further divided into six age-groups, corresponding to the periods of early infancy (birth to six months), later infancy (six to 12 months), toddlerhood (12 to 24 months), and ages 2, 3 and 4. The list is by no means exhaustive, nor is any one activity specifically necessary for cognitive development to take place. Rather, the activities listed here are illustrative of the countless ways that children's early learning is supported through their daily interactions with their parents and others.

The importance of joint attention

Much of children's early learning occurs through 'joint attention' activities, where the infant and caregiver jointly share their attention towards a physical object, person or event. During the first 12 months, joint attention activities provide the context in which children learn their first words. In toddlerhood and preschool, joint attention activities continue to provide children with opportunities to practise their language skills, understand other people's perspectives, increase their knowledge of the physical world, and deepen their awareness of numbers.

Joint attention, also referred to as triadic play, occurs when the caregiver and infant together direct their attention towards a toy or other household object. Through this play, children develop fine and gross motor skills, learn about how objects work and come to appreciate that knowledge about objects can be communicated.

What does good interaction between caregivers and children look like?

Children can learn from their caregivers through a broad variety of activities. What is important here is that such activities are safe, engaging and developmentally appropriate.

- **Safe** means that activities are supervised, and that all toys or objects are checked to make sure they do not present a choking hazard or contain sharp parts that might cause harm. Objects should also not easily break apart or contain toxic paints.
- **Engaging** means that activities have some dimension that makes them fun and interesting. Infants and young children easily habituate to objects and activities, so it is a good idea to rotate objects and mix activities, so that children remain curious and engaged.

- **Developmentally appropriate** means that the toy or activity corresponds with the child's level of cognitive understanding and physical skill. For example, a two-year-old is likely to find a rattle boring but may have difficulty with a sticker book. Very young children also often have a limited attention span. For this reason, the lists in this guide are organised developmentally, to provide an indicative age when activities might be first introduced.

Open-ended or close-ended?

Researchers and early years educators often classify play and learning activities as open- or close-ended. Open-ended toys and activities have no specific set of rules, which means they can be used in a variety of ways for differing purposes, such as exploration, symbolic play, creative expression or theory testing. For example, wooden blocks encourage open-ended play, as they can be used to build a variety of structures, or used symbolically in pretend play, or to explore architectural principles.

Close-ended activities, by contrast, are those that have a restricted set of rules or correct responses. Close-ended toys and activities nevertheless play an important role in children's learning, as they help children to practise specific skills and gain factual knowledge. Examples of close-ended activities include wind-up or electronic toys, model kits, workbooks (such as 'connect the dots' or colouring books) and various games. The completion of rhymes and counting sequences could also be considered a close-ended activity.

Make-believe food is an example of an open-ended toy leading to a variety of activities that support all four of the competencies discussed in our review.

Child-led or caregiver-led?

Learning opportunities work best when they are within a child's 'zone of potential development'. This means that they should take the child just beyond what they already know.

Learning within the zone of potential development can occur during both child-led activities and adult-guided play. However, children will be more motivated to engage in activities and remember new ideas when they reflect the child's personal interests. For example, some children are fascinated by balls and wheels, whereas others are more interested in dinosaurs or fairy princesses.

Children nevertheless benefit from exposure to a wide variety of activities. Thus, the child's personal interests can be used as a starting point for introducing new ideas. For example, caregivers might leverage a child's interest in *Star Wars* to introduce them to the alphabet sounds associated with its characters or the scientific principles associated with space travel and technology.

Is it evidence-based?

While many of the activities in this guide have been observed through scientific research to be associated with improved learning outcomes during the first five years, it is important to note that each separate activity has not necessarily been explicitly tested. Many of these activities could nevertheless be considered to be 'evidence-based' because they have been used in observational studies to test individual differences in children's knowledge and learning.

It is also worth remembering that the efficacy of any activity is determined by a variety of factors, including the context in which the activity takes place, the frequency with which it occurs, the extent it is well-matched to children's developmental needs, whether the child enjoys it, and so on. This means that there is no guarantee that any of these activities will automatically support the learning of an individual child at a specific point in time.

Are the activities specific to one competency?

Although the toys and activities in this guide are grouped around the four key competencies, individual activities rarely support just one competency. For example, toy food not only supports children's understanding of food and food-related vocabulary, but also their awareness of differences in people's food preferences, and number-related concepts involving sharing, slicing and counting.

Toys and activities that support children's understanding of objects

Birth to six months

While newborns cannot intentionally manipulate objects, they are responsive to movement and sound and are able to grasp. By one month, infants may reach out to specific objects, and by four months, they can actively and intentionally manipulate them to gain knowledge about their use and characteristics.

New-born babies are attracted to the movement of mobiles hung above their cot. Mobiles with a motor additionally allow infants to track the movement of the objects.

Learning activity: At around 8–10 weeks, attach an infant's foot to a mobile with a ribbon. Within a relatively short period of time, the infant will come to associate their leg movements with the movement of the mobile. Once the infant realises this, they will begin to kick vigorously. However, the kicking will stop rapidly once the infant has become habituated to the movement.

Objects, such as rattles and squeak toys, facilitate gentle and playful interactions with parents and their infants. Rattles, squeak toys and teething toys also facilitate independent object exploration, which supports the infant's understanding of the object's characteristics and use.

During early infancy, objects should be small enough for the infant to hold facilitate object interaction and exploration. Infants will reflexively put objects in their mouths, so early toys should be made of materials that permit sucking and teething. Squeak toys may become filled with mould, so they should be washed on a regular basis in hot water or the dishwasher.

Learning activity: Within the first two weeks of birth, infants can learn to track objects and sounds. When an infant is in a quiet and alert state, help them to fixate on a bright object. Once the object is within the infant's gaze, move the object slowly to help them track it. Infants can similarly track sounds. Take a rattle and gently shake it on one side of the infant's head until they turn to look at it. Then, try shaking it again on the other side.

When the infant is 12 weeks or older, play gyms allow infants to manipulate multiple, interesting objects on their own before they can sit up. A play gym placed above the infant also facilitates the infant's understanding of their own agency, by creating opportunities for the infant to bat or kick objects.

Play gyms work best when the toys and objects are interchangeable. Rotate play gym objects on a regular basis so the infant can explore a variety of objects and does not become bored. Consider adding small and safe household objects, such as small cups and utensils.

Learning activity: Parents and caregivers can also serve the same purpose by holding objects above the infant and then encouraging them to swipe at the objects. As the child's reaching and grasping skills increase, the caregiver can gently pull on the objects to help refine the infant's grasping skills.

Baby playmats allow infants to explore objects on their own in a way that is similar to a play gym. Playmats that allow toys and objects to be rotated periodically for variety are preferable to those where the objects are fixed in place.

Learning activity: Playmats encourage 'tummy time', which supports early motor skill development. Initially, it helps the infant learn how to support their head. At around six months, tummy time is also valuable for helping them to reach other important motor milestones, such as rolling over, sitting up and crawling. A toy placed just out of reach during tummy time encourages the infant to move toward the object, reach for it, grasp and then pull it towards themselves.

Six to 12 months

During the second half of the first year, infants can sit upright and are quickly becoming more physically mobile. Infants are also actively testing object properties and learning their purpose and use. By the end of the first year, infants will also actively look for objects that have been hidden and may be able to engage in pretend play with a doll or various household objects, such as pretending to drink from a cup when nothing is inside.

A simple jack-in-the box allows infants to refine their understanding of object permanence first by watching the object appear and disappear, and then by exploring the box and making the object disappear and reappear on their own.

Learning activity: Engage an infant's attention with a simple jack-in-the box. Once the infant has seen the sequence a few times, let them have a go at manipulating it. Alternatively, caregivers can become a human jack-in-the box, by lying down next to the infant and putting a cloth over their face, then making noises so the infant is tempted to remove it. A caregiver might also try curling up into a ball and then popping up, although care should be taken not to startle or frighten the infant.

Stacking and nesting toys allow infants to hide and retrieve objects on their own, and to test the principle of gravity. Stacking and nesting toys also support children's understanding of number, magnitude and ordinality.

Learning activity: Make a squeaky toy squeak underneath a cloth or other object that hides it from view, then make it appear from the same place. Hide the toy again, make it squeak, and then make it reappear. At eight months, many infants will actively look for the toy before it is revealed.

A variation of this games involves hiding a desired object under a cup and encouraging the child to retrieve it, through various demonstrations.

During the second half of the first year, most infants can actively manipulate objects, by dropping, throwing, pushing and pulling them. Balls and toys with wheels provide excellent opportunities for this kind of manipulation from five months onwards. Infants also rapidly learn how to use strings as tools when attached to a pull toy.

Learning activity: Place a pull toy out of an infant's reach, but make sure that its string is within reach. Demonstrate first how the toy can be pulled towards the infant and then let the infant have a go. Similarly, a blanket may be used in the same way as a string, by placing the toy or object on the blanket, just outside of the infant's reach.

The fine motor skills of a 10–12-month-old infant can also be encouraged by making a 'ribbon pull'. Take a cardboard canister or box lid and string a variety of different kinds of ribbons all the way through. Gently tug on one side of a string to make it almost disappear so that the baby can see, but do not pull out completely. When the baby eventually grasps the string, pull on the opposite side of the string to provide gentle resistance.

Toys in the bath provide excellent opportunities for children to understand the physical properties of water and objects in water, by observing objects floating or sinking and using objects to pour or squirt water. Toys can be introduced into bath play as soon as infants are able to sit upright on their own.

Learning activity: Place a variety of cups and bowls in the bath with a baby and encourage them to pour water from one vessel to another.

12 to 24 months

Between the ages of 1 and 2, children learn how to walk and rapidly learn new words and how things work in their home and neighbourhood. Pretend activities involving daily routines and familiar objects reinforce this learning. Initially, caregivers may need to initiate the pretend play, but by their second birthday, many children will be able to initiate their own make-believe games.

From late infancy onwards, children are able to engage in pretend play involving themes that replicate the routine activities occurring in the child's life. Pretend food provides children with opportunities to understand the various characteristics and uses of food, and to engage in interactive activities around the preparation of food and family members' individual food likes and dislikes. Food play also raises children's awareness of number and proportion through cutting and sharing exercises. Thus, make-believe food supports the development of all four of the cognitive competencies described in this report.

Learning activity: Plan a make-believe picnic by asking (or guiding) the child to 'invite' some toys to come along and pack a bag or basket full of toy food and dishes. Then 'go' on the picnic, even if this happens to be in the child's bedroom or the living room. Take turns preparing the food, serving it and 'eating' it. Pretend that one of the toys does not like the food, to promote differences in people's perspective. Younger toddlers will need to be led through this activity, whereas older ones can be encouraged to lead various activities.

Blocks support children's development at all stages. Already at eight months, children may begin to stack them, and by 18 months they may be able to build a tower of four blocks or more. Blocks also help children to refine their fine motor skills, increase their knowledge of object categories (for example, blocks can be sorted by shape or colour), recognise differences in size, and facilitate counting.

Learning activity: Use blocks to lead the child in various sorting activities, starting with colour and then by shape. Most children will be able to actively participate in this activity from 18 months onwards.

During the second year, children will have a good understanding of the role of vehicles and also be aware of different kinds of vehicles. Miniature vehicles are therefore useful for refining children's sorting skills, as well as helping them to understand how objects have differences and similarities, first in size and shape, and then in use – for example, a fire engine and an ambulance are different sizes but both are rescue vehicles. Vehicles are also excellent for initiating pretend play themes involving cars, buses, diggers, etc.

Learning activity: Initiate a parking game, where the child is asked to 'park' the cars by putting them in to the spaces. Ask the child if they can park all of the small cars and large cars. Encourage children to make the noise of the vehicle as they 'drive' it into the space. As children grow older, the categories can become more sophisticated, for example to involve 'emergency vehicles' (such as ambulances and fire engines) and 'passenger vehicles'.

Children are fascinated by animals from a very young age and toddlerhood is a perfect time to take them to farms and zoos. Animal families also provide excellent opportunities for children to learn about the characteristics of animals (such as the noises they make). As children grow older, miniature animals increase children's awareness of how animal systems work – for example, the difference between mammals and insects, where animals live, and the relationship between parent and baby animals.

Learning activity: (from 18 months onwards) Plan an outing to a zoo or farm, and then recreate the zoo or farm at home with miniature animals. Let the child initially determine how this zoo or farm will be organised and then ask open-ended questions about the animal relationships. Initially, caregivers will need to scaffold this game, but by the age of 3 or 4, children should be able to lead this game.

Ride-on vehicles are an excellent way to support toddler's gross motor development, while also providing opportunities for pretend play.

Learning activity: Encourage a child to make their own train by allowing them to drive a train of pull toys or cardboard boxes behind a ride-on toy. Alternatively, the train can be stationary, with toys lined up sequentially or family members sitting on pillows.

2 to 3 years

Between the ages of 2 and 3, children can engage in increasingly complicated pretend games and also appreciate more complex object relationships. During this period, children are also refining their fine motor skills and enjoy creating things through arts and crafts activities.

Many toddlers are fascinated by trains. Small train sets support children's fine motor development, as well as helping them to consider how people, vehicles and animals interact within communities. Playing with trains also supports children's awareness of physical and mechanical processes.

Learning activity. Invite a child to create their own village with a small set of building blocks and a simple train set.

During the third year, children can follow simple directions or rules, including those introduced through matching tasks.

Learning activity: Games like animal snap introduce children to rule-based activities, while at the same time reinforcing their knowledge of animal and/or object relationships.

Puzzles are an excellent way of improving toddlers' fine motor skills, as well as increasing their awareness of part/whole relationships and numerical understanding. Various puzzle themes also reinforce children's knowledge of object facts. Jigsaw puzzles of up to 12 pieces are suitable for children between the ages of 2 and 3.

3 to 4 years

Between the ages of 3 and 4, children are increasingly aware of activities and processes that occur outside of their everyday awareness. Toys and activities should therefore reinforce this interest.

Virtually all preschoolers have some interest in dinosaurs. Learning about dinosaurs supports their awareness of biological processes, animal taxonomies and hierarchical systems, and the existence of histories and timelines.

Learning activity: Visit a museum with information about dinosaurs. Afterwards, at home, organise a playset of dinosaur figures into groupings. Already by the age of 4, some children will be able to group dinosaurs by types, such as brontosaurus, raptors, spinosaurus, stegosaurus and triceratops types. As children grow older, they might also be encouraged to learn how to place dinosaurs on a timeline.

Sticker books give children opportunities to learn about object systems and object relationships, with or without adult guidance. Children can be guided into sorting objects into various categories or encouraged to come up with their own.

4 to 5 years

Between the ages of 4 and 5, most children will have a relatively long attention span, have developed fine and gross motor control, and be able to engage in longer periods of play. Children also remain very curious about the world and enjoy experimenting and learning factual information.

By 4 years, children will have the fine motor skills to build things with interlocking plastic bricks. Interlocking bricks allow children to first create their own worlds and increase their understanding of mechanically relationships.

Learning activity: Encourage the child to make a marble maze with a set of interlocking bricks and a board. The creation of the maze will encourage the child's imagination and fine motor skills. Once the maze is made, the child can test its functionality while practising fine and gross motor coordination.

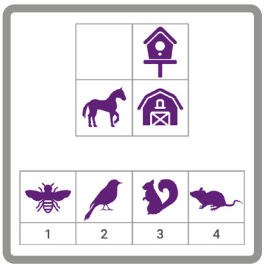
By the age of 4 (if not before) children can in participate in a variety of household activities, including cooking, cleaning and gardening.

Learning activity: Grow a sunflower or other small plant. Planting seeds that grow fast is a good way of helping children to understand the biology of plants, as well as the use of tools, planning, and watching and waiting for something to happen.

Children's natural curiosity about the world can be nurtured by books containing factual information, such as a mini encyclopaedia.

Learning activity: Use a 'my first' encyclopaedia to introduce a 4-year-old to a new topic every day for a period of two weeks. Then, reintroduce each topic to see what the child remembers.

By the end of the fifth year, most children can refine their understanding of object relationships through analogy games. Lists of simple analogies are readily available on the internet, and there are also a variety of analogy apps for children from the age of 4 onwards.



Toys and activities that support children's understanding of the thoughts and feelings of others (theory of mind)

Birth to six months

Already at birth, infants show a preference for faces; by three months, they can track another person's gaze. Toys and activities that nurture this preference are likely to support these capabilities.

Infants are attracted to objects with clearly identifiable facial features, such as dolls, stuffed animals, Humpty Dumpty-type characters and smiling suns. The greater the contrast in these features, the more very young infants will show interest in them.

Learning activity: The caregiver can show the infant a high-contrast object and place it close to their face, so the infant is tracking both the object and the caregiver's face. As infants grow older, the caregiver can move the object away from their face and look at it, naming the object. This activity helps infants to follow another person's gaze.

Unbreakable mirrors reinforce infants' fascination with faces. Initially, the baby will look at the mirror as though they are looking at another face. Over time, the infant will come to associated their actions with what they see in the mirror.

A game of peekaboo fundamentally reinforces the infant's theory of mind understanding. Although infants will not be able to fully participate in this game before they are six months old, they will nevertheless enjoy watching their caregiver and others engage in it.

Learning activity: Caregivers can facilitate their infant's awareness of their own and others' perceptions by facilitating turns during a game of peek-a-boo by gently covering the infant's eyes.

Six to 12 months

Between six and 12 months, babies are increasingly able to understand that what they see and know can be different from what others perceive. At approximately 10 months, most infants also understand that knowledge can be shared with another person. Activities that support these milestones include those that help the child to understand another's perspective and that knowledge can be communicated.

Mirror games reinforce the baby's growing awareness of themselves as an individual. They also provide perfect opportunities for the infant to view similarities and differences between themselves and others.

Learning activity: At around eight months or so, spend time in front of a mirror making funny faces. Encourage imitation by imitating the infant's face. As the infant grows older, mirror games also provide the perfect opportunity to learn the names for facial features.

Already by six months, infants will understand the critical features of balls.

Learning activity: Once the child can sit up, try initiating a game of 'catch' by rolling the ball to the infant. Younger infants will not initially understand that the ball can be returned, but over time will be able to do this. Once the 'rules' of the game have been established, the caregiver can move around so the infant will need to change their position to roll the ball back.

Pointing is a clear indication to the infant that there is something interesting to see and knowledge can be shared about it. At around 10 months, infants will start pointing to objects themselves. Caregivers should be responsive to this behaviour or initiate it on their own through joint attention activities involving pointing, looking and playing.

Learning activity: The word 'want' is one of the first words used by toddlers to express their own opinion and to understand the opinions of others. Caregivers can reinforce this knowledge by specifically asking infants if they want something when they point to it.

Dolls, teddy bears and other stuffed animals play a variety of important roles in children's development – by soothing the child, by providing something soft to cuddle, learning the parts of the body and face, or serving as a 'participant' in a pretend game.

Learning activity: A teddy bear is useful for initiating conversations about feelings and differences in perspective. By the end of the first year, most infants will be able to show some understanding when a caregiver makes the teddy bear or other toy act happy, sad or angry. Once children have mastered the words associated with feelings, dolls and stuffed toys are useful for initiating conversations about feelings and differences in how people might feel.

12 to 24 months

During the second year, children begin to learn the words associated with feelings and show empathy when someone has been hurt. They are also becoming aware that people can differ in terms of their feelings, preferences and knowledge.

At around 18 months, toddlers will start to engage in socio-dramatic play, where they pretend to be someone else. At first, this might just involve putting on different costumes, but as children develop, they will increasingly be able to appreciate differences in personalities and attitudes.

Learning activity: Help a child to pretend to become someone else by inviting them to wear the hat of another person in the family and adopt their personality. Caregivers might initiate this game by wearing the toddler's hat first and then assuming the child's personality.

Toy figures are similar to dolls and costumes in helping children understand and 'try on' differences in personality and perspective.

Learning activity: A toy bus or train can be used to help a child understand multiple perspectives during the same activity. Initiate a game with a small vehicle with different characters. As each character boards the bus, engage the child in conversations about how the characters' feelings and thoughts might be different or the same.

Books provide a non-threatening way to initiate conversations about positive and negative feelings. Stories involving a character who is sad or hurt support children's sense of empathy and also allow them to understand how difficult feelings might be resolved. More open-ended stories also encourage conversations about feelings and various mental states.

Learning activity: During a book-sharing activity, ask a child who has some understanding of the words associated with emotions (angry, sad, glad) to guess what the various characters might be feeling, even if this is not explicit in the story. Then take turns imitating these emotions.

The game of hide and seek is an excellent way of reinforcing differences in what the child and other people know. By the second half of the second year, most toddlers will understand the basic rules of hide and seek, and delight in taking turns in hiding and looking. Initially, this 'hiding' should not involve much more than hiding obviously behind a chair or a doorway, and the hider may have to provide audible clues.

2 to 3 years

Between the ages of 2 and 3, most children will understand the words associated with feelings (happy, sad, mad, frightened) and also be able to talk about differences in what people know and understand. This knowledge can be reinforced through activities that highlight differences in other people's perspective.

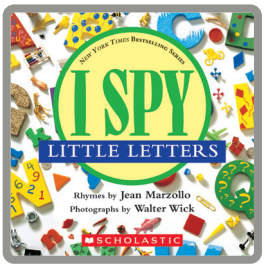
Already by the middle of the second year, toddlers will demonstrate empathy with others and show interest in helping. Helping activities, around food and cleaning tasks, or repairing broken items reinforce the idea that the toddler is a valued member of the family, while at the same time providing opportunities for the child to learn a variety of important helping roles.

Learning activity: After a meal, invite a toddler to help sweep the floor, by either holding the dust pan or working on their own with a toy broom.

Conversations about feelings and emotions help toddlers to understand that two people may feel differently about the same event. Making faces with exaggerated expressions is a good way to initiate these conversations.

Learning activity: Take turns with a toddler making exaggerated facial expressions and photograph them. Print out the photos and cut them into cards. Later on, ask the toddler to sort the expressions into different emotions and/or match them. Initially, toddlers will only be able to understand simple emotions like happy, sad and angry. However, as they grow older, this game can be used to explore more subtle emotions, such as worried or frustrated.

The game of 'I Spy' reinforces children's understanding of different perspectives.



Learning activity: There are a variety of ways to play I Spy. Those that take place in a stationary place (as opposed to a car) are particularly good for helping toddlers to understand what another person might be seeing. The game typically begins by one participant saying '*I spy with my little eye something that is…*' and then providing a description. Very young children will need relatively simple prompts. But as children grow older, the game might involve looking for opposites, objects of a specific colour, and so on. 'I Spy' books also support turn-taking, while teaching children factual information about objects and object relationships.

Puppets play a similar role to stuffed animals in providing children with a vehicle to engage in pretend play that explores feelings and emotions. Already in infancy, children will enjoy caregivers manipulating puppets during interactive play. During the second year, many children will be able to successfully manipulate a hand puppet on their own.

Learning activity: With a 2-year-old, take turns making a puppet behave in a way that reflects a specific feeling. As children grow older, the feelings can become more complex. Older children might also be encouraged to make others guess the puppet's feelings through its physical motions.

3 to 4 years

Between the ages of 3 and 4, children become increasingly good at understanding what others might be thinking, including anticipating others' false beliefs.

The 'hot and cold' game (also referred to as 'hunt the thimble') is not only useful for supporting children's theory of mind skills, but is also good for supporting their listening skills and ability to follow directions.

Learning activity: The game of 'hot and cold' is similar to hide and seek in helping children to understand how one person's perspective and beliefs can differ from another's. The game involves the child or caregiver hiding a small object or prize in a room, and then giving clues to the other participant by using the words 'hot' or 'cold' to indicate if they are close (hot) or far (cold) from the object. The game continues until the object is found. Variations on this game include blindfolding the searcher (such as in 'pin the tail on the donkey'), although this unnecessary if the object is well hidden. It is important to remember that blindfolding has the potential to lead to accidents.

A 3-year-old's theory of mind skills can be supported through conversations about differences in people's likes and dislikes, as well as thinking about ways to surprise people.

Learning activity: Initiate a conversation with a child about what would happen for them on an imagined special day. Use open-ended questions to help elaborate the child's preferences in great length. Then ask the child to describe what a special day might be like for another person. Younger children will likely include many of the same elements from their own special day, but through open-ended questions will be able to consider how their ideal day might be different from another person's.

A variation on this activity involves asking a child how they might plan a surprise birthday party for another person. This task will not only require the child to consider likes and dislikes that may be different from their own, but also to consider how they might plan an event so that the other person remains unaware.

4 to 5 years

Between the ages of 4 and 5, most children can understand the false beliefs of others, and can discuss in detail mental activities such as thinking, planning and knowing.

Children's fairy tales and fables are filled with stories about how one character makes use of pretence and false beliefs to deceive or trick another. For example, in the story 'Stone Soup' the protagonist uses his skills of persuasion to trick the villages into thinking he can make a tasty soup out of stones, while convincing them to give up valuable ingredients. Similarly, Little Red Riding Hood is initially tricked by a wolf who disguises himself as her grandmother.

Learning activity: Invite children to re-enact a fairy tale involving the manipulation of another person's false beliefs. Children can take turns playing the trickster or the one who is being tricked.

Between the ages of 4 and 5, many children actively seek out activities involving socio-dramatic play with costumes, and some researchers assume this is associated with their growing understanding of other people's perspectives and false beliefs.

Learning activity: Facilitate socio-dramatic play where the child or children take turns in assuming a variety of different roles while wearing corresponding costumes. Although children often have characters that they prefer to assume (such as a specific superhero or fairy princess), encourage them to assume alternative characters as well, by having them draw straws and then switching personas, to facilitate differences in perspective-taking.

Toys and activities that support children's understanding of numbers

Birth to six months

While new-born infants cannot count, they can discriminate differences in magnitude and small number amounts.

The perceptual capabilities of infants are not as developed as those of adults or older children, so their attention is more easily drawn to areas of high contrast. Infants may perceive differences in magnitude and small numbers in high contrast visual array cards. Although the extent to which these activities directly influence the development of children's numerical understanding remains unknown, such cards are thought to support early perceptual awareness and the ability to discriminate differences in shape.

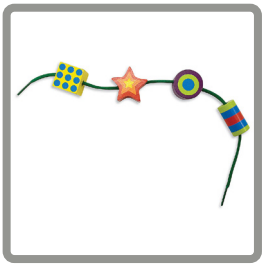
Infants can perceive differences in sets of objects of three or less. Providing infants with small toys that come in sets may support this awareness.

Six to 12 months

During the second half of the first year, the infant becomes capable of sitting upright and is readily able to pick up and manipulate small objects. These skills facilitate activities that support infants' growing awareness of patterns, shape, magnitude and ordinality.

Between six and 12 months, most babies can readily pick up and manipulate objects. Stacking rings help babies to refine their motor coordination, and to reinforce their understanding of shape and ordinality. Shape sorters similarly support children's fine coordination while facilitating their understanding of shape.

Beads also support children's fine motor development, while reinforcing their understanding of shape, sequence and numerosity. Beads can be introduced to infants as young as eight months, with caregivers doing the majority of connecting together and pulling apart. However, by 15 months, many toddlers will be able to construct their own bead necklace.



Alphabet blocks are a useful way of familiarising young children with Arabic numerals, even though it will be several years before they are able to associate specific numerals with individual cardinal values (that is, knowing that each number word corresponds with a specific value).

During the second half of the first year, infants will begin to eat solids. Meal times provide the perfect occasion for talking about the concept of 'more'. Initially, conversations will involve asking the infant if they want more. Over time, conversations will likely introduce the concept of 'less', as well as negotiations over the number of bites that could be eaten – for example, '*can you please try just one more bite?*'

Using the words big and small during interactions with infants can draw their attention to size; over time, they will learn to associate these words with amounts.

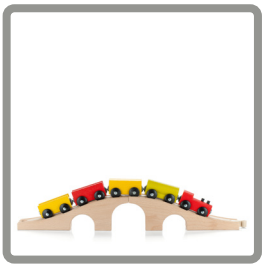
Learning activity: The 'so big' lap game heightens helps infants to associate the word 'big' with size. The game begins with the caregiver asking in an exaggerated voice '*How big is [baby's name]?*' and then answering the question by saying '*So big!*' and raising the child's arms. Over time, the infant will come to associate the word and gesture as a word for describing size.

12 to 24 months

Between the ages of 12 and 24 months, toddlers become increasingly able to discriminate differences in magnitude. During this period, they are also learning many of the words associated with numbers and amounts. By the end of the second year, most will have mastered the words 'more' and 'one', and be able to successfully understand and use plurals.

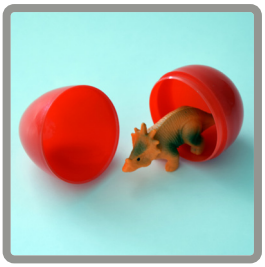
Between the ages of 1 and 2, many toddlers develop a fascination with trains. Trains can be used to reinforce a variety of ideas associated with number, including sequence, ordinality, shape, colour and numerosity.

Learning activity: While children may not be able to reproduce some of these ideas until they are 3 or older, caregivers can highlight numerical values by counting out train cars with children.



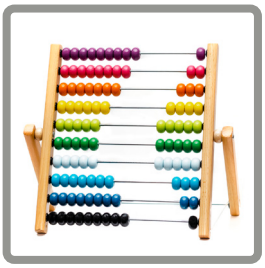
Toddlers can keep track of changes in number in groups of three or less. Nesting toys are ideal for supporting this ability, by encouraging children to search for small sets of objects.

Learning activity: Nesting eggs can be used to hide one or more desirable objects (such as sweets) within one or more of the eggs. Caregivers can encourage toddlers to search for a number of these desirable objects by showing the infant the objects first, then hiding them within the nested layers in a way that the toddler cannot see how they have been hidden. The caregiver should then let the toddler search on their own, only providing prompts if the toddler fails to look for the correct number of objects.



While most children will not learn to use an abacus correctly until the middle of primary school, toddlers nevertheless enjoy moving the colourful beads from one side to the other.

Learning activity: Caregivers can count out loud as they move the beads from one side of a toy abacus to another. While it will be several years before the child will be able to accurately count the beads or associate the number words with specific cardinal values, abacus counting is an excellent way of introducing toddlers to number words and the counting sequence.



Child-safe clay is useful for reinforcing a variety of numerical concepts. Already during toddlerhood, children can be asked to form balls of clay that are smaller or larger than others. Once children begin to count, they can also be asked to divide them equally into two or three lumps, and to verify that they are the same size. As children grow older, clay can be used to reinforce children's counting capabilities, as well as their understanding of measurement.

2 to 3 years

Between the ages of 2 and 3, most children will learn the words associated with the counting sequence (in other words, be able to say the number words 'one' to 'ten' in the correct order) and recognise the Arabic numerals as numbers.

Counting books can be used to introduce and reinforce children's understanding of the counting sequence, Arabic numerals and the concepts of more and less, value and magnitude. These concepts will be particularly salient in books that encourage the actual counting of objects (as opposed to just saying the number) and making issues pertaining to magnitude an important part of the story line.

Learning activity: Use the story of the three bears to initiate a conversation about ordinality, asking the child to identify three chairs for three bears that are papa-bear size, mama-bear size and baby size.

Counting songs and rhymes are useful for introducing toddlers to the counting sequence and concepts involving more or less, particularly when it comes to adding or subtracting values of one.

Learning activity: Initiate a game of '10 in the bed' with a child's stuffed animals, by first helping the child to collect 10 toys and placing them in a bed. The toddler and caregiver can then re-enact the song as they remove the stuffed animals from the bed.

During the second year, most toddlers will readily grasp concepts involving equality and sharing. This awareness can be reinforced by activities that encourage them to share without relinquishing too much.

Learning activity: Ask a child to line up four soft toys in a row. Then give them a bag of marbles and ask them to share the marbles out equally in four cups, first demonstrating how to do this. Then invite the child to do this until all of the marbles have been shared out. Once the marbles are divided, ask the toddler to verify that the amounts are equal by counting the marbles out individually in each cup. It is highly unlikely that a 2-year-old will be able to divide the marbles equally and accurately understand their cardinal values on the first attempt, but they will nevertheless have fun sharing the

objects between the toys. Once the child has fully mastered the counting principles, they will become increasingly concerned with equitable sharing.

During the end of the third year, children will begin to understand the cardinal values of sets of numbers, starting with sets of two.

Learning activity: The 'give a number' game is a good way of helping children to master their knowledge of cardinality and the counting principles. Give a child a pile of small objects (such as toys, household objects or sweets) as ask them to give you a specific amount. After the child gives the objects, count them individually with the child to verify if the child is correct.

Children's awareness of large numerical values can be encouraged by conversations about amounts greater than 10. Such conversations can be facilitated by engaging children in counting activities that go beyond the first 10 number values.

Learning activity: To increase a preschool child's understanding of large values, encourage them to count steps as they climb a staircase. Asking them to estimate the number of peas in a bowl or grains of rice on a plate during meal time is also a good way to increase their awareness of large number values.

3 to 4 years

Between the ages of 3 and 4, children will gradually master the counting principles and may be able to spontaneously add or subtract values of up to around five.

Tasks involving food preparation provide a natural way of reinforcing children's understanding of more and less, the importance of measurement, and specific numerical values.

Learning activity: Ask a preschool child to help with cooking in the kitchen. Invite them to complete tasks that do not require precision or sharp instruments, while adults perform activities involving more precision, including measurement. When doing these activities, the adult should highlight the size or value of the numerosity, while describing the impact this will have on the final product.

The game of dominoes supports children's ability to detect differences in magnitude and awareness of cardinal values. Initially, children will match dominos on the basis of pattern, but over time, will be able to recognise that the dots on the dominos represent specific cardinal values.

Flash cards are useful for introducing children to Arabic numerals and mapping them to specific values. Between the ages of 3 and 4, flash cards can support children's ability to name various numbers or symbols and to make judgments regarding more or less. With older children, flashcards can be used to help children to solve simple arithmetic problems and support the rapid retrieval of arithmetic facts.

Mosaic tiles can help preschoolers to refine their understanding of shape, pattern and geometry, while at the same time supporting their fine motor development.

Learning activity: Ask a child to create a potentially symmetrical object – such as a flower, butterfly or Christmas tree – with a set of mosaic tiles. Once the shape is completed, highlight aspects that are symmetrical or asymmetrical by highlighting the critical features of various shapes.

By the age of 3, children will have some understanding of what age means and differences in children's ages.

Learning activity: Teach children how to represent their age with their fingers. At first, this may be a rote activity, but children will eventually be able to associate it with cardinal values.

4 to 5 years

By the age of 5, most children will fully understand the counting principles and be able to add and subtract numbers involving numerosities less than 10.

Magnetic numbers support children's ability to practise and solve simple addition and subtraction problems in the absence of specific numerosities (such as the dots on the side of a dice or domino).

Learning activity: Take turns with a 4-year-old child being a teacher and student, formulating simple equations with magnetic numbers. Initially, the equations should be very simple ('one plus one') involving numerosities less than 10. As children develop, equations can become more complex, involving two-digit numbers. Numerical equations can be supported by counting out on numbers, and the introduction of 'max and min' strategies.[2]

'Connect the dot' workbooks support children's knowledge of the number sequence, counting principles and Arabic numerals. Initially, designs should be intuitive involving low number values, but can increase once children have mastered the cardinal principles.

Opportunities to see and use actual money are becoming increasingly rare in the age of digital money. Nevertheless, a spare change jar is useful for drawing a young child's attention towards money and its various uses.

Learning activity: By the age of 4, most children will understand the concept of an allowance. Count out the child's allowance in change and store it in a money jar. Encourage the child to save for a desired, non-expensive item. Once it is clear that a sufficient amount has been saved, help the child to verify the total through a counting exercise before the object is purchased.

2 For more detail, see chapter four of our *Key competencies* report: https://www.eif.org.uk/report/key-competencies-in-early-cognitive-development-things-people-numbers-and-words

Playing with pretend money is an excellent way of supporting children's knowledge of the counting principles and awareness of large numerosities.

Learning activity: Engage a child in a game of 'shopkeeper'. Ask them to find household items that they would like to sell. Help them to assign prices to the items with stickers, making sure that these prices reflect both high and low numerosities. Then, invite family members and friends to come to the shop and buy the items with play money, and help the child to provide the correct change.

At first, children will enjoy going through the motions of the game and may not be able to provide the correct change without assistance. Children will nevertheless appreciate the principles underpinning making change and providing the correct amount.

Between the ages of 4 and 5, children will start to understand the logic of the one-to-one correspondence between cardinal values and sets of objects, but nevertheless rely on the appearance of things to make visual judgments of more or less.

Learning activity: Invite a child to engage in Piaget's conservation task. This involves presenting them with two identical rows of objects (such as coins) in sets less than five. Ask the child to count out each object and to verify the amount, and ask them to determine whether one set has more or less than the other, or if the sets are equal. Then spread one of the sets out so that it covers more surface area than the other and ask the child to say which set has more. Initially, the child will view the set covering a greater surface area as having more, even after being challenged to recount the objects. However, open-ended questions about why they think that will help them to refocus their attention on the specific numerosity, so they are not misled by appearances.

By the end of the fifth year, many children will understand correspondence between volume, numerosity and measurement.

Learning activity: Take a piece of string and cut it up into one, two, three, four and five-inch lengths. Then, with a 4-year-old child, ask them to measure the strings with a ruler. Initially, the child will only be able to accurately measure the length of the individual strings. Over time, however, the string lengths can be used to ask the child to perform or explain various principles associated with addition and subtraction.

Toys and activities that support children's early language development

Birth to six months

Language learning begins already when the child is in the womb and can discriminate the sounds of their mother's voice. The infant's phonological awareness then steadily increases until their first birthday, when most infants can say one or two words. Activities that help babies to listen to language and 'participate' in conversations are thought to increase their phonological awareness and contribute to their listening skills and receptive vocabulary.

Already within the first few days of birth, babies show a preference for their mother's voice and actively listen to it.

Learning activity: Babies can learn to recognise the voices of other family member's through gentle conversations that do not startle or overstimulate them.

A music box can serve a similar function to the caregiver's voice in supporting the new-born baby's listening skills and increasing their awareness of music.

Learning activity: Take a music box and place it next to the baby but out of their line of sight. Wait for the baby to turn towards the sound. Then, move the music box to see if the baby tracks the sound. A rattle can similarly be used to help the baby to track sounds.

Books support a variety of aspects of children's cognitive development even during early infancy. Babies will find high-contrast images in early baby books interesting to look at. As they develop, turning the pages of a book also support the infant's early fine motor development.

Learning activity: Small board books attached to the pram or play gym provide an excellent way for children to explore the pages and images on their own. Little board books are also excellent way of managing an infant's attention when waiting at a GP's office or travelling.

Throughout our *Key competencies* report, we highlight the importance of the exaggerated speech (referred to as infant-directed or child-directed speech, baby talk, or 'motherese') that parents and caregivers use when interacting with their infants. This form of speech exaggerates consonant and vowel sounds, encourages participation on the infant's part and is responsive to what the infant does. Already by eight weeks, infants can become an active participant in these 'conversations'.

Learning activity: At around four months or so, infants especially enjoy interactions that follow predictable routines but also contain an element of surprise. 'Body' or 'lap' games are one form of enjoyable caregiver–child interaction that help the baby to learn how to manage their emotions and take turns in bidirectional conversations.

'Mousie creep' is a common baby game that introduces an element of surprise within a reoccurring routine. Caregivers can start this routine by making two fingers (the mouse) slowly 'walk' up an arm or leg while softly saying *mousie creep, creep, creep*. Once the 'mouse' reaches the abdominal region, he will break with walking routine and gently tickle the baby, while the caregiver says something nonsensical such as such as *kootchy kootchy koo* or *gottcha!* It is then the baby's turn to respond by laughing or cooing. Many infants find variations in the intensity and timing of this routine hilarious and are often enthusiastic participants, so long as the game takes place in a way that is not frightening or overstimulating.

Six to 12 months

During the second half of the first year, infant babbling replicates consonant and vowel sounds, gradually leading to the production of the child's first words. At around six months, many infants will also be able to recognise their own name. Over time, they will be able to associate the sounds of words with specific objects.

Throughout the latter half of infancy, babies continue to enjoy predictable, interactive language games with their caregivers and other family members.

Learning activity: The game of 'pat-a-cake' is an example of a common language game that combines clapping and other gestures with rhymes. When caregivers first introduce this game (typically between four and six months), they will have to perform the majority of gestures themselves while saying the rhyme. By the time the baby is a year old, however, they will be able to perform many of the gestures and say parts of the rhyme.

Babies are naturally curious about the objects in their environment. Studies show that joint attention activities involving household objects and toys facilitates the learning of new words.

Learning activity: When introducing new toys or household objects to a child, allow the child to initially explore the object on their own. After the child has had some time playing with the object, introduce turn-taking, while demonstrating and commenting on the object's critical features.

Through the second half of the first year, infants will increasingly enjoy book-sharing activities. Books that facilitate interaction, through mirrors, different textures and sounds, are particularly good for engaging the infant's attention and introducing descriptive verbs.

Infants are frequently fascinated by phones, and will understand that they are used for communication by the end of the first year, if not before. While it is not wise to let the baby play with a real phone, a play phone is a useful substitute during infancy.

Learning activity: During joint attention activities, the caregiver can pretend to call someone up to tell them what they and the child have just done or seen. For example, when engaged in a joint attention activity involving a ball, a caregiver might say something like 'we're playing with a ball. Let's call grandma and tell her about the ball.'

At the end of the first year, the infants babbling will resemble the names for parents, such as 'dada' and 'mamma'. Caregivers can reinforce these sounds by responding positively to them.

12 to 24 months

During the second year, children's vocabulary dramatically increases and they start to put words together in simple sentences. At the time of their first birthday, children will only be able to say three or four words; by the time of their second, many will know over 300.

All of the activities described in this guide support children's language development in one way or another. These activities include pretend play, conversations about feelings and numbers, book-sharing, and visits to parks, zoos, museums and other venues.

Learning activity: Vocabulary learning is particularly salient during the second year: in a word spurt (typically around 18 months) children may learn as many as 20 new words a day. This vocabulary will typically involve objects and activities that are present in their daily lives. This learning can be supported by the use of picture dictionaries of such common, everyday objects. During the second year, children will also enjoy books about daily routines, such as going to bed, visiting a park or cleaning up.

Once children start to put words together, they will make many grammatical errors. Caregivers will naturally want to correct these errors, but it is better if they use them as opportunity to reinforce and expand what the child already knows. For example, a child might say 'I maked cake' after forming a cake with some clay. Instead of directly correcting the child, it is preferable for the caregiver to reaffirm the child's statement with a subtle correction: 'That's right, you made a cake'. The caregiver can then use the situation to further expand the child's language learning by saying 'let's make another cake together'. The caregiver can then follow the child's lead while subtly introducing more grammar and vocabulary during the cake-baking process.

2 to 3 years

Between the ages of 2 and 3, children's language skills will continue to expand, as they become increasingly able to discuss events in the past and future, as well as imaginary events and things they may never have experienced. By the end of the second year, many children will understand what a story is and describe events within narratives that have a beginning, middle and end.

During the third year, children develop an active imagination, and develop the attention span and vocabulary to understand longer and more complicated story lines. The third year is an excellent time to introduce children to fairytales and stories involving superheroes and other fantastical creatures.

Learning activity: Auditory books can support children's listening skills and receptive vocabulary, and are also useful as a way of keeping children quiet when travelling.

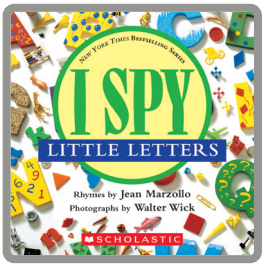
Children's understanding of narratives can be supported by recognising children's interest in specific stories and by helping them to create stories of their own.

Learning activity: Help children to create their own stories by letting them direct a 'photoshoot' with an adult, taking digital photographs with a phone or inexpensive camera. These photos can then be printed out and made into a booklet, or sent away to an inexpensive online digital book-making company. Caregivers might encourage children to reuse some of the themes familiar to them from stories they have already read, and then helping their child to take images of similar events in their own lives, or events that the child may have recreated with their toys. Once the book is made, the child should then be encouraged to 'read' their story to others.

3 to 4 years

Between the ages of 3 and 4, children are increasingly able to understand that language can be communicated in a written form and that letters correspond with sounds. Non-didactic and open-ended activities involving letter sounds and alphabet letters support this awareness.

Already by the age of 3, many children will be able to recite the alphabet and recognise signs as containing letters. The fourth year is therefore an excellent time to help children make connections between specific letters and the sounds they hear.



Learning activity: Initiate a game of 'I spy' with letter sounds. For example, 'I spy with my little eye, something that begins with the sound mmm'. Initially, the child may not be able to make the connection, in which case caregivers will need to make the connection. Once children are proficient with the entire alphabet, however, children and caregivers can take turns going through the alphabet. Letter recognition and phonological learning can also be supported by the *I Spy* book series involving letters.

Sending letters and cards is a good way of reinforcing a preschooler's understanding of how language can be communicated through the written word.

Learning activity: A 3-year-old might be encouraged to 'write' a letter to remote family members containing hand-drawn pictures and words. The recipients should then be encouraged to open the letters in front of the child through face-to-face video-calling technology and pretend to read the letter, while allowing the child to correct them. In an early years setting, post office games also support children's awareness of the importance of writing for communication.

4 to 5 years

Between the ages of 4 and 5, many children will have developed the fine motor skills to hold a pencil and write letters, as well as being able to associate sounds with specific letters of the alphabet. Some children may also be ready to formally learn how to read and write, although a variety of informal, child-led activities also support children's language learning during this time.

By the age of 4, children will have a good understanding of story narratives and will be readily able to re-enact various plots.

Learning activity: Caregivers can encourage this by helping children to plan and create their own puppet shows. A variety of websites contain copyright-free images that can be easily printed, and then coloured and turned into stick puppets by children. Alternatively, children can be supported to act in their own 'plays' with costumes created from household items, and stuffed animals can be recruited as audience members.

Between the ages of 4 and 5 five, children begin to understand that many of their favourite stories were written by an individual author and will be able to associate specific authors with various titles.

Learning activity: Preschoolers' understanding of authorship can be encouraged by reading entire book series, which may be available through libraries or early years settings. Caregivers can then initiate open-ended conversations about the similarities and differences between stories written by the same author. These conversations do not need to be sophisticated, but could encourage children to consider the thought processes underpinning some of the storylines. Children's awareness of authors and storytelling can also be supported by reading children's books about individual authors.

Additional resources

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