



## Thinking Outside the Toy Box...Again!

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Last month, we shared some ideas for using everyday items during play with your child. We're back this month with four new items and more ideas for encouraging language and learning while having fun together!

The first step is always to **follow your child's lead**. Take your cues from your child and talk about whatever your child is doing at the moment. Watch how your child explores these items and what ideas they have. Wait for your child to communicate before you introduce one of the new ideas below, and make sure your idea matches your child's interests. By following your child's lead in this way, your child will learn new things as you both have fun together!

### 1. Cardboard boxes

If your child likes to pretend, you can rescue cardboard boxes from your recycling bin for some imaginative play! Wait to see what they do before you make any suggestions with the boxes.

#### Some fun ideas you could add

If your child likes to play with stuffed animals and dolls, small boxes or shoe boxes make great beds for them, especially if you provide little blankets and baby bottles. See what they do with them and then join in.

Boxes can also be turned into buildings with roads going through them. If your child likes playing with vehicles, you could provide a few small boxes and a number of vehicles, and then watch to see what your child does.

Large boxes transform into vehicles when you attach a paper plate “steering wheel” to an inside edge. See what your child does and if they pretend to drive, get your own “steering wheel” and copy what they are doing.

## Adding language

There are endless things to talk about during pretend play! If your child uses the box as a bed for a teddy bear, you could talk about the bear being sick or at the hospital. You can introduce new words like “ill,” “fever,” or “thermometer.” You can also introduce your child to new words when pretending a box is a vehicle, talking about how the vehicle needs a “mechanic” because it won’t go or how the car might go on the “highway”. Hearing new words like this during play builds your child’s vocabulary and prepares them for the type of language they will hear in school.

## 2. Cookie sheet

If your child isn’t ready for the pretend ideas above, try some simple play with cars and a cookie sheet. Lean the cookie sheet against something so that it turns into a ramp and watch what your child does next. Maybe your child will send a car down the ramp or enjoy driving it underneath like a tunnel.

### Some fun ideas you could add

If you observe that your child enjoys letting cars run down the ramp, you could add a few cookie sheets of different sizes and at different angles and explore which ramp makes the cars go faster. Or you could add pieces of masking tape down the middle of the ramp to create lanes for two cars. If your child decides the cookie sheet is a tunnel, grab your own car and copy your child as they drive cars underneath.

If your child isn’t interested in cars, they might enjoy some sensory play with a cookie sheet. Fill the cookie sheet with shaving cream or finger paint and watch what your child does, without telling them what to do. Let your child have fun “drawing” in the cream or paint!

### Adding language

Follow your child’s lead as you lean the cookie sheet at different angles, letting your child then come up with different places to lean the ramp. Talk about your child’s ideas and actions, such as “Oh, it’s leaning against the stool” or “That’s a steep ramp!”

If you've decided on fingerpainting with the cookie sheet, you might want to add finger paint or shaving cream to your own cookie sheet so you can play alongside your child. You can talk about what you are both making, or how it feels "wet," "slippery," or "cold".

### 3. Empty food packaging

If your child has started pretending, they've probably done some pretending related to food or cooking. Food-themed pretend play is very popular with young children, probably because it's something they see so often in everyday life. If your child enjoys this type of play, collect empty food containers and packaging, such as cereal and pasta boxes, plastic condiment jars, washed out milk cartons, yogurt and sour cream containers, egg cartons, etc. Start by giving your child the packages, and then wait to see what happens next. Your child might decide to be a "chef" with the food or set up a grocery store!

#### Some fun ideas you could add

If your child wants to pretend to cook, you could add some bowls and wooden spoons and see what they do next. Or maybe your child wants to play "restaurant." If so, join in by providing an apron and a small pad of paper so they can pretend to be the waiter and write down the customer's order. After giving your child these items, watch to see what happens next and let their imagination take off! Maybe your child will look at the food packaging and want to set up a grocery store. You could join in by adding a basket, some spare change, and some shopping bags.

#### Adding language

It's easy to become the "director" during pretend play, introducing lots of new ideas and giving your child instructions. But your child will have more opportunities to use their imagination and communicate in new ways if you don't tell them what to do. It's best to follow their lead and be their play partner. Join in the pretending and take on a role yourself, saying things that your character would say. If you are the customer at your child's restaurant, talk as if you are a customer, saying things like "May I please see the menu?" or "Do you have any specials tonight?" If you are shopping at your child's grocery store, you can ask "Do you have any apples?" or "How much does this cost?"

### 4. Tupperware or food storage containers

Children love to stack objects and put things in and out of containers, and Tupperware works well for this type of play. Present your child with containers of different shapes and sizes and let them explore. Once you notice what your child is doing and they have started to communicate with you about the containers, you can add an idea.

## Some fun ideas you could add

If you notice your child try to put things into the containers, add some small toys that fit inside (e.g., little animals, blocks, or balls). Copy what your child does, putting things in and out of the containers. If your child tries to stack the containers, you could put the lids on a few pieces to make stacking easier and have fun building towers together! Your child might try to scoop and pour with the containers. If so, they might have fun scooping and pouring sand or water with the containers. You can try this in the bathtub or a sandbox.

## Adding language

Stacking, pouring, and putting things in and out gives you lots of opportunities to use action words (verbs) like “pour,” “build,” “stack,” “splash,” “fall,” and description words (adjectives) like “tall,” “short,” “wet,” “big,” and “small”. You might also talk about locations, such as “in,” “on,” “under,” “beside,” and “behind” during these types of activities. The most important thing to remember is to match what you say to your child’s interests. When you observe your child’s actions and interests and talk about what they are doing, your child will hear the language that describes whatever they are focussing on. This is how children learn new words and ideas.

Thinking outside of your toy box can lead to new experiences for your child, which means they will have new opportunities to play, hear language, and learn new things. If you follow your child’s lead as you enjoy these new experiences together, you are sure to have fun with your new “toys”!

### About The Hanen Centre

*Founded in 1975, The Hanen Centre is a Canadian not-for-profit charitable organization with a global reach. Its mission is to provide parents, caregivers, early childhood educators and speech-language pathologists with the knowledge and training they need to help young children develop the best possible language, social and literacy skills. This includes children who have or are at risk for language delays, those with developmental challenges such as autism, and those who are developing typically.*

*For more information, please visit [www.hanen.org](http://www.hanen.org).*

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