



Water Play with Preschoolers – The Hanen Way!

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Summertime is here! It's time to get outdoors with your preschooler and have fun with water! You can fill up a wading pool, use a water table, or make your own if you don't have one (see below). And if it's a rainy day, you can play with water in the bathtub or the kitchen sink. Whatever way you play with water, you are sure to enjoy this activity together and find new things to talk about if you play "the Hanen way"!

Make your own water table

No need to buy a water table from the store – you can easily make your own from things around the house! All you need is:

- a large plastic container or bucket
- household items that will float, sink, or squirt, such as: cups, small plastic containers, spoons, turkey baster, spray bottle, stones, marbles, sponges, strainer, funnel
- plastic toys for pretending, such as: toy dishes and food, dolls, vehicles, action figures

Goals for Preschoolers

The goals for your preschooler when you enjoy water play together are simply to:

1. Enjoy interacting and taking turns with you
2. Learn some new concepts or words
3. Think, imagine, experiment, predict, and explore
4. Have fun!

How to enjoy water play with your Toddler

Whether experimenting with different sizes of containers or imagining that a pirate is searching for treasure, your preschooler is bound to love playing in the water with you! Here are some ideas which will help you turn water play into an opportunity for communication, new ideas, experimenting, and fun!

- Begin by **following your child's lead**. Wait and watch him without speaking. Let him decide how he wants to play in the water. Maybe he will want to pretend that a firefighter is riding around in his fireboat. Or maybe a doll will need a bath. Perhaps your child will want to discover which objects will float and which will sink. Include toys or objects in the water play according to your child's interests. Once he has shown you what he wants to do, then follow his lead by joining in.
- **Get down to your child's level and face your child**. This allows your child to make eye contact with you, feel connected to you, and learn from your facial expression, actions, and words.

How do you get face to face?

- If you are playing at a water table, sit across from your child
 - If your child is in the bathtub, sit on the edge of the tub or on a stool facing him
 - At the sink, try standing beside him and leaning in close so that he can see your face as easily as possible.
- If you decide to make your own water table, **involve your preschooler in the process**. You and your child can think of items to include in the water table and collect them from around the house. This brainstorming will help expand your child's thinking.
 - There is no right or wrong way to play in the water! Let your child play the way he wants to play. It's more motivating for him if you follow what he is doing rather than trying to get him to play your way.
 - Ensure the conversation is balanced when you play. After you make a comment or ask a question, ensure that you look at your child and wait to give him a chance to say something back to you or do something. He may make a comment, ask you a question, or continue the conversation in another way.
 - You can stimulate your child's language when you introduce **new vocabulary** and concepts during water play. Together you can decide how much water to put in the water table or tub, deciding whether it will be "deep" or "shallow". By using a variety of sizes of containers, funnels, and strainers, you can stimulate concepts such as "empty", "full", "heavy", "light", "narrow", "wide", "fastest", "slowest", etc. Verbs (action words) that can be emphasized include: "splash", "stir", "pour", "scrub", "strain", "sink", "float", "measure". In order to ensure that your child understands a new word, try to use it a few times during the play, adding an explanation when necessary, and then later use the word in other situations during daily life.
 - You can also use **abstract language** that will stimulate your child's thinking when playing with water. For example, you can use language to pretend, such as "Let's pretend this bowl is a pirate ship, looking for treasure!" You can provide explanations like "The wind is making waves on the water". You and your child can hypothesize and predict, thinking about which objects will sink or float before you place them in the water. When you model this type of language, you provide your child with new information and extend his ability to think about his world.
 - Preschoolers are starting to play collaboratively with other children, but they can still find it difficult to share and take turns. Water play offers a great opportunity to **help children play together**, as it is simple, open-ended, and sensory-based. This means that there aren't any confusing rules, and all of the children can

have a turn if you have multiples of objects and toys in the water. Water play can also work well when different age groups are playing together, as each child can play in his own way.

- What if your child doesn't enjoy water play in the bathtub, sink, or water table? **There are many other ways to enjoy water in the summer.** You can water the flowers together with a hose, spray bottle, or watering can. Or have fun running through the sprinkler! Your preschooler may enjoy "cleaning" outdoor items with you using a bucket of water and rags, or pretending to "paint" the fence or sidewalk with water and a large paintbrush. Whatever way you choose to play with water, your child will enjoy spending time with you and talking together.

If you follow the guidelines above, you will probably notice that your child:

- enjoys playing and interacting with you
- engages in conversation about new topics
- engages in pretend play about new themes
- enjoys playing with other children during this activity

*This approach to water play comes from *It Takes Two to Talk®* (Pepper and Weitzman, 2004), a practical guidebook for parents who are concerned about their child's language development. To find out more about how *It Takes Two to Talk®* can help you build your child's language skills, visit:*

<http://www.hanen.org/Hanen-Resources/Resources-For-Parents/It-Takes-Two-to-Talk-Parent-Resources.aspx>

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.

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