



# Thinking Outside the Toy Box

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Many parents wonder about the best toys to help their child learn to communicate, interact, and play. While you can find many wonderful toys at the store, you don't need special toys or "educational" products to help your child learn. You have lots of things right in your own home that are really fun to play with! Most of all, when you join in with your child, almost anything can be fun and encourage learning!

Here are five everyday items that are really fun to play with. If you follow your child's lead as they explore and play with these things, you will have many opportunities to get involved and encourage language learning. We've provided some suggestions after each item about things you might talk about as you play together. But what's most important is that you observe whatever catches your child's interest and talk about it.

## 1. Mixing bowls

If you've ever given your child a wooden spoon and a metal bowl, you know how much fun it can be to use it as a drum! But bowls are also great for pretend play. Children can pretend to cook, pouring toy food into the bowl and stirring it. Bowls can also be filled with water, dry beans, cotton balls or dry pasta. Then, hide items inside for your child to find.

## How to add language

For budding drummers, you could talk about how “loud” the noise is, or how the beat is “fast” or “slow”. If your child is pretending to cook, watch their actions and describe them (is your child stirring, pouring, tasting, measuring, spilling?). You can also describe your child’s interests as they look for items hidden in the bowl, saying things like “You found the...!” or “Where’s the...?” When you add language, it should be based on whatever your child is doing with the bowl.

## 2. Linens and bedding

Sheets, blankets, towels, pillows, and old couch cushions can do double duty as forts, tents, tunnels, or whatever structure your child wants to build! A large blanket can turn into a swing if two adults hold either end while your child lies on it. Jumping into a pile of cushions is a great way to burn off some energy indoors. And towels and sheets make the perfect place to hide during Peekaboo or Hide and Seek!

## How to add language

These activities are all pretty active and provide many opportunities to talk about locations and actions as your child “climbs,” “hides,” and “jumps” and goes “under,” “over,” “through,” and “behind” the items. Children love physical play and moving around usually encourages them to communicate. If you watch what your child is doing, say something about it and then wait, it’s likely your child will keep the conversation going by communicating back.

## 3. Paper towel and toilet paper rolls

Empty paper towel or toilet paper rolls make great tunnels for little cars! Older children (over 4 years) might enjoy making a marble ramp by attaching a few rolls together at different angles and sticking them to a wall or cupboard door. It’s fun to let the marbles run down and catch them in a container at the bottom. Paper rolls are also great props for pretend play, and your child might enjoy looking through their new “telescope” or “binoculars”!

## How to add language

As you construct a tunnel or marble ramp, get involved with your child and talk about what you’re both doing. Try not to take over the activity, and let your child contribute their ideas. When your child puts things in the tunnel, you can talk about which objects fit and don’t fit, or which ones rolled through slowly or quickly. And there are endless things to talk about as you use your rolls as telescopes and binoculars! Maybe you are pirates looking out for treasure through your telescope, or maybe you are on a safari looking for elephants through your binoculars! No matter what the pretend theme, be sure to stick with your child’s interests and let them lead the way.

## 4. Tape

Masking tape and painter's tape can be used in a variety of ways. Children love to rip off pieces of tape and to peel tape off of surfaces. Anything that rolls is fun for toddlers, and they enjoy watching the roll of tape roll back and forth across the floor! Preschoolers can make roads for their vehicles out of tape or use their imagination as they pretend pieces of tape are Band-Aids for their stuffed animals. Another fun thing to do is to make a path or hopscotch pattern out of tape on the floor so your child can enjoy some physical play.

### How to add language

Just like the suggestions above, talk about whatever's caught your child's attention with the tape. If you are ripping off pieces, talk about whether they are "long" or "short." Describe your child's imaginative play as they make tape Band-Aids or roads ("Poor teddy, he has a cut on his arm" or "Which cars are going to race?"). Physical play is a great time to talk about actions and directions, like "jump," "hop," "balance," "forward," "backwards," and "sideways."

## 5. Plastic bottles

Empty plastic water or pop bottles can be used for pretending about food. Children love to pretend to cook, play restaurant, or pretend to go grocery shopping. Plastic bottles also make great bowling pins! Line them up and let your child roll a ball towards them and knock them down. Filling up and pouring from bottles can also make bath time extra fun!

### How to add language

Join in with your child's pretend play and add language related to your child's actions with the bottles. If you're pretending to grocery shop, you might say "I'd like to buy something to drink with dinner." If pretending to eat at a restaurant, you could add a new word like "beverage", asking "What beverage should we order?" If you've decided to use the bottles as bowling pins, you might talk about different ways to line the pins up or whether you should stand close or far away from the pins when you roll the ball. Make sure you don't do all of the talking; after you say something, wait to see what your child does and says next!

Look around your house and get creative. If you think outside the toy box, you will likely discover you have a whole set of "toys" that you didn't know about! Stay tuned next month for more ideas about how to have fun with everyday items.

Looking for more ideas about how to add language to your child's everyday experiences? Our guidebook *It Takes Two to Talk* gives parents practical ways to encourage their child's communication during everyday interactions.

## 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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