

Especially for practitioners working with toddlers! 

Sound Ideas

 *Sound and Phonemic Awareness*

In order for a child to read, he must have an understanding of how sounds go together to make different words. This practice guide includes early word games to help toddlers understand how sounds combine to form words. This is an important building block for later reading.

What is the practice?

You can help toddlers “make the connection” between sounds and words. Playing sound and word games helps toddlers develop an early understanding of how sounds go together to form words.

What does the practice look like?

Toddlers experiment with sounds (such as ma-ma and da-da) to make “new” words or silly sounds. This helps them understand that letters have different sounds and can be combined into different words. A toddler learns that these sounds can be put together in different ways to create new words. This is an important emergent literacy skill.



How do you do the practice?

There are many different opportunities for learning about sounds in words as a child plays with toys, eats lunch, or takes a walk.

- Start by thinking about what he enjoys doing and saying. Often young children have a word or sound that they say repeatedly. For example, some toddlers really like to make animal sounds such as “baa,” “meow,” or “woof.” Other children may like to make up silly names for their animals, dolls, or family members. Get your toddler’s attention by saying the sounds the toddler likes to make. After he repeats the sound, change the first letter to make a new silly word: “baa baa” becomes “ha ha.”
- Word play can be done with toddlers in lots of different situations and often happens spontaneously. For example, if while in the yard you see a worm on the ground, get the toddler to say “worm.” Make up a little rhyme like “Wormy, wormy, squiggly, squirmy.” Say it together as you watch the worm.
- As the toddler’s skills strengthen, begin to put words together in short sentences with the same sound. For example, “Did the doggie dig?” Laugh about the funny sound of “doggie dig” and encourage the toddler to repeat the phrase.
- Show the toddler that he did well by smiling and commenting on his efforts. A little encouragement will keep him playing longer, but be sure to stop when he tires of the game.

How do you know the practice worked?

- Is the toddler starting to “play” with individual sounds or words?
- Does the toddler seem pleased when he tries to make or copy your sounds?
- Has the toddler shown interest in trying new sounds and words?

Take a look at more fun and games with sounds

Hop Drop Game

Janice is an early childhood specialist in a class full of energetic children. She remembers a game she has used before to engage active toddlers. Janice tells the teacher about the Hop Drop Game. First, the teacher introduces the words drop, hop, top, and pop to the children. She shows them the action that goes with each word—Hop up and down; drop to the floor; put hands on top of their heads; and pop hands together in a clap. After all the children know the motions, she calls out one word after another while the children do the movements. After the children get the idea, she lets them take the lead. It becomes a class favorite, with someone always asking for the Hop Drop Game and wanting to be the leader.



Rearranging Sounds

A home visitor regularly visits with Gareth and his mom. Gareth, who is 19 months old, makes lots of sounds, some of which are “real words” and some just sounds. The home visitor is helping Mom figure out ways to rearrange these sounds and to make them fun to play with. Gareth often sits in his seat in the kitchen near Mom while she cooks dinner. Gareth begins cooing, and Mom comes close, cooing back at him. Gareth coos again and Mom repeats his cooing. Mom goes back to her cooking task. In a few minutes she returns to start the game with a new sound like ma-ma. The next time she changes the sound to baa-baa. Gareth smiles and responds to his mom, showing how much he enjoys the game.

Tickle Game

Sean is just learning to say single words though he is almost 3 years old. His favorites are “Mama,” “Dada,” and “baha” (for “ball”). To encourage him to play with the sounds, his mom and their home visitor have made a tickle game. It has become a favorite activity for Sean. Mom and Dad take turns with him. First Mom leans in close and wiggles her fingers to encourage Sean to say “Mama, Mama.” When he does, she tickles him, resulting in loud laughter. Then it is Dad’s turn to get Sean to say “Dada, Dada.”

