

The Observant Mom's Brain Building, Patience Building Toddler Activities

These are activity ideas in line with Montessori principles that are ideal for children aged 1 to 3, which is before most formal Montessori preschools begin. This will be featured in *The Observant Mom: Toddlers*. If you like this, please share it via the original blog post!

I read through many toddler activities books from non-Montessori authors. I picked out the best of the best activities. These are the characteristics of a good toddler activity, based on Montessori principles that I looked for:

Characteristics of a Good Toddler Activity

Isolates the distinguishing characteristic

An example of one activity given in a typical toddler activity book is to take a toddler to a tree and describe it: the bark is rough; the leaves are green, etc. This is an activity I rejected, because the attributes of the tree are not presented in an isolated, intellectually organized way. To present the color "green," for instance, two objects *that are exactly the same*, except in color, should be presented to the child. Otherwise, the child has no idea what you mean when you try to draw their attention to the color "green." As for drawing a child's attention to reality, per Montessori's teaching, the teacher does not point out attributes in reality that they use sensory material to teach. Instead, there are activities, such as coloring trees where the child has to select what color to use and thus remember what they have seen, that encourage the child to notice things by themselves.

Reality-based

Montessori is opposed to (adult-initiated) fantasy play. An example of a fantasy play activity that I rejected is one where the adult would make a "river" out of blue felt with green "alligators" that the child has to avoid as they are running. Montessori explicitly writes about how fantasy play is not helpful to child development and can also lead to false fears, such as fearing monsters under the bed. I would recommend against exposing children under the age of 3 to anything purposely scary, either in activity or in movies. They can develop nightmares.

The other main reason Montessori is opposed to fantasy play is there is no end creation that the child works towards. It is ultimately fatiguing to the child. An example is a fake kitchen. Instead of using a fake kitchen, why not get the child involved in the real kitchen at age appropriate times?

There is a difference between adult-initiated and child-initiated fantasy play. In Montessori, child-initiated "fantasy" is spontaneous. For instance, if given legoes, a child might put it together, and, on their own, make an alligator. An adult should not suggest it. Instead, encourage the child to observe reality and give the sensory training, and let the child initiate all of it. If a child was handed strips of felt and then turned it into a "river" with alligators, this would be a Montessori-approved activity.

Control of error

As the child works through an activity, there should be a strong control of error, alerting the child if they are doing it properly or not. If playing with cars, for instance, a child may have a road system laid out for them with masking tape, such that they stay within the lines. The control of error is the visual of going off of the road. Otherwise, the child may be inclined to simply crash the cars into furniture. The control of error should be strong and immediate, such that the child can identify it, and the adult never has to correct the child, i.e., never has to hover. In the car example, as the child gets older, this control is no longer necessary and many other activities, of the child's choosing and initiative, can be played.

Not singy-songy rhymey-rhyme jingles

There are many times that songs are appropriate and fun for a toddler. In our house, we sing songs while washing hands, cleaning up toys, and simply for the pleasure of singing songs at certain times.

However, when learning a new concept, I find them unnecessary. There are dozens of activities in toddler activity books to be used to learn about, say, body parts that use songs. I don't find these especially harmful but I don't find them necessary either. It is just as effective to point to the child's eyes and tell him or her that those are their eyes.

Being able to reject many of the toddler activities to be found in books was actually a relief. It would be difficult to have hundreds to choose from and memorize. Instead, I was able to whittle down the activities to the very best ones. My favorite book is *Help Your Preschooler Build a Better Brain*.

Benefits of this approach

I have found that if you find activities that follow these guidelines above, you will very often find your toddler playing independently. If they have an activity that captures their interest; has a real result; and alerts them to know if they are doing it right or wrong, they will *persist* at it. If they have no idea if what they are doing is good or bad, if they see no visible result, if they did not choose it, or if they do not like it; they will likely abandon the activity, as children often do, no matter how many blinky lights their toys have on them.

While the child is persisting in work, they are developing their attention span. Montessori writes that normalization is the most important aspect of her educational system, where *persistence of work* develops natural, internal discipline in a child. As a child works happily for a long time at an activity, they are increasing their attention span, bringing order to their movement, and learning to be a calm being enjoyable to be around. As a rule, if any activity whatsoever captures their attention, even if you see no value in it, just let them continue with it.

I have read that the problem parents have when a child turns 3 is a lack of attention span, where the child goes from one activity to another, unwilling to learn. Working on this normalization from an early age is sure to help.

Warning about Pushing a Child Too Hard

There are many exciting activities below. If you are like me, especially if this is your first child, you are excited and may present activities to your child before they are ready. My experience with this is it may cause frustration in your child. If they saw you do something, and you actively helped them do something once in a hand-on way, they will want to recreate it again later—but this time on their own. When they can't, they may have a meltdown, and, no, they *won't* let you help them do it.

Instead, I find it best to show them how to do something, using as few words as possible, in fact, preferably no words with a simple demonstration. If you want to help them, *talk* them through it, but *never step in and do something for them*. The only behaviors to discourage are "rude and rough acts."

To know if an activity is age appropriate for the child, ask: did they *choose* it, do they *like* it, and are they *persisting* at it? Trust that your child's inner teacher will guide them. If they do not seem interested, put the activity away for a few days, weeks, maybe even months.

Organization of listed activities below

The activities are grouped into categories. Organizing it this way allowed me to analyze new materials and toys quickly. When looking through new materials, I ask myself "what category is this activity?" I can then reference the list below. Instead of comparing the activity to every activity I've ever seen, I can compare it to just those in a particular category. I can see if I already have something like it or if this new activity may be better and able to replace one of the activities I have listed. This categorization, which is the crux of rational epistemology, always has this liberating (simplifying) effect when looking through data. I no longer feel overwhelmed when looking through toddler activities, because I have this strongly categorized list.

Each category starts with the easiest activity in that category and, thus, the activity that can be presented at the youngest age. Each category then has more challenging activities of the same type of activity. The intention is to start with the first activity, as it is the easiest, and then progress to others in the same category as your child seems ready.

Age Progression of Activities

Montessori describes a very delicate order of presenting activities to a child. I found the order of activities to be different for my child. I think this is because Montessori only worked with children aged 2 ½ and older. The activities below start as young as just shy of one year old. And, to that end, even Montessori says that, depending on when you start, a child may do the activities in different orders, such as how an older child first exposed to the materials actually works backwards, from the most

complex to the simplest activities. I found my son accomplished most skills earlier than the timeline outlined by Montessori.

I found the following outline to be the high-level, general progression of the development of a toddler:

Age	Activities
< 1 Year old	Songs, Learning New Words
1 Year to < 2 Years Old	Fine motor skills
2 Years to 2 ½ Years Old	Matching games, abstract words, e.g., colors and letters
2 ½ Years to 3 Years Old	Complex (jigsaw) puzzles, Constructing from patterns, Counting

Resources:

These are some of the resources I used to put together this list of toddler activities.

- [Help Your Preschooler Build a Better Brain](#) by John Bowman
- A [blog post](#) from Living Montessori Now with many links to DIY Montessori materials.
- [Lakeshore Learning](#) has some Montessori materials at a reduced price
- [Busy Toddler Happy Mom](#). A toddler activity book that had some activities similar to Montessori
- Dr. Montessori's Own Handbook
- The Encyclopedia of Toddler Activities

For any of the Montessori activities, I recommend purchasing Dr. Montessori's Own Handbook. It can be read in 2 hours. Review the section on the activity you are introducing, which usually has only 3 or 4 pages dedicated to it. The website <http://www.infomontessori.com> is also good.

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Brain Building Toddler Activities

Activities Starting Under 12 Months

Vocabulary Lessons

Age to start: 9 months

In a Montessori classroom, there are many hands-on, reality-based activities to teach different things. A board is made with sandpaper and a smooth material to teach rough versus smooth. The children touch bowls of water with cold versus hot water, etc.

I found I could present these activities to my first child at a very young age, and he easily understood the lessons. These lessons are very simple and do not take much time. They are not activities that the child would do over and over again. Generally, only a few lessons are necessary.

According to the book *Wonder Weeks*, children start to understand concepts at age 9 months. At this age, I started to present my son with many concept activities. One I presented to him was dry versus wet. I gave him a dry wash cloth, then got it wet, and gave it back to him, explaining at first it was dry and now it was wet.

At 9 months, he was not even talking yet, so it was hard to ascertain at the time what he understood. But when he did start talking, which starts at 18 months and becomes very fluent by 21 months, he understood "wet" and "dry" very easily and at a *very* young age. This makes me think that many concept activities can be presented at just 9 months, even if you won't see the result of the lesson for many months.

Other activities:

- Rough versus smooth
- Cold, Warm, Hot. You can simply use the faucet.
- Dry versus wet

Another activity to do is to give a small child a **treasure box** with similar items in it. For instance, put all rattles in one day, then all spoons, then all giraffe objects, etc., for the young infant to explore.

Movement Activities (Infant)

Little "obstacles courses" for infants are fun. Gymnastics style mats shaped like mats or hills are fun, though expensive. A free standing step, such as is used for exercise, can be fun for an infant.

Songs

Age: As early as possible

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Songs come in handy when, say, changing diapers. They helped to get a child to look at you and smile when taking photos.

You can find on my blog a [song basket](#). You can print this sheet out, cut the songs out, and put these lyrics to the songs in a basket to pick at random and sing. A homemade song basket would make a great gift for a new mom. These were some favorites:

- Yankee Doodle
- Pop Goes the Weasel
- Spiderman theme song
- Slippery Fish
- Bringing Home a Baby Bumblebee
- Alphabet Song
- Twinkle Twinkle Little Star (sung every night before bed)
- Wheels on the Bus
- Tiny Turtle
- Hush Little Baby
- Happy and You Know It

Children can learn simple movement to match the song.

Putting on songs with a strong beat is sure to have your little one dancing!

Music Activities

Young children love to drum, with their hands or an object. Young children love a set of hand bells that they can ring. Maracas or rattles are always fun. A xylophone is fun to strike and can eventually teach the notes. Some people have recommended a “Chim-a-long.”

If you invest in musical instruments, consider getting real ones instead of toy versions, depending, of course, on your budget, space in your house, etc.

Sound Activities

Most formal Montessori sound activities are better for a child aged 3, if not 4 or older. But one activity you can do, starting young, is to notice sounds around you: airplanes, dogs barking, etc. To this end, keeping a quiet house is ideal.

Activities Starting Age 12 – 20 Months (One Year)

I grouped ages 12 – 20 months, which is 1 year to < 2 Years old together because there is a strong theme of learning to **manipulate objects** among them. Skills learned from 12-20 months start with perhaps pushing a popper toy and progresses to more complex things, such as being able to buckle a seatbelt. If you give your child ample opportunity to manipulate objects with their hands at this age, I believe you

are setting up your child to hold and write with a pencil well at just 22 months old, which is much earlier than even in a Montessori classroom.

The activities that work well at this age have very **strong physical boundaries**. The child learns by what physically can move and what can't. For instance, as they put a puzzle piece in its slot, it either fits or does not. As they strike a ball with a hammer, they either hit or miss.

Knobbed Puzzles ("Wooden geometric insets")



A picture of the Montessori geometric wooden insets is above. It is easy enough to get a similar product cheaply on the market today: These are simple knobbed puzzles. This is not the first activity in a Montessori classroom but my son was able to do the below first activity at just 12 months, and my second child, my daughter, at about 14 months.

First (easiest) activity: Sharply contrasting shapes



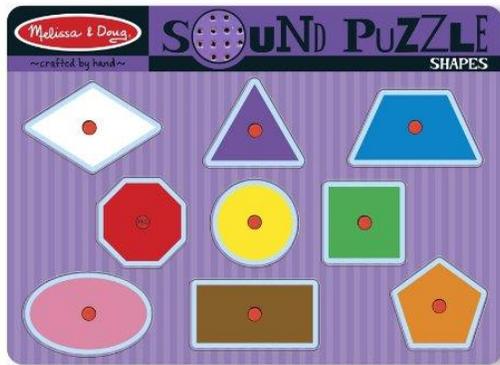
Age: 12 months though this varies

The easiest shape for the toddler is the circle, as the orientation of the piece does not matter. Put it in about 90% of the way and have them complete the rest.

The above toy is my favorite gift to get a child at their one-year old birthday.

Second activity: More similar shapes

As in all Montessori activities, at first sharply contrasting objects are presented. As the child advances, shapes that are more identical to each other can be introduced.



The advantage of the puzzle board invented by Montessori is any arrangement of shapes can be made as desired. Also, on the Montessori board, the shapes are all painted the same color, both the removable piece and the back color of the puzzle. This is generally lost if you rely on cheaper, widely available product on the market. However, I found them to be a decent enough substitute.

Montessori's personal trays are set up as follow:

1. 4 plan wooden squares, one rhomboid, and one trapezoid
2. 1 square and 5 rectangles of varying width
3. 6 circles of diminishing diameter
4. 6 triangles
5. 5 polygons from a pentagon to a decagon
6. An ellipse, oval, and flower like figures

Other ideas:

Lauri toys sell foam toys with shapes, letters, and numbers cut out that a child can take out and put back. However, I admit, I found I preferred wood as being sturdier and less likely to create a mess.

Balls

Age: 12 months

A 24" beach ball is a great toy to get a one year old.



Some people say to not give children balls, because they are too young to understand when to play catch and may throw it and hit you in the eye or knock over a lamp. I found they greatly develop hand-eye coordination and are great for discipline reasons. If for instance your child is throwing something they shouldn't, you can hand them some soft balls and tell them they can throw soft balls but not whatever they are throwing.

I read once that a sign of a well-developing child is they can lead and organize games. My son was constantly organizing games between me, my husband, other children, and himself involving balls.

Activities to do with balls:

- Roll back and forth
- Knock down pins
- Throw into a ring
- Hang on a string and bat
- Hit with a small stick or golf club
- Kick the ball

Dress Up

Age: 13 Months

My daughter especially loved to put rings and bracelets on herself. I found this out when she put spider rings meant for Halloween on her finger, much to our surprise, at just 13 months. My children loved putting on super jangly bracelets. Consider it some early practical life exercise.

Transferring Activities



Age: 15 months

This is pretty straightforward.

Alternative exercises:

- Use tongs (advanced)
- Transfer beans with a small spoon
- Use tweezers
- Use a baster or eye dropper
- Transfer water with a sponge: Great for learning to clean up spills
- Let child feed him or herself with spoon and fork

Pouring Activities



Age: 15 months

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The hardest skill to learn to get a child to drink out of a real cup is pouring properly. If you let your child practice pouring, without pressuring them to drink, it will help when they do start to try to drink out of a cup.

Alternative ideas:

- Have them scoop and pour water with a cup in the bathtub
- Have them pour pasta or rice from cup to cup
- Use different styles of cups, such as plain or measuring cups
- Encourage them to clean up spills
- Get them involved in cooking, letting them dump in ingredients

Tools

First (easiest) activity

Age: 15 months



My children greatly enjoyed this hammer toy at a very young age. It allegedly helps develop awareness of object permanence.

It's always a good idea, in my opinion, to have some kind of hammering toy on hand. If your child or one of his playmates starts hammering on a toy that they shouldn't hammer on, you can give them the hammer toy as an alternative.

Second activity

At just 18 months, we got a child tool's box from Ikea. My son loved to practice with the screwdriver and hammer. He would do this for ½ hour at a time.



Consider letting your children use real tools, in a safe manner, if possible. Some other products use wood instead of plastic. I have not tried any but in general I find I prefer wood toys to plastic ones.

Third activity

At 2 years 4 months, my son could start to use this toy, though I probably would not recommend buying and using it until about 2 years, 9 months. My son, at a young age, just wanted to disassemble it and try to drive it around without wheels. It comes with a real power screw driver. A Battat Roadster:



Note: Many books recommend doing activities to learn how to use locks. I was opposed to this because I didn't want my son to learn how to use them and escape out the front door. I found he learned, on his own, just fine, as I found out the hard way one day. He also learned how to use bathroom door locks just fine. I recommend a chain lock at your front door, up high, so children cannot get out. You may want to remove the lock on their bedroom door if they can lock themselves in.

More ideas:

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- A flashlight. We took our son to a hardware store and found one he could turn on. Great fun!
- Use a wrench to put the nuts on
- Screw on real nuts on real bolts
- Gigantic wooden screwdriver toy

Mega Blocks

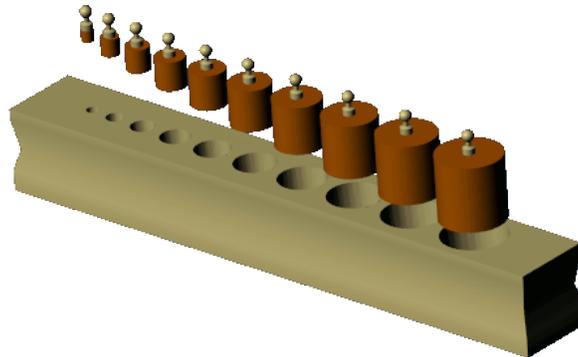
First activity: Mega Blocks

Age: 15 months



In the picture above, my son is 15 months. At first, he simply figured out how they go together. Providing these large "Legos" is all you have to do.

Cylinders ("solid insets")



Age child can start: 15 months

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This is the first material presented to the child in a Montessori proper classroom. I found my son could do these at a very young age.

The goal is for the child to arrange the cylinders correctly. The parent should embrace mistakes as the child makes them, only intervening when the child is rough with the material.

Montessori writes of three cylinder types: those that change in diameter only, height only, and both at the same time. From retailers, you might find a fourth: one where the height decreases while the width increases. I actually don't recommend the fourth. It is too complicated and seems to trick and confuse the eye more than develop correct judgment.

Some cylinders have 5 slots and some have 10. The ones with 5 are designed for a child under 3 years old. The ones with 5 slots can be found much cheaper than the ones with 10 slots. Children like smaller objects more than larger ones. So the ones with 5 slots are very useful for small children.

Alternative Exercises:

The advantage of the cylinders is they change in size in such a logical way. However, there are many things like this at home.

- A plastic tray meant to hold batteries can be used, to sort the different sized batteries.
- Putting caps on differently shaped pens and/or highlighters
- Putting lids on pots

Books

Age: 15 months

I think books deserve their own article, but, briefly: I found a child isn't interested in books until about 14 or 15 months old, and then, they only want to open and close them. At 18 months is when they become interested in content. I advocate picture/word books as a great vocabulary builder. These are mocked by many people as being "just facts without feelings." But, when reading a story to a child, if they have no idea what you mean by "truck" or "road" or any other concept, how can they enjoy the story? This is an obvious example of the backwards epistemology that dominates thoughts on education: that "mere" facts and knowledge need not be taught. I found that the "absorbent mind" that Montessori wrote about really doesn't kick in to high gear until a child is 2 ½. Until then, I see much benefit in explicitly showing a child what means what. *Point* to a truck to show it is a truck. This sets up a great early epistemological foundation. Knowing the 3 stages of learning, presented by Montessori, discussed in a separate chapter, is crucial.

Every Christmas, we try to get pictures of our children showing off where they are in their development. At 20 months, we chose to feature my son with a book:



Cars ,Trains, and Airplanes

Age: 18 months, possibly earlier

Cars and trains can be a mindless toy if they have a bunch of blinky lights, there are too many of them, and there is no structure at all to how they play with them. But, in that they kept my son's attention for hours, I have to recognize their value. How to bring structure to this activity:

- Put masking tape on the floor for them to push their cars on or in between the lines
- Have them put the cars in a line. This made my son die with laughter
- Put wooden blocks up to make a "maze." The Montessori long rods can be used.
- Have them assemble their own train tracks
- Also with model airplanes, buy a book with those same airplanes and have them match the model to the picture. You can also make your own "book" by printing out pictures.
- Re-enact movies with the cars. My son loved Disney Pixar Cars and we would re-enact scenes from the movie.

Movement Activities

Age: 18 months

I especially like these because they can be used to entertain a child while out in public waiting for something. These bring order and control to a child's movements. Some ideas

- Walk the line. We walked on the lines at the tennis court often
- Walk the line while music is on.
- Walk the line while carrying a tray with stuff on it
- Ride a bike on a line
- Hop
- If a floor is tiled, hop from square to square.
- Stand on one foot

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- Do a short jump. Measure progress.
- Jump over a rope
- Limbo
- Make a balance beam out of a wooden 2X4
- For an outside playground, a set of rings for developing upper arm strength. These are available at gymnastic centers, which often offer preschool playdates
- Basic exercises like arm circles
- Yoga
- Dance parties doing freeze dance
- Outdoors obstacles courses

Sensory Bins

The blogosphere is filled with sensory bin ideas. I like making them for holidays, with the color of the holidays. The best sensory bin I ever made was with fake “dirt” for use with artificial flowers along with a tiny truck set, where my son could then excavate, dump, etc., dirt. Mixing in marbles and such makes it fun. This was a great attention span builder. This set of material found a permanent home on our toy shelf.

A sandbox outside, with many tools to play with, is its own sensory bin, and can be enjoyed by children even younger than one years old.



Practical Life Exercises

Age: 20 months

A major advantage of doing Montessori in the home is that it should naturally lend to doing many practical life exercises. One issue however is that homes are designed for adults, not children, whereas a

Montessori classroom is entirely designed around the size of a child. Still, here is a list of activities for 3 and younger:

- Cut a banana or hard-boiled egg with a knife. Cut it in half so it is flat. They can do this when they are 2 years old.
- Have the child help take care of a plant
- Get involved in cooking. My son made scrambled eggs with me on many mornings. Make [frozen fruit popsicles](#) together
- Screwing lids on jars. Serving food family style, where the food is on the table, makes this possibly a daily activity during snack
- Practice brushing fake set of teeth. Children should eventually brush their own teeth.
- Get child involved in laundry. Toddlers can put soap in; turn washer or dryer on; push baskets around; find their own clothes in the basket; help hang clothes.
- Vacuum. At 2, my son could operate a handheld Dyson vacuum. He got it himself when he wanted to clean up a mess. He also used the Swiffer.
- Practice using a spray bottle filled with water—great fun!
- Use a fork and spoon on their own
- My son loved to buckle the seat belt that was found on his high chair when he was about 20 months old.

Stringing Activities



Age to start: 20 months

- Lace large tubular pasta through a shoe string
- Push pipe cleaners through a colander.
- Put spaghetti on a lump of play dough. String cheerios onto the spaghetti. This is surprisingly super fun:



Activities Starting 21 – 30 Months (Early Twos)

At 21 months most children demonstrate an explosion in language development. This alone suggests a major leap in development.

When you think of a 21 month year old child, just shy of 2 years old, I want you to think of **matching games**.

Matching games are recommended by Montessori sometimes before the three stages of learning, such as to draw a child's attention to an attribute before you even tell them what that attribute is. I found if the child matched colors together, as an activity, and letters, they learn it very easily, before the age of 2.

In addition, at this age, my son started **recreating reality** with objects. For instance, he put long, green lego blocks together and told me it was an alligator. He also started drawing, making shapes, which he said were snakes or other objects.

At this age, many of the activities now have a "canvas." Many involve a piece of paper, that the child uses to match objects or draw on. Legoes and such are their own canvas as well.

There is also in this time an explosion in memory capacity. Your child may, all of a sudden, recite an entire song. This is necessary for activities such as learning letter sounds, which requires the child can remember 26 (or more) different sounds

Free Drawing

Age to start: 22 months

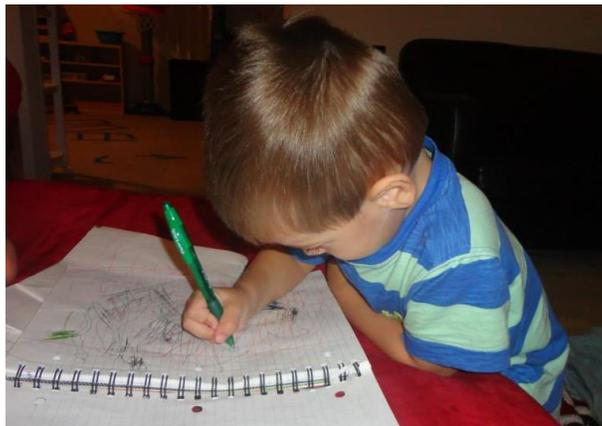


Colored pens and a notebook or construction paper are one of my favorite gifts to get a 2-year old.

There is a delicate order that Montessori advocates to present activities to children, resulting in holding a pencil properly. I did not find this necessary. Or, at least, not the exact progression that she outlines. Indeed, just shy of 2 years old, I simply gave my son colored pens and a notebook and he doodled for hours.

However, in looking at all of the previous activities, he certainly was getting practice improving the dexterity of his fingers: puzzles, using hammers, screwdrivers, utensils, mega blocks, and buckles. All of this practice may have led him to naturally hold a pencil correctly.

How well my son held a pen at just 2 years 4 months:



Science Equipment

Every child needs a magnifying glass.

For when they are just a bit older, if you get a microscope, consider getting a real one, designed for a child aged around 10 years old. One made with plastic are so weak and so poorly made that you may regret buying it.

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A pair of binoculars are sure to be great fun.

Painting

I found painting at a young age to be too messy for my taste. One rule I have as a parent: If I don't like doing it, I don't do it! It is not fun for anyone if mom or dad do an activity with a child while grimaced.

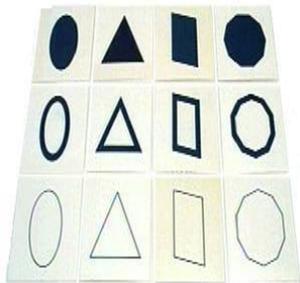
Nonetheless, here are some ideas. My son did LOVE to paint.

- Paint with water on the sidewalk (for very young child).
- Paint pumpkins in the fall.
- Tape large poster board to a table. Tape paper to this. Let child paint the paper. This is mess-free.

Matching Concrete Items to their Abstract Symbols

Age: Around 2 years

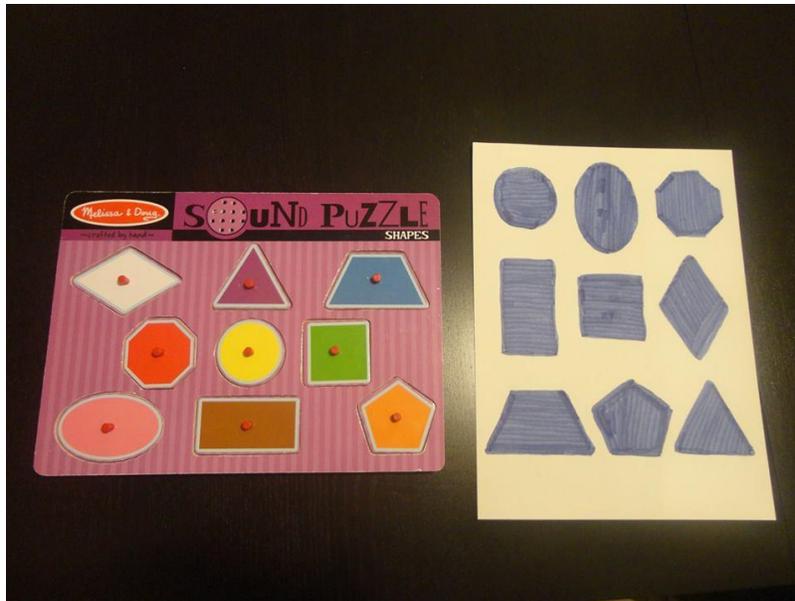
An extension of the “puzzle pieces” in a Montessori classroom are a set of white cards. There are 3 total. The first shows the shape completely filled in with the color blue. The second has a thick contour of the shape with the middle not filled in with any color. The final is a simple black line of the shape. The child places the "insets" (puzzle pieces) on the drawn shapes. This moves them intellectually from the concrete—shapes they can hold in their hand—to the abstract—the drawn shapes.



This prepares the children for writing where letters are symbols and so are words.

The child should outline the inset with his finger such as to place the inset perfectly on the white card with the solid blue shape.

A homemade version of this:



Alternative exercises:

- Use cookie cutters with Styrofoam. Cut a shape with the cookie cutter out of the Styrofoam. Place it back in the Styrofoam
- Have the child trace on paper an outline of several toys. Put them in a box. As the child draws them out, they match the toy to the outline.
- Many other shapes can be matched to a drawn 2-D version of the shape. We used model Disney Pixar Cars characters to match to a book about those cars.
- Print out a drawing of your child's favorite toy and have them match the 3-D toy to the 2-D shape. An example of a fun toy to do this with is model space rockets or airplanes or cars. Printing it on card stock, which is sturdier than paper, and laminating the printed pictures makes them more durable. I found a laminator for less than \$20.

Matching Cars figurines to a Cars books:



Colors



Above are some color tablets as would be found in a Montessori classroom. There are 64 wood tablets of 8 colors each with 8 shades. There are two sets of these for a total of 128.

First (easiest) activity: Sharply contrasting colors

Age: 23 months

At first, sharply contrasting colors are presented. I used magnets on the refrigerators and had my son put them in lines, which he liked to do. At first, you might ask your child to do red and green (or any other sharply contrasting colors) graduating to doing more colors at once.



This is about as far as I would go for a child up to the age of 3.

Letters

I had thought learning letters and numbers would be as easy as learning concepts such as "ball" or "cow." I did not find this to be true: letters are much more abstract than a concrete object. Instead, I found it was good to do some sensorial games before learning letters or numbers.

Note that in a Montessori classroom, the children learn to trace the sandpaper letters before they learn letters or numbers. This is done because the tactile sense is stronger than the visual sense. Montessori writes that some children cannot retrieve a movable letter by *asking* the child to get such-and-such letter, but they can get retrieve the correct letter after *tracing* it.

I, however, found that letters could be taught around 2 years old, provided matching games were done first. I did not find that my son was interested in tracing letters at 2 years old yet.

First activity: Matching games with letters or numbers

Age: 23 months

We had a book that had clearly drawn letters in it. We also had foam letters meant to stick to the bathtub wall. We had my son match the foam letter to the letters in the book.

After doing this matching game, progress to the 3 stages of learning where you point out, for instance, that a particular letter is "A." Then ask them to point to which one is "A." Then, without giving them the name, ask, "what is this?", as you point to the letter A. If they struggle with any of these exercises, revert back to an easier exercise until they seem confident and move on.

Montessori recommends doing small case letters at first. I found almost all books and activities have capital letters so we did capital letters. Also, many of the words they will be interested in later are capital, such as "S T O P" on Stop signs.

Other ideas:

- Call up Microsoft Word or any other word processing software. Ask child to find a letter on the keyboard and see how it appears on the screen
- Have them identify the letters found on shirts, signs, etc. This is great as it shows them how letters are everywhere and have relevance to daily life.
- Sing the Alphabet song.
- Lauri toys makes foam toys where letters or numbers are cut into the foam. This is also a matching game.
- To learn letters even earlier, a knobbed puzzle with letters may be desirable
- For numbers, also routinely count up to 20.

Second activity: Letter sounds

Age: Close to 2 ½

I tried to start off immediately by teaching letters sounds instead of letter names. I found it so unnatural that I couldn't keep it up. The children in my son's Montessori school could identify both the name and sound of letters when they were somewhere between the age of 2 ½ to 3 years old. A child can understand that a cow's name is "cow" and the sound it makes is "moo," and I think they can also hold these two concepts of letter names and sounds in their mind without much, if any, conflict.

Super Activity: iPad application: Phonics Island

I found *great* value in using an iPad application to learn letter sounds. Many people are opposed to letting young children use electronic devices, but learning letter sounds is one subject that using an iPad application proved very useful. I like the iPad better than videos, because the iPad is interactive. It gives the child the chance to use the information.

We did "Phonics Island," which my son calls "Monkey on the airplane" and this taught my son letter sounds with almost no involvement from me. The application went over letter sounds over and over, and my son loved it. His thirst for repetition was satisfied. The application was able to keep going long after I would have tired going over letter sounds with him. The application also had children trace letters, which he did happily. Highly recommend for a child close to 2 ½.

As far as regulating computer time, it is easily self-regulated. The application holds his interest in a healthy way without becoming addicted. He uses it until he is done, and then happily *stops*.

Naming Activities

Age: All, but especially when they start learning attributes

These activities can also be categorized as "Vocabulary Lessons," but they are so important, they bear worth repeating.

After the child does the sensorial activities, they are then given a name to describe the attributes they are working with. To do this, repeat all of the sensorial activities. Then start to name things for them. Again start with contrasting back to more fine. For cylinders, the teacher arranges those that change in diameter only, presenting the thickest and thinnest. Then do the 3 stages of learning, starting with the very thinnest and the very thickest cylinders. Do the same with the others.

This is, according to Montessori, "application of education of the visual sense to the observation of the environment." These exercises are done largely to encourage the child to make observations of the world, spontaneously, on their own initiative. They have the training, and most importantly, the word to describe what they see in reality.

Physics Activities

Age: Around 2 years old

When teaching physics in high school or college, I believe that teachers and professors teach the math behind concepts but students might not even be able to point to the concept in reality. The below physics activities are not meant to teach a child the heavy equations of physics but simply to give them a vocabulary.

It is not enough to just let them experience physics—almost all children (and adults) experience physics all of the time and yet few people notice the phenomenon. You must also give them the *vocabulary* to describe what they are experiencing.

Ideas:

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- While driving in a car, start to accelerate. Tell your child you are accelerating.
- Have an object move slowly and then quickly in front of their eyes. Explain fast and slow. Have them move slowly then quickly.
- Have them walk up and down a hill. Point out it is hard to go up hill and easy to go down hill.
- Point out that they move to the outside of a bend when you take a corner in the car. This is “centrifugal” force.

Making Art from Pre-Made Parts

First Activity: Sort and Match Toy

Age: 24 months

I hesitate to recommend an expensive toy as a first activity but we really enjoyed this toy. It is a sort and match toy. Using different pre-made plastic parts, the child arranges them on a peg board to make different objects. We had the one that made trucks. We used this same toy later to learn how to build a pattern from the instruction boards provided. This is also a great gift for a 2 year old.



Other activities:

- Mr. Potato Head
- There are many, many toys on the market that do similar things such as using magnets of different shapes to arrange on a board.
- Tangrams though we did not use these at this age. There are Tangram iPad apps
- Blue Montessori constructive triangles
- Using coins to create objects
- Print shapes on card stock and cut them out to be arranged by the child.
- Use sugar packets at a restaurant to make objects. It can entertain a small child while out.

Building Toys

Age: Slightly over 2 years old

Many Montessori activities, as will be shown throughout this list of activities, encourage the child to recreate reality. Children are given pencils to draw with, clay to create 3-D objects, etc. As they become

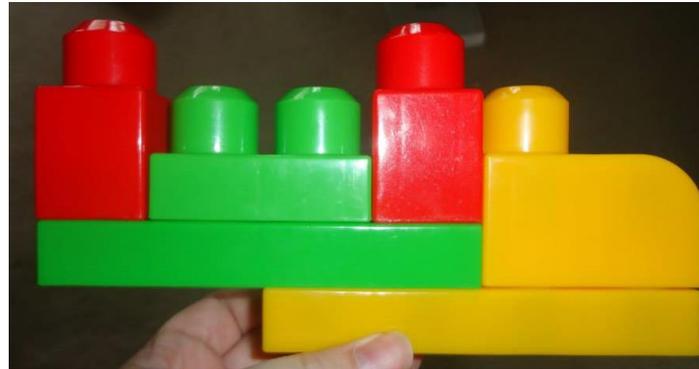
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more aware of reality, due to the strong sensorial education they are given, their recreations become more high fidelity. Legos are also good for this purpose. This is a creation my son made at 25 months. He told me it was an alligator:



Magnetic Blocks

There are many, many, many building toys on the market. I had to actively stop myself from buying so many. One toy that is exciting are the blocks made of magnets, which can thus build tall, sturdy shapes. After much research, I bought Magformers for my son. The best price I found was at Toys R Us.



Other ideas:

- Wooden blocks
- Quarcetti Tubation. At 27 months, my son liked to make a "race car" out of the tubes as well as an "airplane." We also made slides and put marbles down them.
- Marble Runs

Flower Arrangements

I bought many silk flowers on sale for my son to use as flower arrangements. We also had several sized vases and material to put in the bottom of the vase, including fake dirt, stones, and water beads. I put these materials in a china cabinet in our house. At any time my son wanted to set up a flower centerpiece, he could. He got practice pouring material from one container to another; judging sizes to match flowers to vases; picking out colors; learning the names of flowers; and creating something beautiful.



For birthdays, I have my children pick out a few real flowers, usually about \$4, to present to the birthday person, and to then make a flower arrangement.

Play Doh



Age: 24 months

The activity that held my son's attention the longest, hands down, was Play Doh.

This activity has everything: fine motor skills; using a pattern to cut out shapes; learning about shapes; using tools such as scissors and pizza cutters; colors; and, of course, making art.

A suggested progression for up to age 3:

- Simply make snakes and balls out of the dough at first
- Get tools that cut the dough in various ways, including child-safe scissors.
- Make shapes with small cookie cutters
- Make simple 3-D objects such as bananas or eggs

Counting up to 5

Age: 27 months

I was originally very conflicted on how to teach counting to my children. Montessori writes that counting should be taught with the long rods with alternating colors. The first rod is painted just red. The second rod has two units, one painted red and green. The third has three units, which are red, green, red, and so on. By counting the units on the rods, it shows the child that "three" is a singular concept, as represented how there is only one rod but which is split up into three units. Counting loose objects, she says, causes confusion: You are not teaching "3" but rather "1 + 1 + 1."

So, I was conflicted: should I wait to teach counting until he did the long rods? The long rods seemed like such a long way away and it seemed like he could start some first attempts at counting.

What I found however, was that a child can easily understand counting up to 2 and even 3 by perceptual means, meaning, they can just see two of something and know it is two, without counting individually. Montessori even says that most children enter the school already knowing how to count up to 3. There

is no harm in this. This idea of a “number as a singular concept” will play a role in formally learning how to count, starting with counting to 10, but this starts promptly when the child turns 3, and will be described in *The Observant Mom: Preschoolers*.

I found my son *wanted* to count. The very first time he tried to count, he got up to 9, fairly successfully. It burst out of him, like sunshine after opening a curtain. I certainly was not going to discourage it! Sure, he got out of sync often and counted things twice, but he certainly got the idea, and he kept getting better and better with each passing month.

Here are some ideas to bring some structure to these early counting attempts.

Activity idea:

One activity that seemed to help a lot was mega blocks. One of the mega block pieces is a row of 4. My son, on his own, would put 4 single blocks on this long row of 4. As he did it, he would count. The row of 4 allowed him to perceptually understand what “4” was. After this, he reliably was able to count up to 4 or 5 accurately.



To encourage proper counting, you can show the child how to count from left to right and top to bottom. This also helps prepare for reading. Line up objects in an egg carton left to right. This reinforces 1:1 correspondence.

Sorting

Sort household items in a muffin tin

Age: 27 months

Sorting activities in my opinion are some of the most important activities to build intelligence. They encourage organization and clarity. This is a skill to carry forward throughout all of life. As an example, I organized a computer lab once to simply put keyboards in a box; mice in another; etc., with labels. I

know this seems so simple, but people were amazed at how easy it was to find things and maneuver the lab. Otherwise, as it is with most labs, everything is just in one big heap.

I bought some toys to practice sorting, but, really, this is so easy to do with household items and a muffin tin or egg carton.

- Take different objects and sort them in a muffin tin or egg carton. Coins, buttons, beans, marbles, pasta.
- Simply give the child an egg carton and something to sort without suggestion of what to do. Let them amaze you with how they sort!
- Sorting magnets that are similar shapes.
- Organizing shoes in the shoe area (also practical life)
- Sort shapes made by cutting shapes out of construction paper
- A game we played was to pick out marbles of a certain color; fill up a toy dump truck with them; drive the truck on masked tape to a paper plate; and dump the marbles. Sorting, filling, moving, and pouring!

Activities Starting at 2 ½ Years

There are big leaps in development for a child at 2 ½ years old, 2 years 9 months, and 3 years old (the latter outside of the scope of this book.) A child noticeably develops that “absorbent mind” that Montessori talks about, where they pick up on information effortlessly.

In this time, the child can deal in the abstract. They can follow an abstract set of instructions. An example is being able to follow a drawn pattern and construct something from it. From this, the child can also, say, read a map. A child can help work out problems now, by discussing them, too. If something goes wrong, around 2 years, 9 months old, you can say to them, “We have a problem. We need to find a solution. Here are some options,” and let them decide on the solution or possibly come up with their own solution.

A child at this age is well on their way to becoming a “preschooler”!

Jigsaw Puzzles

Age: 2 ½ (30 months)

My son’s first jigsaw puzzle, which he did when he was 1 years old, had several puzzles that each only had 2 pieces. At age 2 ½, I got him a 12-piece jigsaw puzzle of animals at first. Then I was like, duh, he loves trains. So, at 2 ½ years old, I got him puzzles of Thomas the Train, sized 12 – 16 pieces. He was able to do this. I would recommend finding a puzzle of something your child likes.

What I found especially interesting is how my son solved it. He didn’t solve it by matching the shapes of the puzzle pieces or by spinning off of small details. He knew the design of a train and built the puzzle

based on that. As he solved it, he would ask me, “Mommy have you seen Thomas’s funnel ? ... Do you see Percy’s cab? ... Where is James’ coupler?”

Following Patterns (Abstract to Concrete Activities)

Age: 2 years, 8 months (32 months)

Montessori talks a lot about moving from the concrete to the abstract, using activities which place concrete objects on abstract paper. I am not sure if she also talked about moving from the abstract to the concrete. This is a necessary skill. All of the following are examples of building something concrete from an abstract instruction: building from a blueprint, playing a song from a sheet of music, making clothes from a sewing pattern, putting on a play from a script, or simply imagining a story as written in a book.

At not quite 2 years 8 months, I found my son could start to follow a pattern. This is a “Sort and Match” toy. At first I had him place the physical parts on the suggested patterns. Then I had him move those parts, already assembled, to the peg board. Note at first he would start to put the parts on the peg board, and then say, “No,” and put only parts that had matching colors on the board, as was his preferred activity. But you can see in this photo that he did start following patterns, and I would like to add: and how!



Reading a Map

2 Years, 9 Months

The best way to learn how to read a map is first build a map. I blog about this [here](#). Google maps is also a great tool in learning how to read maps.

Putting on Plays

2 Years, 10 Months

An activity my first child really liked was putting on a Cinderella play. My son so happened to really love the movie, *Cinderella*. It’s a perfect first movie for a child, as there are no really scary characters and

there are lot of cat and mouse chase scenes. To see if my son understood what he was watching and to encourage that very comprehension, I put on a Cinderella play with him. I got a set of Cinderella figurines, and we re-enacted the story. To my surprise, he remembered many details about the play that I forgot, such as when the cat was in the scene. I do think this activity greatly encouraged his understanding of the movie, and he continued to show understanding of the plot of different movies we watched after this. I see this as preparing him to receive information from a lecture format later.



My son did spontaneously put on plays of his own after this, especially with his Pixar Cars characters. On his own, he lines them in different ways, such as all of the race cars about to race with spectators watching. Here, on his own, he set up The Prince and Cinderella, with Cars characters watching.



At 3 years, the child goes through yet another major development. This work will be documents in *The Observant Mom: Preschoolers!*