

# Poke, Pull, Squish!

## Physical Development and Healthy Habits



**Level:** Toddler

**Cost:** Under \$5.00

**Mess Factor:** Some

**Suggested Room in the House:** Kitchen



You may have already introduced your toddlers to play dough, but you might want to try it again with home-made play dough and some cool tools!

### Your children will experience:

- Using the small muscles in their hands and fingers
- Hearing new vocabulary words

### Materials:

- Homemade play dough (see recipe below; other recipes can be found on the Internet)



#### Recipe for Homemade Play Dough

1 cup water  
1 tablespoon vegetable oil  
½ cup salt  
1 tablespoon cream of tartar  
food coloring  
pot  
1 cup flour

#### Directions

1. Combine the water, oil, salt, cream of tartar, and food coloring in a pot, and heat until warm.
2. Remove from heat and add the flour.
3. Stir, then knead until smooth. The cream of tartar makes this dough last six months or longer, so resist the temptation to omit this ingredient if you don't have it on hand.
4. Store dough in an airtight container or a Ziploc freezer bag.

- Items for poking into the play dough (plastic pegs, plastic animals or people figures, popsicle sticks)
- Items for pounding the play dough (lightweight wooden or plastic hammers or mallets)
- Items for filling (plastic cups or bowls)

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### Before You Get Started:

Make the play dough prior to introducing this activity to toddlers. Homemade play dough tends to be a softer consistency and is easier for little hands to manipulate than is the store-bought variety. Although store-bought dough is nontoxic, if toddlers decide to explore the homemade play dough by tasting a bite or two, you will feel confident about their safety knowing that it has been made with ingredients from your own kitchen.



### Beginning:

Seat toddlers at the table in booster seats. Divide the play dough into separate mounds, one for each child and one for yourself. Give children plenty of time to explore this new material. Toddlers will enjoy poking, squeezing, pulling, pinching, and pounding the play dough. As they explore, imitate children's actions and introduce new vocabulary words to describe what toddlers are doing or experiencing. Words to use might include *squishy*, *poke*, *flat*, *heavy*, and *salty*.



### Middle:

Observe how children play with the play dough. If they poke it with their fingers, you may want to offer them other items that are good for poking (such as popsicle sticks or plastic pegs). If toddlers pull the play dough apart, you may want to put a plastic bowl or cup on the table for children to fill with small play dough pieces. If little ones pound with their fists or hands, you may want to offer a lightweight wooden or plastic hammer or mallet. By observing how children use the play dough, you can encourage their interests by introducing new materials. Use your mound of play dough and the other materials in the same way you see children using them. If they poke plastic pegs into their mound, do the same, and narrate what you are doing. For younger toddlers, you might say something like "You're poking the pegs into the play dough! Poke...poke...poke..." (as toddlers poke them into their mounds). For older toddlers who may have an awareness of numbers, you might want to count each popsicle stick toddlers place into the mound of dough.



### End:

This activity might last a very short time or a very long time, depending on children's interest and attention span. Follow children's lead, and end the activity when they begin to lose interest. Understand that children may lose interest in the activity even before you've had a chance to introduce the new materials...that's okay! Or perhaps children are having such a good time pulling the play dough apart and squishing the play dough back together that you decide not to introduce the new materials this time...no problem! You can introduce new tools the next time you bring out the play dough.



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### Cleanup:



Let children know that it's almost time to put the play dough back into the container or bag. You might want to sing a familiar "cleanup" song or have fun making one up. Your toddlers may be ready to stop and clean up right away. If not, singing the cleanup song gives your child a warning that the activity is almost over. Show children the container or bag for the play dough, and encourage them to put the play dough back inside. Give children a wet rag so they can help you wipe the table.

### Younger Children:

- Expect younger children to simply explore the properties of play dough by poking, pulling, pounding, and squeezing. These are natural and necessary ways younger children explore, and they serve to strengthen the small muscles in children's hands as they play.



### Older Children:

- Older children may enjoy helping you make the play dough by adding the ingredients or by stirring the mixture. Cooked play dough is very hot, and it sticks to your fingers and hands when you first start kneading. You may want to knead it first before letting older children help with this part (*Hint*: kneading the play dough with waxed paper or parchment paper until it begins to cool will keep the hot dough from sticking to adults' fingers).
- Older children's hands and fingers are typically stronger and more coordinated. Because they can manipulate objects with more dexterity and precision, offer tools such as rolling pins, cookie cutters, garlic presses, or scissors, to increase their play dough fun.



### Hints:

- Although you might be tempted to teach children how to make detailed sculptures out of the play dough, keep in mind that toddlers' fine-motor skills (that is, the development of the small muscles in their hands and fingers) are still developing. As children's muscles develop, and as toddlers become more coordinated, you will gradually see them progress into making more controlled and purposeful creations with their hands, and with the use of play dough "tools."
- Squeezing, kneading, and pulling apart play dough strengthens the small muscles in toddlers' hands. Helping toddlers develop strength and control in their little fingers now will prepare them for handling writing tools (pencils, crayons, markers) and participating in other fine-motor activities (such as cutting with scissors or zipping their coat) as they get older.
- If homemade play dough gets on clothing, carpeting, or furniture, you don't have to panic! Simply allow it to dry thoroughly, scrape it off with your fingernail, a butter knife, or another blunt tool, and vacuum up the dry play dough crumbs.



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**More!**

- Add bowls, muffin tins, and other cooking and baking utensils (such as spoons, butter knives, pots, and spatulas). Toddlers will enjoy filling and emptying the bowls and other containers with their play dough pieces, as well as exploring the other accessories from your kitchen.
- Homemade play dough (find the recipe above) makes a great gift for a two-year-old (or preschooler). Throw in some popsicle sticks or other age-appropriate tools to experiment with. It's inexpensive, fun, and good for little hands and fingers!
- Search the Internet for other play dough recipes that might provide different sensory experiences for toddlers. Recipes that use Kool-Aid or baking extracts provide interesting and appealing smells. Adding items such as uncooked rice will provide a different tactile experience for curious little ones.



**Special Needs Accommodations:**

- Some children with special needs may be sensitive to new smells or to the way things feel in their hands. If your child reacts to play dough in a negative way, don't worry. There are many other ways to strengthen the small muscles in your child's hands, such as balls that light up when they are squeezed. Giving your toddler ample opportunities to manipulate a variety of objects (starting with chubby objects that are easy to hold) will help develop his or her fine-motor skills.