



Level: Toddler

Cost: Under \$10.00 (Mostly materials found around your house)

Mess Factor: Little

Suggested Room in the House: Kitchen



Have you ever noticed how toddlers seek your attention as soon as you begin cooking dinner? You may want to consider taking the child safety lock off of one of your cabinets and designing a space in the kitchen exclusively for toddlers.

Your children will experience:

- Filling containers
- Nesting or stacking objects
- Using language to describe characteristics of objects



Materials:

- Plastic bowls in (at least) three sizes
- A set of nesting cups or boxes (“Nesting” toys fit or “nest” inside one another in graduated order, from smallest to largest. Turned over, nesting cups, bowls, or boxes can be stacked on top of one another by positioning the largest one on the bottom and the smallest one on top.)
- Collections of toys or other items

Ideas for Play Items

(Start with just one set of the following):

- soft blocks
- bean bags
- sensory balls
- snap beads
- plastic linking toys
- lids from baby food jars



- Plastic or wooden spoons, plastic spatulas, measuring cups or spoons
- Pots and pans
- Empty food, condiment, or spice containers
- Containers to store items



Before You Get Started:

Choose a low cabinet in your kitchen where you will be able to see toddlers as you prepare your meals, but choose one that is far enough away from the oven, stove, and your workspace to keep toddlers out of harm’s way. Clean out the cabinet and replace the contents with some of the materials listed above. If you have child safety locks on your kitchen cabinets, remove the lock on the chosen cabinet so that children have easy access to their new play area.

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Beginning:

Show toddlers the new space when you have enough time to sit on the floor and play together. Watch as children dump out, explore, fill, and fit together the toys and other materials. By paying attention to how toddlers use the materials, you will be able to support their play and learning. (Note: Ultimately, your toddler may enjoy playing with the materials independently while you are able to prepare a meal, do the dishes, or complete other tasks. Even when you are busy with your own work, because of the close proximity of your child, you will be able to encourage your toddler’s play by making comments on what he or she is doing.)



Middle:

If toddlers begin filling a container with materials, find some similar materials and fill the container with children. Imitate children’s actions, and use language to describe what they are doing. For example, you might say, “You’re filling up the big bowl with your toys. I’m going to fill up the smaller bowl.” Children may begin “nesting” objects by size. Being able to nest three or four cups, bowls, or boxes is appropriate for toddlers. Many sets of nesting objects are purchased with six, eight, or more to a package. You may want to initially limit the number of cups or boxes, then gradually add one or two at a time to increase the challenge of the activity. If children stack the objects, you may want to stack some too, or say, “You’re making your boxes go higher!” Or you could sing, “Up, up, up...,” moving your voice up the octave as children stack their cups higher. When the cups fall down, sing “Down, down, down...,” moving your voice down the octave. If you frequently model “measurement” terms, such as “big, bigger, biggest,” or “high, higher, highest” when toddlers are younger, you will probably hear them using some of the same types of words as they get older and their vocabulary increases.



End:

Give toddlers a large plastic or wooden spoon. If they have filled a bowl with objects, you might suggest stirring the objects with the spoon or filling the spoon with some objects and transferring them to a different bowl. Large spoons are also great for knocking down objects that have been stacked!



Cleanup:

As you begin cleaning up with toddlers, you may want to fit many of the nesting objects together while leaving the largest and smallest ones on the floor. You might say something like, “I need two more cups. Can you find the little cup that fits in here? Now can you find the biggest cup?” For more ideas for cleaning up with toddlers, see “Hints” below.

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Younger Children:



- Infants who are able to sit independently can be placed on a soft rug or blanket in an area of the kitchen (out of harm's way, but close enough to adults who can watch and interact with them). Put three or four nesting cups on the floor in front of them to play with and manipulate. Exploring objects with measurable attributes (in this case, size) is an important step in infants' mathematical development. Add a few objects that are the appropriate size to fit inside the cups, and older infants will enjoy placing the objects in the cups or filling larger containers that adults provide.

Older Children:



- Older children will appreciate having their own space near an adult working in the kitchen as well. You may notice older children using the same objects in a more purposeful way. You will also hear older children using "measurement terms," such as "bigger," "longest," or "heavier," but now these terms will be used to directly compare or order things based on their measurable attributes. For example, children might explain to you while fitting measuring cups together, "This cup fits in here because it is bigger than that one but smaller than the first one." Consider adding collections of items for different measuring experiences. Empty food boxes, spice containers, or empty yogurt containers lined up in a row, stacked on top of each other, or filled with smaller items, will add an interesting dimension to older children's play and learning.

Hints:



- To make cleaning up easier, you may want to place a label on the container that holds the collection of materials. Simply take a picture of the toys (such as the snap beads), print out a small photo, and tape the picture onto the container in which the snap beads are kept. You can find many photos of toys on the Internet if your search terms include the name of the toy and the word *images*. Another option is to tape one of the actual items from the collections (such as a baby food jar lid) onto the container. You will need to help toddlers sort and place the correct items into the appropriate containers at first; but as time goes by, you will see that your toddler and older children are able to pick up many of their toys with little assistance.
- For younger toddlers, you may want to limit the number of materials you place in the cabinet. Too many items may be overwhelming to both you and your toddler, especially when it's time to clean everything up!
- If there is no extra cabinet space in your kitchen, fill a plastic storage tub with some of the materials described above. As you start getting dinner ready, set the tub on the floor in a safe area, and let your toddler get to work!



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More!



- Switch it up a bit, and change some of the materials in the children's cabinet. Keep available the toys toddlers play with frequently, but replace items that have lost their intrigue with new materials. Consider adding different collections of items to keep children's play more interesting. For example, if children are getting tired of filling up the bowls with the plastic linking toys, you may want to replace the linking toys with sensory balls or baby-food jar lids. Perhaps children are no longer interested in using the nesting cups. Try adding pots and pans or empty food boxes or plastic spice containers to the cabinet. The spice containers will offer new and interesting smells for toddlers to experience.

Special Needs Accommodations:



- Too many materials offered at one time may be overwhelming for children who have special needs. You may want to try giving toddlers three or four nesting cups and just one other set of materials for filling and emptying. You may also want to consider stocking children's cabinet with some sensory toys (such as tactile sensory balls, spinners, twisty fidget toys, or toys that light up).