



## Water Play with Toddlers – The Hanen Way!

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There are many ways to enjoy water play with your toddler – in the bath tub, at the kitchen sink (while your child stands on a stool), in wading pools or at water tables. Or have fun with the hose or sprinkler! Playing with water stimulates a child's senses, and encourages him to communicate, imagine, socialize, and experiment.

### Make your own water table

No need to buy a water table from the store – you can easily make your own from things around the house! All you need is:

- a large plastic container or bucket
- household items that will float, sink, or squirt, such as: cups, small plastic containers, spoons, turkey baster, spray bottle, stones, marbles, sponges, strainer, funnel
- plastic toys for pretending, such as: toy dishes and food, dolls, vehicles, action figures

### Goals for Toddlers

The goals for your toddler when you enjoy water play together are simply to:

1. Enjoy interacting and taking turns with you
2. Participate by using gestures, sounds and words
3. Pretend, experiment and explore
4. Have fun!

## How to enjoy water play with your Toddler

Whether pouring from different containers or imagining that a pirate ship is searching for treasure, your toddler is sure to enjoy playing in the water with you! Here are some simple tips to ensure that you encourage your child's communication, play, and thinking skills while you play with water together:

- **Face your child and get down to his physical level so you are eye to eye when you play. Why is it important to be face to face?** Because your child feels more connected to you when you look him in the eyes and that encourages him to interact with you. Being face to face also makes it easier for him to see and learn from your facial expression, actions, and words.
- **How do you get face to face?**
  - If you are playing at a water table, sit across from your child
  - If your child is in the bathtub, sit on the edge of the tub or on a stool facing him
  - At the sink, try standing beside him and leaning in close so that he can see your face as easily as possible.
- **Observe your child's actions and interests** so you can see what types of toys or objects to include in the water play. If he likes pouring - include items like funnels, cups, bowls, etc. If he likes to pretend - include items based on his interests. For example, if he wants to play "firefighter", include a small boat and some plastic figures who can be the firefighters putting out the fire with their fireboat. Don't have a small boat? Use a plastic bowl or container. Using something less realistic while pretending helps expand your child's imaginary play skills. Other pretend ideas for water play include: giving a doll a bath, washing the doll's clothes, washing the dishes, having a car wash, or pretending the water table is an ocean full of fish and sea creatures.
- **There is no right or wrong way to play in the water!** Let your child play the way he wants to play. It's more motivating for him if you follow what he is doing rather than trying to get him to play your way.
- **Let your child lead the conversation** – this means playing in silence for a bit to encourage your child to start the conversation. Then you respond, building on what he has said. Make sure you pause every now and then to encourage him to lead the conversation.
- **Introduce new vocabulary** –Water play gives you opportunities to introduce some new vocabulary, and reinforce vocabulary from other daily activities. New words could include: wet, dry, float, sink, warm, hot, cold, pour, splash, stir, scoop, slippery, empty, full, heavy, light, scrub, wash, swim.. Repeat new words and explain them simply. For example, "This cup is empty. See? There's no water. It's empty."
- **Emphasize new words** using your voice and face, and add a gesture when you say a new word whenever possible. This will make the new word stand out, and make it easier for your toddler to remember it.
- Toddlers have not yet learned how to play collaboratively with other children, even though they like being around them. The goal for toddlers is really to help them **play in parallel with other children**, enjoying the same activity. Playing at a water table or in a wading pool is a great way to help your toddler play alongside

another child. You can have more than one of the same toys and items so there is no need for arguments over sharing. Sharing an activity like water play helps children relax and encourages them to socialize with one another.

- Don't be afraid to enjoy **water play over and over again**, if this is what your child wants. Young children never tire of their favourite activities! This repetition helps them learn what to expect from the world around them and introduces important language associated with the activity.
- **Other ways to enjoy water play** – There are many other ways to enjoy water in the summer. You can water the flowers with a hose, spray bottle, or watering can. Or have fun running through the sprinkler! Toddlers like to pretend to be adults, so your child might like to use water and rags to help you “clean” something outside, such as outdoor furniture or the swing set. Or pretend to be artists and “paint” the fence or sidewalk with water and a large paintbrush. Whatever way you choose to use water with your child, your child will enjoy spending time with you and talking together.

**If you follow the guidelines above, you will probably notice that your child:**

- enjoys playing and interacting with you
- sends many messages while playing with you, including using facial expression, actions, sounds, and words.
- plays for longer than usual, if you follow his interests
- possibly enjoys playing alongside another child during this activity

This approach to water play comes from It Takes Two to Talk® (Pepper and Weitzman, 2004), a practical guidebook for parents who are concerned about their child's language development. To find out more about how It Takes Two to Talk® can help you build your child's language skills, visit:

<http://www.hanen.org/Hanen-Resources/Resources-For-Parents/It-Takes-Two-to-Talk-Parent-Resources.aspx>

## 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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