

Early

Learning & Education
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Infant and Toddler
Cognitive Development

Infants and toddlers develop their cognitive skills through their experiences with people and objects around them. Caregivers can support cognitive development by paying attention to the interests of children, using language to engage them in learning, implementing quality personal care routines, and creating an enriching environment. Giving young children time to explore at their own pace and play in their own way is key to cognitive development.

All children have their unique personalities and cues that indicate their feelings and preferences. A caregiver who learns to notice and respond to those cues supports cognitive development by using that information to expand learning

through language and play. For example, a young infant who is fascinated by a windsock outside might also enjoy playing with scarves. The caregiver can gently toss scarves in the air in front of the infant and say, "This scarf moves in the air. See how it floats?"

The caregiver can also take the scarves outside to provide an opportunity to compare the movements of the scarves and windsock.

Infants make connections between people and their names, or objects and words, from a very young age. Caregivers can support those connections, and create new ones, with language. *continued on page 4*



MAKING PUPPETS

Puppets are an interactive storytelling tool. Gather fabric glue, wiggly eyes or buttons, yarn, cloth scraps, and laundry marking pens to make puppets. For infants, sew items on securely or draw on faces to avoid choking and keep them washable.

- **Socks:** Tube socks can become a snake, worm, caterpillar, or person.
- **Gloves:** Use cloth gloves. Decorate each finger to match a song, such as *Five Little Ducks*.
- **Wooden Spoons:** Use the bowl of the spoon as the head. Twist chenille stems around the handle to create arms and legs, then use material scraps for clothes.



Exploring and Learning with Nature

Infants and toddlers are naturally curious, and time in nature can enhance their cognitive development. Nature offers young children the opportunity to explore spatial relationships, sizes, patterns, shapes, colors, volume, and the concept of cause and effect. All of these experiences help infants and toddlers build their cognitive development and critical thinking skills.

Take infants for walks where they can observe nature. Notice what seems to catch their attention and talk to them about it. For example, “Ryan, I see you are looking at that tree. Do you see how the leaves are moving? What could be making the leaves move like that?” They may not respond verbally to questions, but they are listening to new vocabulary and developing curiosity in learning.

Once infants and toddlers are familiar with nature in its natural outdoor setting, you can start bringing nature inside and use it to create learning experiences. Here are some ways that you can bring nature learning inside:

- Find leaves that are different sizes, shapes, and colors. Allow children to explore, and even crumble, the leaves in the sensory tub as you discuss what they see, hear, and touch. Leaves can also be laminated or sealed in clear contact paper to be explored without them crumbling.

- Collect other natural items that toddlers can explore, order, and classify, such as large stones, large seashells, twigs, pinecones, soil, mulch, grass, sand, coffee grounds, water, fruits, and vegetables. Always supervise the use of sensory materials, and when using fruits and vegetables, let children taste them (when appropriate).
- Hang bird feeders in front of windows or play areas so children can observe local birds.
- Introduce botany by planting non-toxic edible herbs and flowers for children to explore, such as spearmint, mint, chives, and rosemary.
- Consider having an aquarium, a bird, or another class pet to help children learn about ecology and the care of animals.
- Share nature books with children that have realistic photos of plants, animals, and habitats.



Infant Oral Health

Practicing good dental hygiene with babies and toddlers can help them have healthy teeth for years to come. Babies are born with twenty primary (baby) teeth already in their jaw. The teeth usually begin pushing through their gums between six and fourteen months after birth. By the time toddlers are around three years old, they usually have all their baby teeth showing. These primary teeth are important because they are placeholders for growing permanent teeth and help young children chew, speak, and smile.

Parents can clean their infant's gums twice a day with a clean, moist cloth. Once teeth begin to come in, they can be brushed with a small smear of fluoride toothpaste. Only offer milk or formula in bottles at feeding times. If a bottle is needed for comfort, it can be filled with drinking water. Babies should visit the dentist for a checkup between the first appearance of teeth and their first birthday. The dentist can make sure the baby's teeth and gums are healthy and teach parents how to care for teeth.

Many infants and toddlers experience pain or discomfort during teething. Symptoms of teething include being fussy, irritable, refusing food or sleep, and drooling excessively. The safest remedies for teething are massaging the infant's gums with a clean finger, letting the baby chew on a clean, wet washcloth that has been chilled in the refrigerator, or cold baby food like applesauce (for infants eating solids). Teething rings made of solid rubber can also be used, but teethingers filled with liquid should be avoided. Over-the-counter teething remedies should only be used when recommended by the child's pediatrician.

Source: The American Dental Association website at <https://www.mouthhealthy.org/life-stages/babies-and-kids> was accessed in August 2026.



Infant and Toddler Cognitive Development

A toddler who is lining up items by size, shape, or color will benefit from a caregiver who sits next to them and says, “I see you made a line, and it looks like the biggest trucks are here and the smallest trucks are here. Where will the next truck go?” Caregivers can introduce more vocabulary by counting trucks with the toddler, asking them which ones are the same, identifying shapes, or introducing words that describe positions of objects to promote spatial awareness, such as “What will you put next to (behind, in front of) this truck?”

Personal care routines support cognitive development because they are repetitive, sequential, and allow children to anticipate and take initiative. Consider diapering routines. Throughout the diapering procedure, the caregiver can explain what is happening and respond to the infant’s non-verbal cues. As the infant grows into a toddler, they learn to anticipate what will happen next in the routine and can be encouraged to take initiative by fastening and unfastening their own diaper tabs, sitting on the toilet, and washing their hands.

Personal care routines can be extended into symbolic play. Add clothes or accessories to the environment that can be easily pulled on and off, such as hats, ponchos, scarves, slip-on shoes, large bangle bracelets, or sunglasses. Include other familiar items like plastic telephones, dishes, stuffed animals, dolls, cars, and trucks. When young children have the opportunity to recall and imitate familiar people or events, it builds their symbolic thinking, which is the ability to use symbols to represent things. Some additional materials that promote cognitive learning for infants and toddlers are: rattles, sensory bottles, board books, shape sorting boxes, stacking rings, musical instruments, and toys with buttons, levers, slides, or latches. Infants and toddlers need unhurried opportunities to play and learn. It is through play that they explore their environment, learn, and build relationships.

Source: *California Framework for Infant-Toddler Learning and Development* by the California Department of Education (2025).

DESCRIBING INFANT TODDLER LEARNING

Educators may find that the families of infants and toddlers have different perceptions of what cognitive development is and how it can be measured. For example, they may think that their infant needs to learn the ABCs. A family’s background, culture, and belief system will influence their expectations for their child’s development.

Be respectful and open to their ideas. Look for positive ways to share information about development. When an infant is picked up, you can share observations such as, “Today when we were cleaning up, Ruben remembered where each toy goes. Remembering things like that is a math skill!”

Take a moment to think about the children and families in your program and consider the following questions: What do the parents in your program know or believe about the cognitive development of infants and toddlers? How do you help families see, understand, and support cognitive development?

Source: *California Infant-Toddler Curriculum Framework* by the California Department of Education (Sacramento, 2012).

RECIPES

Banana Oat Pancakes

This recipe makes twenty-four small pancakes that are great for a healthy breakfast or snack. Children can help add ingredients to the blender and add toppings.

Ingredients

- 2 medium bananas
- 2 medium eggs
- 1 cup rolled oats
- Oil or butter for cooking
- *Optional:* 1/2 cup whole fat ricotta, cottage cheese, or yogurt
- *Optional:* 1 teaspoon cinnamon

Directions

Add all the ingredients into a food processor or blender in the order listed. Blend until smooth. Stir in your optional proteins if you are using them. Let the batter sit for five minutes in the blender while you heat your pan. Add oil or butter to a griddle or a large nonstick pan, then place it over medium heat. Drop one or two spoonfuls of pancake batter into the pan. Cook for about one to two minutes, or until golden brown and tiny bubbles appear around the edges. Using a thin spatula, flip and cook for one to two minutes more. Serve warm with a little syrup, butter, or fruit. Refrigerate the remainder and use it within three to four days or freeze them for up to three months.

Source: Adapted from the website <https://www.mjandhungryman.com/banana-protein-pancakes> in August 2026.



Fall Fingerplays



Activity: The Owl

Age group: Infants

What you need: The words to this rhyme.

What you do: Gather infants and place them where they can see you. Use an animated voice and the gestures noted in parentheses as you sing or chant the following rhyme. *There's a wide-eyed owl* (thumbs and forefingers around eyes) *with a pointed nose*, (thumbs and forefingers to make a point) *he has pointed ears* (clenched hands, pointer fingers up for ears) *and claws for toes* (make hands into claws). *He sits in a tree and looks at you;* (circle fingers around eyes like binoculars) *then flaps his wings and says*, (hands to chest and flap elbows) *"Hoot, hoot"* (hands cup mouth to hoot).

What they learn: Infants are introduced to new vocabulary and practice motor development as they enjoy the rhyme.

Source: Adapted from
<http://www.atozkidstuff.com/owls.html>
 in August 2026.

Activity: Grey Squirrel, Grey Squirrel

Age group: Toddlers

What you need: The words to this rhyme.

To view a video of the rhyme, visit

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J1U5i_scF_M.

What you do: Gather children together as you sing and move to the following rhyme. Pretend to swish your tail, hold a nut with your feet, and wrinkle your nose. *Grey squirrel, grey squirrel, swish your bushy tail. Grey squirrel, grey squirrel, swish your bushy tail. Hold a nut between your toes. Wrinkle up your little nose. Grey squirrel, grey squirrel swish your bushy tail.*



What they learn: Toddlers are exposed to new vocabulary and connect words with movement.

Source: Adapted from
<https://firstchanceforchildren.org/fall-finger-plays-rhymes/>
 in August 2026.

Activity: Five Little Acorns

Age group: Preschool

What you need: The words to this rhyme. You can also turn this into a flannel or magnet story by printing pictures of a tree, five acorns, and a squirrel and attaching a piece of flannel or a magnet sticker to the backs of the pictures. Another option is to create a glove puppet with a picture of an acorn on each finger.

What you do: Use an animated voice to sing or chant the rhyme. Follow the directions in parentheses for suggested movements. *Five little acorns hanging in a tree* (hold one hand up with the five fingers spread apart), *the first one said, 'I'm happy as can be* (fold down one finger)!" *The second one said, "It feels like fall* (fold down another finger)." *The third one said, "The best season of all* (fold down another finger)!" *The fourth one said, "The squirrel is around* (fold down another finger and hold the other hand above your eyes like you see something)!" *The fifth one said, "Hey, what's that sound* (fold down the last finger and cup your other hand over your ear)?" *Then, up ran the squirrel* (hold up one arm and use your other hand to run up it) *and crunch, crunch, crunch* (pretend to eat)! *The five little acorns became his lunch* (rub your belly)!

What they learn: Children learn new vocabulary, follow directions, and practice motor skills.

Source: Adapted from
<https://firstchanceforchildren.org/fall-finger-plays-rhymes/>
 in August 2026.

Fall Fingerplays

Activity: Five Little Leaves

Age group: School Age

What you need: The words to this rhyme and colored scarves or crepe paper streamers that can be used as "leaves" (red, orange, yellow, green, brown). This can also be made into a flannel or magnet story by printing pictures of leaves and attaching a piece of flannel or a magnet sticker to the backs of the pictures.

What you do: Gather children together, give each one a leaf, and use an animated voice to sing or chant the following rhyme. Ask children to create movements for the words as they hear them. As their "leaf" color is called, they can float it down and sit on the floor. *Five little leaves, flying by my door. One **red** leaf blew away, and then there were four. Four little leaves falling down on me. One **orange** leaf blew away, and then there were three. Three little leaves falling down on you.*

Source: In August 2026 adapted from

<https://www.kidssoup.com/craft-and-resource/fall-autumn-and-leaves-felt-stories-rhymes-songs-and-books>

*One **yellow** leaf blew away, and then there were two. Two little leaves having lots of fun. One **green** leaf blew away, and then there was one. One **brown** little leaf, sitting in the sun. It blew away, and then there were none.*

What they learn: Children review the names of colors, practice motor skills as they move creatively, and practice following directions.



ABOUT CHS

For 135 years, Children's Home Society of California (CHS) has adapted to the changing needs of children and families. Since 1891, CHS has worked diligently to protect our community's children and strengthen their families through diverse programs and services.

At CHS, we view a child not in isolation, but in the context of each family's health, stability, and resources. We believe that families are fundamentally strong and resilient. The mission of CHS is to reach out to children and families at risk with a range of services to ensure every child the opportunity to develop within a safe, healthy, and secure environment.

Therefore, CHS provides a variety of services to children and families in California and nationwide, working to improve their quality of life by offering vital information, education and resource services, and child care assistance.

CHS also serves as an expert resource for child care providers, other social service agencies, and government agencies at the local, state, and national level. To learn more about CHS and resources available to you, please visit our website at www.chs-ca.org.

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