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## Mind games

5 brain-boosting activities for toddlers

BY ANN DOUGLAS

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**Y**OU KNOW YOUR TODDLER is busy. (How's that for an understatement?) What you might not realize is just how active your toddler's brain is right now.

At this stage, his mind is hard at work on the development of executive functions, says Ellen Galinsky, author of *Mind in the Making: The Seven Essential Life Skills Every Child Needs* (William Morrow). Executive functions are the set of skills that will (eventually) allow your toddler to control his impulse to rush to the front of the line when he thinks it should be his turn on the slide and to pay attention to what you're saying when he's hungry, tired or otherwise distracted. These skills include paying attention, remembering and flexible thinking. We're talking pretty high-level stuff.

Fortunately, there's plenty you can do to nurture the process. Here are five fun activities to do with your toddler that will help set the stage for some incredible intellectual growth, as suggested by Galinsky and Adele Diamond, PhD, FRSC, the Canada Research Chair Tier 1 and professor of developmental cognitive neuroscience in the department of psychiatry at the University of British Columbia.

**RED LIGHT, GREEN LIGHT** This classic playground game is not only fun, it gives your toddler the opportunity to practise remembering and following directions. Over time, your toddler will learn how to stop when you say "red light" and to make himself go again when you say "green light." This tells you that he has learned how to listen to the part of his brain that is capable of planning and organizing his actions, as opposed to cruising along on his default setting. "Inhibiting impulsivity and exercising self-control is the biggest challenge for toddlers," says Dr. Diamond. Need a quick refresher in the rules? Everyone is free to move forward from the starting position once the leader says "green light," but they have to freeze the moment the leader says "red light." If you're caught moving after the leader says "red light," you have to go back to the start.

**WALK THE WALK** See if your toddler can walk along a line, like one on a linoleum floor or on the sidewalk, without stepping off. Variation: Can he walk across a room carrying a glass with some water in it without spilling the water? This activity

requires your toddler to focus on remembering the instructions ("stay on the line," "keep the water in the glass") and monitoring his progress while walking across the room. Don't be afraid to modify (invite him to try walking along the line a little faster or walk while holding a bell and trying not to let it make a sound) to match your toddler's ability level. "You want to choose an activity where your child will be successful. Then gradually increase the difficulty," says Dr. Diamond. "Having repeated successes motivates learning."

**COLOUR COMMENTARY** Provide a sportscaster-style running commentary as you go about your day, focusing on what people might be thinking or feeling. This will encourage your toddler to switch perspectives as opposed to always sticking with his own. After all, what toddler doesn't think it's all about me, me, me? Beth MacKenzie, a mom of five from Courtyce, Ont., says she always talked about what was going on when her children were small. "It was lonely for me when first staying home, and by talking about what I was doing, we didn't spend our day in silence. I also felt it was respectful to my daughters to tell them and teach them things and to explain the world around us."

**SORTING IT OUT** Toddlers are natural-born sorters, says Galinsky. They love to sort objects in different ways, such as by colour (red only), shape (round only) or category (cars only). "These are important skills which help children learn to make connections," says Galinsky. Or to look at it another way, that classic *Sesame Street* game One of These Things is Not Like the Other made us the geniuses we are today.

**STORYTELLING TIME** Read your child stories without him looking at the pictures in the book. "This way, your toddler has to hold everything in the story in his mind without visual aids like illustrations," explains Dr. Diamond. This challenges his attention, concentration and working memory skills as he focuses on listening to and making sense of the story. Start with a short, simple story and progress to something a little more complex as he ages.

CF contributing editor Ann Douglas is a brainier mother because of the lessons she learned from her four toddlers, now 15 through 24.