

## Language Development Activities for a Language Nest

The following activities have been adapted from Macmillan (2004). These games are just some ideas for simple activities that support language learning in young children. Adapt them to your language and build on them to create more fun, interactive language learning opportunities! For more activities that can be modified for a Language Nest, see her book:

Macmillan, Bonnie. (2004). *Word and Music Games for Toddlers and Twos*. New York: Distributed by Sterling Pub.

**REMEMBER:** No matter what you are teaching, it is important to always **speak in full sentences** and use **action words** (verbs) as much as possible! This helps children to learn how to form sentences and not just memorize words.

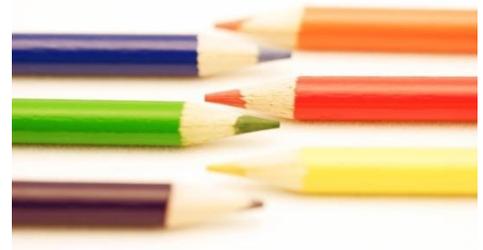
### Greetings

- Teach the children a simple welcome and goodbye in the language. Play a game where the children enter and exit the room (or create a makeshift doorway inside the room to use for this game). Have the child who arrives greet the group. Have the other children greet them in return. Encourage the children to act out what would take place when a 'visitor' enters your home, such as eating food or playing together. You will need to model this to the children so that they understand what is happening. When the 'visitor' leaves have the children say the proper goodbyes. Then continue the game with a new 'visitor'.
- Later, as the children develop their language skills, teach them how to introduce themselves and use other cultural protocols around greetings and goodbyes. Repeat the game, but with the additional language and protocols. Encourage the children to practice and use these greetings and goodbye when they arrive to and leave the nest.

*“Teaching your toddler how to classify things according to shape and colour is an excellent way to develop her vocabulary and critical thinking” (Macmillan, 2004, p. 44).*

### Colours

- Explore the classroom or the outside world and point out colours as you encounter them. For example, “this leaf is green; this desk is brown.”
- Once the children are familiar with the names of the colours, ask them to identify the colours of objects. Start by asking simple yes-no questions, such as, “is



this leaf green?” As they grow more confident, move to multiple choice questions (“Is this leaf green or brown?”) and then to open-ended questions (“What colour is this leaf?”).

- This activity can be combined with other vocabulary. For example, if the children are learning clothing vocabulary, you can point out the colours of the children’s t-shirts or pants and ask them questions such as, “What colour are your pants?”
- Once the children are familiar with the colour terms, you can develop more complex games. Play a game where you say, “There is something blue/green/yellow in this room/book/box of toys. Can you find it?” Or, ask the children to find search for items of a particular colour and bring them back to you; “how many red things can you find in this room?” You can also have the children sort items according to colour. Give them an assortment of objects in many colours and ask them to pick out all the objects of one colour, or group them into piles by colour.

*“The repetition of words and phrases is one of the best ways to accelerate your child’s language development. It helps to reinforce the neural pathways in her brain that link sound with meaning.” (Macmillan, 2004, p. 10)*

## Body Parts

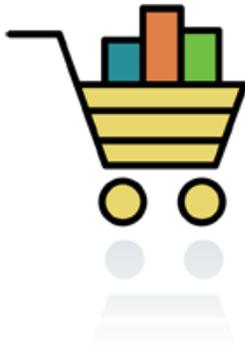
- Teach the children vocabulary for different body parts. Start by pointing out your own body parts, such as your leg or your hand, and talk about these in your language. Have the children take turns showing you their body parts and identifying their names. This encourages turn taking and allows children to learn through modelling.
  - As the children become familiar with the names of body parts, expand on this activity to include the uses of body parts. Ask the children, “What are these for?” For example, “Hands are for waving. Wave!” and wave your hands. “Hands are for clapping. Clap!” Encourage the children to repeat your words and actions.
- Get creative with these actions! Legs can be for walking, jumping, squatting; feet can be for stomping, pointing, sliding. Noses can be for sniffing, sneezing or snoring. Also ask the children to suggest uses; “What do you use your hands for?”



*“Parents can help their child’s language development by using a variety of words and sentence structures, and by making connections between an unknown word and words she already knows.” (Macmillan, 2004, p. 63)*

## New Objects

- Bring in several new objects that the children don't know. These could be cultural objects or just ordinary household items. Present the objects to the children one at a time. Describe and name each object – be sure to use lots of repetition with the name of the object so that the children can remember it. Talk about and demonstrate how the object is used. For example: “this is a cloth. This cloth is white and square. I use the cloth to clean the kitchen. I wipe the counter with the cloth.” Then move on to the next object and repeat the process.
- Now hide these objects around the room and ask the children to go find them. As they find the objects and bring them back, ask the children to demonstrate how the objects are used. This game is useful for teaching several new words at once.



## Shopping

- This game expands on the New Objects game above. Take a shopping bag or a basket and explain to the children that you are going to go “shopping”. Have the children walk with you around the room. As you go, select items to put in your shopping bag, and describe these objects to the children: the little red scissors, the shiny blue book, the big white mug. If you like, allow the children to pick out some items to add to the shopping bag.
- When you have four or five items in the bag, return to your group area and sit down. Talk to the children about what you got when you went shopping. Pull each item out of the bag one by one and talk about it. Describe and model how you use the item. Allow the children to handle the items as you talk about them.
- Now replace the items around the room, back to where they were before. Give the shopping bag to the children (or to one child at a time), and ask them to go shopping for you. Name and describe each item in the language and ask the children find it and put it in the shopping bag.

*“Games where you and your toddler take turns, as in conversation, are an ideal way to boost her language abilities” (Macmillan, 2004, p. 15).*

## Food

- This activity aims to build understanding of traditional and common foods. Bring in a variety of food items or pictures of food items. Have children explore aspects of the food through touch. For example, if you bring in berries, let the children feel the berries and talk about



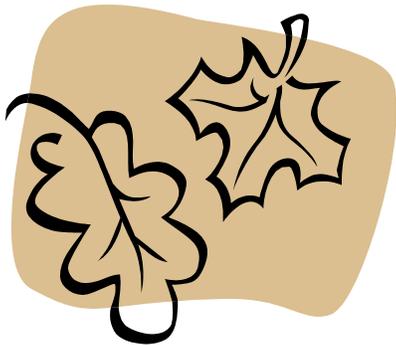
how the berries feel. If you have enough food, let the children taste it as well. What does it taste like?

- If you are using pictures, have the children examine the sizes, shapes, and colours of the images. Use lots of language when describing the food – what it looks like, what colour it is, what shape it is, etc.
- After you have thoroughly explored the food items, you can take them (or the photos) and scatter them around the room. Ask the children to bring back certain food items to the table. This requires them to recall the names they just learned. Encourage the children to repeat the names of the food as they bring it back to you.
- If you have toy food items, use these or the pictures to make “soup”. Let the children choose what to put into the soup pot. Name and describe each item as it goes into the pot. Then ask the children if they can remember what is in the soup. Can they remember the name of each item as you “serve” the soup to them?

*“The best way to enhance your toddler’s language development is to have lots of one-on-one conversations, where you take turns listening and responding to each other.”*  
(Macmillan, 2004, p. 14)

## Natural World

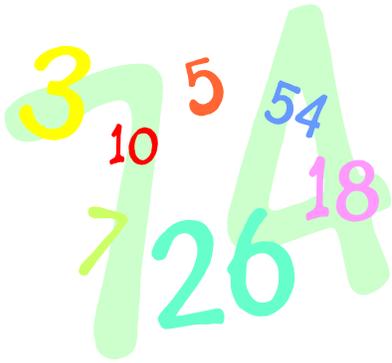
- When possible, go outside and explore with the children. Have them explore through touch as well as sight. As you go, point out different names for the things you encounter. However, don’t simply name each object – describe it! Have the children touch the tree and feel its leaves and bark. As they explore the object, describe it in your language using lots of repetition. “Look at this tree! It is a big tree. Feel the bark of the tree. How does the bark of the tree feel? The bark is rough. How do the leaves feel? The leaves of the tree are smooth.”
  - If the children are more advanced with the language, ask them to talk about what they see or feel. Give them a choice of answers, like “Does it feel rough or smooth?” or let them use their own words to describe it.



*“Encouraging a child to speak himself in response to you enhances language development dramatically. Simple exposure to language ... in overheard conversations does not help a child learn language.”* (Macmillan, 2004, p. 50).

## Numbers and Body Parts

- Combine number vocabulary with body part vocabulary. Teach the children the words for numbers 1 to 5 (or 1 to 10, depending on how advanced they are) and for different body parts. Show them how to combine the numbers and the body parts in a sentence\*. Ask the children questions such as, “How many eyes do you have?” Help them count and locate the different body parts. Demonstrate by pointing to your own body and have them point out parts of their bodies.
- Use lots of actions to demonstrate your meaning and encourage the children to act it out as well. Later on, this can be applied to the bodies of animals and can be a lesson on the vocabulary for different animals. An example would be asking how many wings a bird has.



\*Depending on the grammar system of your language, the words for numbers and body parts may be completely different in a sentence than when used in isolation. If this is the case, don't worry about teaching the individual words and instead focus immediately on teaching the children the words as they occur in sentences.

## Actions & Verbs

- Act out different movements – running, jumping, bending, marching, wiggling – and teach the children the name of each action as you do it. As you do the actions, move around the room or outdoors. In your language, say something like “Let's jump! Jump! Jump!” or, “We're jumping! We're jumping! We're jumping!” Encourage the children to copy you, both doing the action and saying the word in time to the movement.
- After a minute or two, suggest a different movement and repeat the process. Begin by saying the words very slowly and moving slowly in time to them. Then as the children become familiar with the words, speed it up! Say the words quickly and speed up your actions in time to the words, then alternate fast and slow words and actions.
- To build more language, add the words “quickly” and “slowly” in your language: “We're jumping quickly!” or “We're jumping slowly!”

*“Parents who consistently respond in positive, encouraging tones to their children's speech and behaviour tend to raise more verbally gifted children”  
(Macmillan, 2004, p. 40).*

## Dress for the Weather

- Take four cards or pieces of paper and draw four simple weather pictures: a bright sun; clouds and rain drops; snowflakes and a snowman; clouds with windy gusts. Gather clothing items that match these weather conditions, for example: shorts and sunglasses; a raincoat and an umbrella; a toque and mittens; a warm sweater or coat.
- Show the children one of the pictures and ask a child to select the right clothing for that weather. Have the child dress up in those clothes. Repeat with another child and a different picture.
- Be sure to keep talking throughout this activity and use lots of actions to demonstrate what you want the children to do. Describe the weather conditions and name the items of clothing as the children put them on. The children will begin to learn the names of things as you use the words frequently in the context of the activity. This will also help the children develop their logical thinking skills.
- Later, you can mix up the clothing into one big pile and have the children sort out the correct items for each weather condition.



*“A child’s language development is speeded up when parents’ responses are attentive (the parent repeats, confirms or extends what the child says), warm (the parent gives more positive than negative feedback) and encouraging (the parent more often invites or asks than makes direct commands)” (Macmillan, 2004, p. 58).*