

# The not-too-messy animal play pack

for 1- to 3-year-olds



Illustrations by Polly Dunbar from the book *The Hug*, written by Eoin McLaughlin, published by Faber and gifted with this pack.



Being a parent to a young child can be tough. Parenting in a pandemic is tougher still. In September 2021, Dr Alexandra Hendry from the University of Oxford and Dr Nayeli Gonzalez-Gomez from Oxford Brookes University ran a series of online workshops for parents to share some early results of the Social Distancing and Development Study. Our study found that parent-child play is very important for children's development. You can watch a recording of the presentation part of the sessions here: <https://tinyurl.com/babylabpresentation>



We also asked parents what they are already doing that works well, and what barriers they face. It was clear from our workshops that lots of parents are looking for ideas for simple, engaging activities that are quick to set up, and quick to clear up. So, with help from our partners at National Literacy Trust, Peeples, and Home-Start Oxford, and with the generous support of book publisher Faber, we put together this pack of toddler-friendly activities that are all about exploring, talking and enjoying time with your child. We hope you will adapt them, build on them and have fun with them.

# Animal Habitats

**Help your child make a home for their jungle animals. Collect some leaves and grass, sand or mud and spread it out in the tray to make a cosy home for the animals.**



This kind of play provides lots of opportunities for you to extend your child's vocabulary. You could talk to your child about where the animals might like to hide, or what they would like to eat.

## Adapt

Take the animals on a real-world adventure and help your child find them the perfect habitat. Is there some long grass near you where the animals can hide? Or a puddle they can visit for their drinking water?

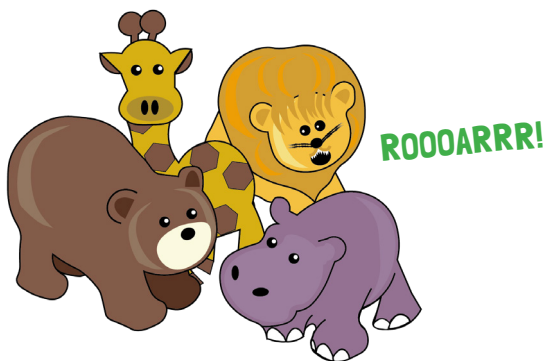
## Extend

If you have any spare bits of vegetables they could be added to the 'jungle'. Broccoli florets make great trees, celery can be a log, chickpeas can be stones, lentils can be sand, and cress is the perfect grass.



# Animal Sounds

**Have a go at making the sounds of the animals in your pack with your child.**



It may sound silly but experimenting with making sounds can help with language development.

## Adapt

Can you act like the animals as well as sound like them?

## Extend

Play your child some recordings of the real animal sounds from the internet.



# Animal Parade

**Tape a line of masking tape to the floor or table and show your child how to parade the animals up and down the line.**

Concentrating on a simple activity like this helps your child to develop their attentional focus skills.



## Adapt

Turn your masking tape path into a road for toy cars (or pretend cars made from blocks or cards). Add in some curves and corners and then encourage your child to drive their cars along the 'road'.

## Extend

Turn your masking tape path into a bowling lane: place some empty plastic bottles down one end and take turns trying to knock them down with a bean bag, soft ball or scrunched up sock.





# Frozen Animal Rescue

**Put a couple of animals in the ziplock bag, half fill it with water and then put it in the freezer overnight. The next day, remove the ice-block animals from the bag and put them in the tray. Let your child explore the frozen animals and help them figure out how to get them out of the ice.**

Playing with melting ice is a fun sensory activity, that is great for developing observation and thinking skills too.



**Make sure your child is never left unattended with the bag.**

## Adapt

Use yoghurt pots to make smaller blocks of ice, and add squash or food colouring to the water before freezing for different colour effects.

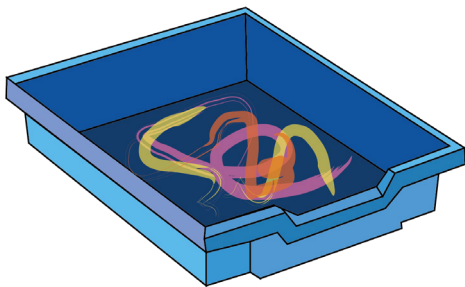
## Extend

Experiment with leaving some ice block animals outside in the cold or sunlight, others by a warm radiator (in a tray or bowl to catch drips) and others in the fridge. Talk to your child about which melt first.



# Paint Trails

**Put a couple of drops of paint in the tray with a round object (e.g. a conker, grape or small ball), tape the lid on, and roll the ball around to make a painting.**



Watching the object roll around, leaving a paint trail, will help your child to learn about cause and effect.

## Adapt

If your child made a pattern that they'd like to keep, press down some plain paper onto the pattern then lift it off and let it dry.

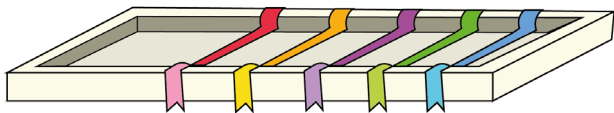
## Extend

Experiment with adding one colour at a time, to see how the colours mix to make new ones.



# Peeling Tape

**Attach strips of the tape to a table or highchair tray. Lift just a bit of the ends of each strip, then show your child how to peel the tape off. Once they've managed to peel off a piece congratulate them but take it away straight away so it doesn't go in their mouth.**



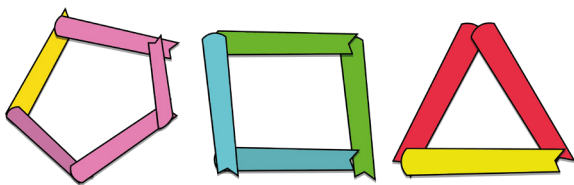
Practising gripping and pulling things is a great way to build the small muscle control that children need to learn to write.

## Adapt

Make the task easier by using straight lines, with both ends lifted off. Increase the challenge by crisscrossing pieces of tape over each other.

## Extend

Use the tape to make simple shapes (e.g. triangle, square) and name them for your child.

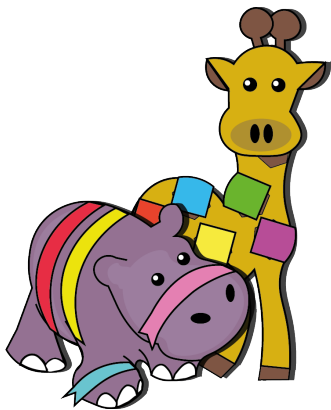


## Animals can change their stripes

**Show your child how to cover their animals  
with tape to give them a whole new look.  
Cut up pieces to help them experiment  
with stripes and spots.**

This activity will fire up little imaginations and provide lots of opportunities for you to talk with them about colour and patterns.

Describing colours and patterns will introduce new words into your child's vocabulary.

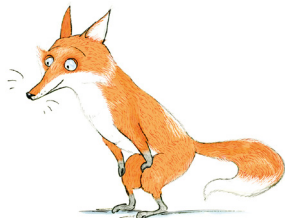


## Adapt

If the tape is too fiddly, let your child decorate their animals with paint instead – but be sure to give the animals a good bath afterwards.

## Extend

Once the animals have their new look, help your child to come up with some new names for them. You could even make up stories about what these new animals like to eat, how they sound, and where they live.





# Painting in a Bag

**Put a few drops of different coloured paint in the ziplock bag, let out the extra air, secure it shut (you might want to add extra tape around the edges), then let your child enjoy squishing the paint around.**



Watching colours spread and mix is a great way to learn about cause and effect.



**Make sure your child is never left unattended with the bag.**

## Adapt

If your child enjoys exploring the world by putting things in their mouth, for this task take away that temptation by taping the bag securely to a window, table or floor. You might want to put some scrap paper underneath just in case of leaks.

## Extend

For a range of effects, you could try adding flour or glitter and oil or washing up liquid in with the paints.



# Potion Making

**Encourage your child to use their tray to make a potion with things they can find around the house or garden. Give them a spoon for stirring... but the rest is up to their imagination!**

Mixing things is a simple, hands-on science experiment that's great for building your child's understanding of how the world works.



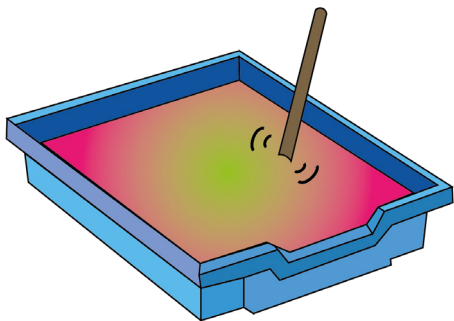
**Always monitor your child carefully if they are playing with anything that isn't safe to go in their mouth.**

## Adapt

Squash up some fruit (bananas and berries work well) and help your child make an edible potion by stirring together the milk and fruit.

## Extend

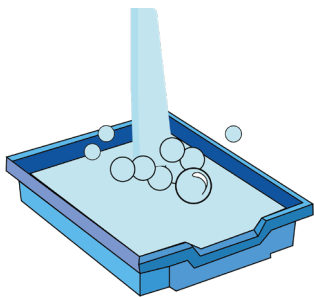
Encourage your child to talk to you about what is happening with their potion. Are the solids and liquids mixing? Has it turned a different colour?



# Rinse and Repeat

**Lots of the paint-based games in this pack can be repeated if you rinse the bags or tray out afterwards. You can keep the mess to a minimum by setting them up with a bowl of soapy water outside, or in the bath.**

Washing things clean can be a fun learning activity for your child, and letting your child help with simple chores builds their self-esteem.



**Make sure whenever your child is around water you watch them extra closely.**

## Adapt

What other simple chores can your child help with?

## Extend

If your child enjoys washing things they could have a toy car wash (make sure none are battery operated), or bath their doll.



For more activity ideas visit



Changing life stories

<https://wordsforlife.org.uk>

and

people

supporting parents and  
children to learn together

<https://www.peeple.org.uk/parents-area>

To find out whether there is a free Peep group in your area  
contact **01865 395145** or **families@peeple.org.uk**

If you think you might benefit from free, confidential,  
non- judgemental support visit Home-Start Oxford



<https://homestartoxford.org.uk>

For a downloadable version of this pack,  
and to hear the activity suggestions in  
English, French, Polish, Punjabi, Spanish  
and Urdu visit:

**<https://tinyurl.com/babylabactivitycards>**



If you have any feedback about these resources,  
or would like to share some pictures of how  
you've used them with your child, we'd love to  
hear from you:

**[babylabcommunitypartnership@oxford.ac.uk](mailto:babylabcommunitypartnership@oxford.ac.uk)**