

Winter Fun Brain Building Activities

Break out these fun and creative ideas when you're cooped up indoors.

Adapted from an article by Isadora Fox (American Baby Magazine)

Marshmallow Tinkertoys

A bag of marshmallows and some thin pretzel sticks are all you need to build the perfect puffy pal, a 3-D house, or tepee. Your child simply skewers the marshmallows with the sticks to create his own masterpiece. Add to the fun by placing toy pigs or other animals in the house and challenging your child to be the big bad wolf and blow it down.

Family-Photo Bingo

Improve your child's memory and help him learn who's who in your family tree with this photo game. Take nine family photos and arrange them into rows of three, then give your child nine playing cards or checkers pieces to serve as bingo chips. When someone calls out "Daddy" or "Grandma," your toddler covers the photo with the card. Whoever gets three in a row wins.

Sugar-Cookie Pizzas

Slice several thick cookies from a roll of refrigerated sugar-cookie dough. Gently flatten them a bit on a cookie sheet to widen them, bake, and cool for about 10 minutes. Next, your child can decorate their pies with strawberry jam or red icing for sauce, shredded coconut for cheese, and red M&M's for pepperoni.

Grandparent Greetings

Haul out the craft supplies and set up a home Hallmark business. First your toddler creates the card with stickers, glitter, cut-out magazine photos, or whatever else he likes. Then you ask him what he wants to say to the recipient, and you write it inside. The icing on the cake? When the weather clears up, let your child stamp the envelope and slide it into a nearby mailbox.

Signature Storytelling

This is a trick I use at bedtime to give new life to old stories. Start reading one of your child's favorite books. When you get to a critical point in the action, challenge him to take charge of the tale and add his own twist. For example, if you're reading *Cinderella* and the mean stepsisters have torn up her dress, ask your child, "What would you do if someone did that to you? Should Cinderella just run away and cry, or should she do something else?" It teaches kids to think on their toes.

Create a Sensory Table

Fill a series of bowls or washing basins full of textured objects -- peeled grapes are a good choice, as is cold cooked spaghetti, steel-wool pads, cornstarch, or dry beans. Blindfold your child, have him sift his hands through, and describe what he feels. Then challenge him to guess the object.

Bowl-a-rama

Small, empty water bottles and a rubber ball are all you need to transform the family room into a bowling alley -- sans silly shoes, of course. Six bottles should suffice for bowling pins; if the bottles fall over too easily, fill them up with a little water or dry pasta for some extra weight.

Disco Down

Disco has been dead and resurrected so many times, I'm not sure if it's in or out anymore. But I do know that young kids love to dance to it, even if they think that "Bee Gees" is some sort of sugary snack you've been denying them. Dim the lights, close the blinds, hand each child a flashlight (for the full disco effect) and a small scarf to twirl around. Cue up some classic tunes like "Dancing Queen," by ABBA, and "I Will Survive," by Gloria Gaynor, and watch the disco magic unfold.

Doll/Action Figure Beach Party

Grab a collection of dolls and/or action figures, beach towels (wash cloths), sunscreen (baby lotion), and perhaps a yacht or two (some Tupperware), and head for some fun in the tub.

Mini Car Wash

Gather up your child's fleet of cars, trucks, and spaceships for a detailing job that'll put your local garage to shame. Load them all into the tub and give them a cleaning with plant sprayers and empty squeeze bottles.

Pirate Play

Wrap a bunch of wooden blocks in aluminum foil, and hide them around the house. Give each child a flashlight and a small paper bag, and challenge them to find the buried silver.

Masking-Tape Marvels

Who would have thought that a humble roll of masking tape could provide so much fun? Make a hopscotch pattern or mock balance beam on the living room floor.

Family-Room Picnic

Change things up by serving lunch outside of the kitchen. First, grab your basket (you don't need a real picnic basket -- a laundry basket will do) and assemble some picnic foods that the kids can "pack" themselves -- juice boxes, water bottles, packets of raisins, string cheese, paper plates, napkins. While the kids are busy filling the basket, spread a blanket in the family room and put together some sandwiches. Then unpack your picnic and watch the lunch disappear.

Movie Time!

At some point even the most creative parent is going to have to resort to some good old TV time. Keep a hidden stash of DVDs that you only pull out during cruddy weather so rainy-day television is truly a treat.