100+ Playful Things to Do With a One-Year-Old

Note: Many of these activities correspond to a link or other blog post. If you don’t understand what’s written on the list, head to the original post to find the link. (Or search on Pinterest!)

Part One  -  Part Two

Follow Their Lead

- Embrace their favorite books: read them plenty, find similar books, search for or come up with activities inspired by their favorite books.
- Embrace their favorite toys: don’t worry if they seem obsessed with a couple of things.
- Establish a toy rotation: When they’re bored with something, stash it away for awhile.
- Remember not to force an activity or outcome on them.
- Slow down and try to see the world through their eyes. Let them lead on the walk, or choose what to play with.

Music Activities

- Go to a kid-friendly concert
- Sing classic sing-alongs
- Create and use a “nursery rhyme basket” with small toys that go along with your favorite nursery rhymes. For example, a cow, a cat, a dog, a plate, a spoon, and a moon for “Hey Diddle Diddle.”
- Make your own musical instruments using recycling.
- Dance!
- Use scarves, ribbons, or other props with your dancing.

Sorting Activities

- Introduce sorting with something super simple: 2 colored bowls, 2 different colored items, invite them to sort in the matching bowl.
- Once they understand that, try introducing more complicated sorting, such as sorting by size.
- Cut a slit in the top of a box or container, and invite your one-year-old to stick a deck of cards through, one at a time.
- Cut holes in the top of a box or container, and invite your one-year-old to push cotton balls or pom poms through.
- Tape a paper towel tube to the wall and invite your one-year-old to drop cotton balls or pom poms through.
Sensory Play: Tables and tubs

- Go for the basic recipe of a filler + a toy + a tool. For example, shredded paper + toy birds + small bowls to put the bird in.
- Check out my eBook 52 Weeks of Sensory Bins for more ideas (bin ideas that are safe for babies or easily adapted are marked in the table of contents.)
- Water pouring: A tub of water, various funnels, bowls, etc.
- Search “Sensory bottle” or “discover bottle” on Pinterest to find tons of ideas that use old water or soda bottles!

Art Activities

- Introduce art materials a little at a time: For example, a couple of crayons, or a couple of markers.
- Mix a couple drops of soap with paint so that it washes up easier.
- Try painting with sponges, leaves, or other unconventional materials.
- Yogurt mixed with food coloring is a great “edible finger paint” for those one-year-olds that still everything in their mouths.
- Paint with water on colored paper or the sidewalk.

Practical Life

- Practice using regular (non sippy) cups. A plastic shot glass is actually a great size for little ones to practice, as strange as it sounds and looks!
- Let them use/practice with utensils, even when they don’t really know how yet.
- Let them use dishes. If they are prone to throwing the dish on the floor, only put a bite or two on the plate at a time.
- Start teaching them manners: gentle reminders, and teaching by showing.

Busy Bags, Boxes, and Boards

- Busy bags/boxes: Basically any small activity or collection of toys. Try putting them in a small case, such as a pencil pouch, and bring them out when you need to keep them busy for a few moments. Search “busy bags” on Pinterest or Google for tons of great ideas.
- Busy Boards: Imagine a piece of plywood with little contraptions all over it: toilet paper holder, chain locks, wheels, etc. It takes a little bit of construction know-how to make one, but they are often sold on Etsy as well.
**DIY Toys**

- I created a **string pulling box** on a whim in just a couple of minutes when my first son was 6 months old, and it’s still a solid toy in our house! (So, 3 years at the time of this writing!)
- Punch holes in paper towel tubes, invite your one-year-old to stick straws through the holes.
- Collect baby-safe recycling in a pile or basket or box and let them have at it! Sounds weird, I know, but every toddler I’ve ever known loves it!
- Search for games that only use your hands, such as patty cake. Great for waiting rooms, restaurants, and waiting for the bus.
- Felt boards are not very difficult to make. Glue a piece of felt to a piece of cardboard, maybe something the size of regular paper. Then cut shapes out of other felt. You can make it as complicated or simple as you want!
- Use cut up pool noodles with pokey things such as pipe cleaners and golf t’s: a poking sensory bin! (idea from Busytoddler.com)

**Cardboard Boxes**

- Create cars, houses, rocket ships, etc. Think about your one-year-old’s interests, and if there’s anything you can make for that.
- Ball pits are a ton of fun!
- Poke holes in a large cardboard box and poke twinkle lights through.
- Cut holes in a cardboard box, and invite your one-year-old to push balls through.

**Blanket/Sheet Forts**

- Use extra large binder clips to clip sheets and blankets as needed.
- Put a large sheet over a table for an instant (and easy clean up) fort.
- Hang sheets from the ceiling for an extra large deluxe fort.
- Make a fort with cardboard boxes.
- Use PVC pipe for a semi-permanent fort that can be taken apart and rebuilt.
- With some hallways, you can pin the sheet across from wall to wall for a quick and easy fort.

**Fine Motor Skills**

- Stickers
- Coloring
- Painting
- Bingo dabbers & stamps
- Peeling tape off of things
- Ripping paper (see the recycling comment above!)
- Playing with pipe cleaners
- Playdough
- Sensory play
- Scooping materials
- Feeding themselves
- Playing in the dirt or sand or garden
- Collecting rocks/leaves/shells, etc
- Sidewalk chalk
- Picking flowers (either dandelions/weeds or with permission from the garden’s owner.)
- Learning to dress themselves.
- Taking caps/lids off and on things.
- Duplos (large Legos)
- Mr. Potato Head
- Stacking things such as blocks
- Popping bubble wrap
- Musical Instruments
- Hammering
- Puzzles
- Playing with dolls

**Large Motor Skills**
- Yoga: You can do it with them, or next to them and see if they copy.
- Play tunnels are a ton of fun and encourage coordination and large motor development.
- Balance beams.
- Climbing on young toddler-friendly playground equipment.
- Jumping.
- Dancing.

**Outdoors and Nature**
- Hiking and going for walks.
- Exploring local parks: the playgrounds and the landscaping/gardening.
- Flower arranging.
- Exploring the beach if you have one, and collecting or inspecting seashells.
- Building sand castles if you have access to a beach or sand pit.
- Camping: One of the best camping trips of my life was when my older son was 18 months old! It took a little bit of planning, but it was a ton of fun.
- Bubbles are a great outdoor activity.
- Large toy trucks.
- Winter: playing in puddles, snow, or whatever other weather your area brings you.
- One-year-olds seem to enjoy collecting things in their pockets. Go for a nature walk and then see what items you can collect. Once home you can inspect them, display them in a place of honor, or mix them with something like playdough.
- Gardening: a one-year-old can’t help a ton, but getting them involved a little plants that seed. Pun definitely intended.
- Set up a mud kitchen if you have the space. Basically a play kitchen, but outdoors using things they can find outside like mud, rocks, leaves, flowers, etc.

**Reading**
- Don’t be afraid to read books that feel a bit too advanced for your child. I’ve found that around 18 months, toddlers stop being completely entertained by simple, 1-word-per-page board books.
- Tell stories without using books (great for that budding vocabulary!)
- Make the library your second home!
- Search for book lists on Pinterest. One of the first things I do when we’re going for a theme in our tot school is to search for the topic + books on Pinterest and find what’s out there.

**Dramatic Play**
- Play kitchens are my younger son’s favorite (currently 18 months as I write this).
- Dollhouses are a classic make-believe/dramatic play.
- Dress up doesn’t have to be princesses and police officers: Daddy’s old baseball cap and mom’s sparkly scarf are plenty for a one-year-old!