

**Using Ordinary Materials to Promote Discovery and Learning with Infants and Toddlers**  
**Addendum to Early Head Start Tip Sheet No. 32**






**Infants and toddlers learn best:**






- In the context of relationships with their parents and caregivers
- Through play and active exploration of their environment

**Items should be:**

- Safe to handle
- Non-toxic
- Easily sanitized between uses
- Used under close adult supervision

**Below are examples of household items that can support discovery and learning opportunities with infants and toddlers:**

Material		Developmental Task of Infant or Toddler
<p><b>You, the parent and caregiver!</b></p>	 <p align="center">Photo: ©istock.com/Yvonne Chamberlain</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Explore the world by showing and playing with baby and materials</li> <li>• Snuggle, hold, sway, and rock</li> <li>• Coo, talk, sing, tell stories, and read</li> <li>• Mirror baby's facial expressions</li> <li>• Delight in baby's wonder and successes; comfort when upset</li> </ul>
<p><b>Mirrors</b></p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Track</li> <li>• Bat at and hold</li> <li>• Explore sense of identity (seeing self and facial expressions)</li> <li>• Concept of body parts (identify eyes, nose, etc.)</li> </ul>
<p><b>Tops to liquid laundry detergents, fabric softeners, and mouthwashes</b></p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mouth</li> <li>• Bang two together</li> <li>• Nest</li> <li>• Stack</li> <li>• Use to fill a large bowl or empty containers</li> <li>• Explore concepts of size, shape, color, texture</li> <li>• Sort and classify by size, shape, color, texture</li> <li>• Dramatic play prop (pretend to drink)</li> <li>• Bath-time or sandbox prop (fill, pour, scoop)</li> </ul>
<p><b>Bandanas, soft scarves, or fabric swatches</b></p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mouth</li> <li>• Dangle above baby to track, bat at, and grab</li> <li>• Feel and snuggle; explore textures</li> <li>• Play peek-a-boo</li> <li>• Dramatic play prop (use as hat, scarf, or baby blanket)</li> <li>• Use to fill and empty tissue boxes</li> </ul>
<p><b>Muffin tin with toys that fit into holes (Empty egg carton works well too)</b></p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Make sounds or 'music' by banging tin with a spoon</li> <li>• Explore shape (rectangular 'holes' versus circular 'holes')</li> <li>• Explore one-to-one correspondence (1 car for each 'hole')</li> <li>• Prop for pretend play (cooking or shopping)</li> </ul>

<p>Empty containers such as powdered drinks, parmesan cheese, mouthwash (Note: mouthwash container has a safety cap making it a great shaker toy)</p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dump and fill (using smaller items such as shower curtain rings)</li> <li>• Place lids on and off</li> <li>• Cause and effect (shake and make noise)</li> <li>• Explore concepts of size, shape, color, texture</li> <li>• Dramatic play prop (pretend to cook)</li> <li>• Bath-time or sandbox prop (fill, pour, scoop)</li> <li>• Roll round containers</li> </ul>
<p>Laundry Baskets</p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use for dump and fill</li> <li>• Explore spatial relationships by climbing in and out</li> <li>• Explore balance by trying to pull up on, push, or carry</li> <li>• Cause and effect by pushing or pulling basket</li> <li>• Practice small motor skills by placing smaller items through holes</li> <li>• 'Help' with chores by collecting laundry</li> </ul>
<p>Tissue box blocks (Fill with "junk mail" to add weight, seal opening with construction paper and clear, non-toxic packing tape)</p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stack</li> <li>• Bang on boxes</li> <li>• Dump and fill</li> <li>• Cause and effect (build and knock down)</li> <li>• Explore concepts of shape, size, color, weight</li> <li>• Explore balance by trying to carry when walking</li> </ul>
<p>Throw-able items such as shower puffs, pot scrubbers, wiffle balls, sock balls, or fabric shapes</p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mouth</li> <li>• Bang items together</li> <li>• Dump and fill</li> <li>• Throw or roll</li> <li>• Props for water or painting activities (shower puffs, scrubbers, wiffle balls)</li> <li>• Explore concepts of size, shape, color, texture</li> <li>• Sort and classify by size, shape, color, texture</li> </ul>
<p>Photos cards placed on shapes cut from milk jugs, diaper wipe box tops, yogurt tops. (Be sure photos and any writing are covered with clear, non-toxic packing tape)</p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mouth</li> <li>• Explore sense of identity (seeing self and loved ones)</li> <li>• Explore emotions ('I'm sad to see my brother leave for school.' or 'I can hug and kiss his picture when I miss him.')</li> <li>• Concept of body parts (identify eyes, nose, etc.)</li> <li>• Cause and effect (pulling apart 2 lids attached by Velcro tabs)</li> <li>• Use smaller sizes for dump and fill activities</li> </ul>