

Toys from Throwaways: Boxes



Have you ever seen a child unwrap a gift, then play more with the box and wrappings than with the toy? It's no surprise that children can find ways to play with many kinds of household items that you might otherwise throw away. You can be kind to the environment and encourage your preschool child's imagination by recycling boxes that you no longer need. Building with boxes can encourage the development of math skills such as measurement and geometry. Here are some ideas to get you started. The possibilities are endless!

Practice safety first

Make sure all materials to be used by children are clean and free from sharp fasteners or sharp edges. Avoid boxes that contained food, such as meat containers. Wrapping paper or paper towel tubes are fine but, for sanitary reasons, avoid using toilet paper rolls.

Build with boxes

Use different shapes and sizes of boxes for building. Discuss what children might want to make—a robot, a car, a house—then help them decide what boxes they will need. Boxes can be glued or taped together and then painted. Large open-ended boxes can be taped together end-to-end to make tunnels for children to crawl through. Smaller boxes or cardboard tubes can be made into tunnels for toy cars.

Try a train

Work with your child to make a box train. Boxes with open tops, such as shoe boxes, work well. An adult can cut the top off of closed boxes, such as tissue boxes, to create an open side. Let your child decorate the boxes with scrap paper, markers, or crayons. Poke a hole in the ends of each box, and then tie the box train cars together with yarn. Young children enjoy filling boxes with blocks or toys, then pulling the train along. As you talk with them about the train, introduce related words and sounds. Suggest reading a book about trains together.

Turn a large box into a television screen

Cut out a large opening. Position it so a child can stand behind it with their head showing in the screen. A small box can be colored to become the remote control. They might want to give a weather report or news story on a recent family event. Your child might prefer to use a puppet or a doll as the reporter.

Make some music

Almost any box or container can become a drum. Children can use a wooden spoon as a drumstick, or they can drum with their hands. Make a shaker to add to the music by placing small beads, buttons, or gravel inside a covered container and taping the lid on firmly. Try a rubber band banjo. Stretch several different rubber bands across an open shoe box. Try varying the width and tension of the bands to produce different notes with your new banjo.

Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this tip sheet are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Illinois State Board of Education.



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