

## Driven to Discover:

### How Thinking Skills Develop Through Everyday Play and Exploration

**F**rom the day they are born, babies are driven to figure out how the world works. Their wheels never stop turning. In their first year, babies largely learn through their senses: looking, listening, mouthing, and touching. They learn important concepts such as cause-and-effect and early problem-solving skills when, for example, they press the button on a pop-up toy or move a cloth to find the toy underneath.

In years 2 and 3, toddlers become little scientists—experimenting to figure out how to make things work and to solve more complex problems, like using a stick to get an out-of-reach toy. Their growing memory also takes on an important role as children master the ability to imitate what they see others do, even hours or days later. And as toddlers get closer to 3 years old, they make a huge leap in their thinking skills as begin to use their imaginations to play pretend and express their own ideas.

The most important part of your child's early learning experiences is you. It is through interactions and experiences with loved and trusted adults that babies and toddlers begin to make sense of the world.

#### WHAT YOU CAN DO:

- **Encourage curiosity and exploration.** Offer a range of interesting objects to explore in different ways—touching, banging, shaking, and rolling. Talk with your child about what he is doing. “You got the truck to move by pulling the string!” This helps to nurture strong problem-solving skills.
- **Teach your child how to solve problems,** such as showing your child how to get the lid off the container so she can reach the blocks inside. Be sure to give her a chance to do it herself first. Watch carefully to see what she can do on her own and then provide just enough help for her to master the challenge. This approach builds her confidence and helps her learn to muscle through challenges—a key attribute for success in all aspects of life.
- **Make the most of teachable moments.** Let your baby help drop clothing into the washing machine. A toddler can help sort by colors or type of clothing. Count the apples you are placing in the bag at the grocery store. Sing a song about body parts as you change your baby's diaper. At clean-up time, have your child sort and classify—putting all the cars on one shelf and books on another.
- **Offer your toddler lots of tools for experimenting**—toys and objects he can shake, bang, open and close, or take apart in some way to see how they work. Explore with water while taking a bath; fill and dump sand, toys, blocks. Take walks and look for new objects to explore—pine cones, acorns, rocks, and leaves. At the supermarket, compare and describe items as hard, soft, big, small, etc.
- **Encourage pretend play with your toddler.** When you see her cuddling her stuffed animal, you might say: “Is your bear hungry? Would he like something to eat?” Then bring out some pretend food. Offer your child objects to play with that will help build her imagination: dress-up clothes, animal figures, dolls, blocks.
- **Give your child the chance to help around the house.** He can wipe down the counter with a towel or sponge, push a broom or mop, or rake leaves. These activities give your toddler chances to solve problems, such as figuring out how household tools work and what they do. These activities also give your toddler the opportunity to be helpful which builds his self-esteem and self-confidence.

continued on next page ►

## **Driven to Discover:** How Thinking Skills Develop Through Everyday Play and Exploration (continued)

- **Teach about sequencing.** As you prepare for a trip to the playground you might say: “First we fill our bag with toys and snacks. Then we get our coats and shoes on. Then we lock the door behind us. Then we walk to the playground.” Doing this helps your child plan and act on a series of steps to reach a goal—an important thinking skill.
- **Ask older toddlers lots of questions during your everyday play and routines.** When reading books, ask your toddler what she thinks the characters might be feeling. “Why do you think the boy is afraid?” When taking a walk, ask about why she thinks the leaves fall from the trees or why dogs bark. The goal is not for them to have the “correct” answer, but to think about why things happen.
- **Help your child test out different solutions to problems.** When he is stuck, suggest other ways to approach the problem. For example, if your child is struggling with a puzzle, suggest placing the puzzle piece in different openings. If he needs a wand for pretend play, ask him what he might be able to use from around the house—like an empty paper towel tube.