

Executive Function Activities for 18- to 36-month-olds

During this stage of development, children are rapidly expanding their language skills. Language plays an important role in the development of executive function and self-regulation (EF/SR), as it helps children identify their thoughts and actions, reflect on them, and make plans that they hold in mind and use. Language also helps children understand and follow increasingly complex rules—both those that regulate behavior and those that apply to simple games. Additionally, bilingualism is associated with better EF/SR, so parents who are fluent in more than one language should use those languages with their children.



Active games

At this age, toddlers are actively developing many important physical skills, and they love physical challenges. The following activities require toddlers to focus and sustain their attention on a goal, inhibit unnecessary and ineffective actions, and try things in new ways if a first attempt fails. They may not always succeed, but the practice is very important. This is a learning process. Many of these activities will require frequent reminders from adult organizers, and they may not last very long!

- **Provide many materials and opportunities** to try new skills, such as throwing and catching balls, walking a balance beam, running up and down an incline, jumping, etc. Set up simple rules to follow for added working memory and inhibition challenges—for example, take turns running to a “finish line” and back.

- **Older toddlers can enjoy simple imitation games**, such as *Follow the Leader*, or song games like *Punchinella* or *Follow, Follow* (“Follow, follow, follow [child’s name], follow, follow, follow [child’s name]”—all children imitate [child]). These are great tests of working memory as well as attention and inhibition.

- **Games that require active inhibition** can be fun, too, like *freeze dance (musical statues)*, although don’t expect children to “freeze” without a few reminders. Also effective are

song games that require children to start and stop, or slow down and speed up, such as *Jack in the Box*; *Popcorn*; *Ring Around the Rosie*; or *Motorboat, Motorboat*.

- **Song games with many movements** are also fun. Examples include *The Hokey Pokey*; *Teddy Bear*; *I’m a Little Teapot*; or *Head, Shoulders, Knees, and Toes*. These require children to attend to the song’s words and hold them in working memory, using the song to guide their actions.

- **Fingerplays, or songs and rhymes with hand gestures** to match, continue to be popular with children this age, similarly challenging children’s attention, working memory, and inhibitory control.



This is an excerpt from the activity guide, *Enhancing and Practicing Executive Function Skills with Children from Infancy to Adolescence*.

Conversation and storytelling

As children develop more spoken language skills, they can begin to engage actively in conversation with adults and tell simple stories.

- **Simply watching and narrating their play** can be a great way to help very young children understand how language can describe their actions. As children get older, questions can be added, such as “What will you do next?” or “I see you want to put the ball inside the jar. Is there another way to do that?” These comments help children pause to reflect on what they are trying to do, how what they have tried has worked, and how to plan their next move.
- **Telling stories about shared events** can be a great way to reflect on these experiences. The

experience must be held in working memory while the child considers the order in which things happened, why things happened the way they did, and what the experience meant. These stories can also be written or drawn into simple books and revisited.

- **Talking about feelings** is also important, either by labeling children’s feelings as they are noticed (“It looks like you are really angry right now”) or by telling the story of a time a child became upset. By giving children language to reflect on their feelings, these conversations can support the development of emotional regulation, which is essential for engaging executive function.

Matching/sorting games

Children this age are able to play simple matching and sorting games, which require children to understand the rule that organizes the activity (sorting by shape, color, size, etc.), hold the rule in mind, and follow it.

- **Ask children to play a sorting game** in which you take turns sorting objects by size, shape, or color.
- **Engage older toddlers in a silly sorting game**, such as putting small shapes in a big bucket and big shapes in a small bucket.

Children tend to put like with like, so a change is challenging, requiring them to inhibit the expected action and engage their selective attention and working memory.

- **As they get older, toddlers also start to enjoy simple puzzles**, which require attention to shapes and colors. Adults can ask children to think about what shape or color they need, where they might put a certain piece, or where they might put the piece if it doesn’t fit, thereby exercising the child’s reflection and planning skills.

Imaginary play

Toddlers are beginning to develop the capacity for simple imaginary play. Often, toddlers imitate adult actions using objects that they have available (such as sweeping with a broom or pretending to cook with a pot). When they reach this age, these actions are not simply imitative, but can be sustained and show signs of simple imaginary play plots. For example, after “cooking” in the pot, the child will put the pot on the table and pretend to eat.

- **Ask children questions** about what they are doing. Narrate the things you see happening.
- **Play along with the child**, and let the child direct the play. Give the child a chance to tell you what role you should play and how you should do it. Regulating the behavior of others is an important way that children develop their own self-regulation skills.
- **Provide a variety** of familiar household objects, toys, and clothing items to encourage children’s imaginary play.

Resources

Music

- fun.familyeducation.com/toddler/music/37371.html

Other activities

- www.zerotothree.org/child-development/grandparents/play-12-24-final.pdf
- www.zerotothree.org/child-development/grandparents/play-24-36-final.pdf