

Young children seem to be like sponges, wanting to soak up everything that their environment has to offer. Although some children are more cautious than others, children seem to be almost constantly involved with the process of using their eyes, nose, taste buds, ears, and tactile senses to explore and understand the world around them. Babies love to watch people's faces and hear their soft voices as they talk and sing to them. Babies thrive on gentle touches and cuddling. They attempt to examine objects by shaking, smelling, and tasting them. Not yet feeling inhibited, a young child uses his/her whole body to make meaning from the world.

Watching toddlers and preschoolers interact with their environment, I often think of them as young scientists and artists involved in problem-solving activities. Whether they are attempting to make a tall tower of blocks, fitting a piece into a puzzle, rolling and shaping playdough, gluing collage scraps onto a paper plate, pushing a truck across the floor, or dressing a baby doll, children seem to be constantly manipulating and experimenting with the objects in their world. Some children like to examine their whole environment in short segments of time, while others prefer to spend longer periods of time engaging in variations of the same activity, like rolling different size cars and trucks down a slide. In their quest to manipulate the objects or things around them, children often become frustrated, which can lead to angry outbursts or tears, but when they feel a sense of accomplishment, their faces beam with joy and satisfaction. These are excellent opportunities for parents to discuss their children's feelings with them.

Another way children learn about their world is through listening to stories. Reading and telling stories to children are two of the most important activities a parent can do with a child. Exposing children to a wide variety of books and stories not only greatly increases their language power but also their imaginations. Children love to pretend and experiment with different roles and ways of being through dramatic play. One minute they can be barking like a puppy and another minute they are roaring around the room like a super hero. At Parenting Place the children love the dramatic play area where they can do simple dress-up, prepare food, dress and rock the babies, and play in the little house. Often a young child will use dramatic play as a way of working through his/her own problems, such as feelings of jealousy when a new sibling arrives. By observing your child's play, a parent can learn a great deal about what he/she thinks and feels.

So parents just remember the next time you're feeling overwhelmed by your children's messes and noise, your children are actually engaging in meaningful activity, taking on the roles of scientists, artists, and actors in an attempt to learn more about themselves and the world around them.

Fondly, Fran