

---

## BACK TO BASICS

# Manipulatives

---

**M**anipulatives or table toys are inexpensive, versatile tools that support children's cognitive, social, language, and physical development. Manipulatives include puzzles, table games, and construction, matching, and pattern-making materials. Each category invites exploration and discovery.

Whether you provide manipulatives in a specific learning center or offer them in every area of the classroom, manipulatives give children opportunities to focus and concentrate in solitary play, develop small muscles in their hands, and improve hand-eye coordination.

Use these guidelines to provide successful experiences with manipulatives in early childhood classrooms.

- Position the manipulatives center in a quiet area of the classroom. Provide a small table, chairs, and storage shelves.
- Give children time to explore and practice. Allow for failure, fresh attempts, and endless repetition of a new skill.

- If children use manipulatives on the floor, offer large, low-pile carpet squares for their work. The carpet will help children keep track of small pieces and facilitate cleanup.

---

### SELECT TOYS MADE OF DIFFERENT MATERIALS.

---

- Put different toys or collections of materials in separate, clearly labeled boxes, baskets, trays, or bins.
- Give children access to a variety of table toys. Include self-correcting materials like puzzles, lotto games, and nesting boxes as well as open-ended toys like sewing cards, stringing beads, construction bricks, geoboards, and counting and sorting tokens.



PHOTO BY SUSAN GAETZ

- 
- Select toys made of different materials. For example, offer rubber, wooden, and cardboard puzzles so children can experience different textures as they play.
  - Watch children while they work and evaluate their skills before you buy or make new manipulatives.
  - Rotate manipulatives so there are always new toys for children to discover.
  - Provide for a range of skills in each category. For example, the 4-year-old classroom puzzle shelf might include 10-piece inset puzzles, frameless jigsaw puzzles, non-picture rubber puzzles, and large floor puzzles.
  - Maintain manipulatives to minimize wear. Cover paper and cardboard folder games with clear, adhesive-backed plastic or laminate. Replace missing puzzle pieces. Encourage children to return toys to their proper bins and storage shelf. Promptly remove toys that are broken or have missing pieces.

## Table toy basics

Use the following lists to guide your purchases and collections of manipulatives.

**Puzzles:** Wooden, rubber, and cardboard puzzles; floor puzzles; stacking rings; feel and smell guessing games; and tangrams

**Table games:** Visual and auditory lotto, matching cards, sewing cards, concentration games, simple board games, picture and number dominoes, and checkers

**Matching and sorting tokens:** Colored cubes, counting bears, plastic lids, buttons, keys, nuts and bolts, flip books, and sorting boxes

**Pattern toys:** Pegboards, geoboards, parquetry blocks, stringing beads, nesting boxes, cylinder stacking boards, attribute blocks, and construction bricks ■