
FEATURE

Infants: Soak up learning with sponges

You can transform ordinary household sponges into learning toys for infants and toddlers with a little thought—and not much effort or expense.

Background

Natural sea sponges have been used in bathing and cleaning for centuries. Retailers claim the sponges are soft and gentle to the skin, long lasting, free of toxins, and resistant to growth of bacteria, mold, and mildew. However, they are usually more expensive than artificial sponges commonly available in supermarkets.

Today a wide variety of household sponges are available. Many are made of plastic polymers (a petroleum product) and do not biodegrade. A better option for a baby learning toy is a sponge made of 100 percent cellulose (wood pulp) or other plant-based fibers. These are absorbent, biodegradable, and inexpensive.

If the sponge package says “anti-bacterial,” beware. The sponges may be made with toxic chemicals, including triclosan (which has been linked to cancer).

Clean natural sea sponges by soaking then in a solution made at the ratio of one tablespoon of baking soda to one cup of water for at least 15 minutes. Rinse and let dry thoroughly. Clean other sponges

in the dishwasher when you wash other baby toys. Alternatively, put a completely wet sponge into the microwave at high power for 2 minutes and leave in the microwave for a few minutes to cool before removing it.

Infant learning

Infants learn best with materials they can explore with eyes, nose, ears, hands, and mouth. Chewing may be especially appealing, par-

ticularly if the baby is teething. If a baby chews on a sponge in an activity, clean it before another child uses it.

Remember that infants and toddlers have short attention spans. Before starting an activity, make sure you have the child’s attention. Stop or change the activity when the child loses interest.

Choose sponges that an infant can grasp in hands, but at least 2 square inches in size to avoid a



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choking hazard. You can usually cut sponges into a desired size with scissors.

Offer brand new, unused sponges in the activities below to avoid infectious microbes. Remember that any time children play with water to provide careful adult supervision.

Activities

Do these activities one-on-one with an infant or in a small group of two or three. Younger infants may lie face down on a towel, while older infants may be more comfortable sitting up, either sitting on the floor with a pan of water between the legs or sitting in a high chair with materials on a tray.

Dry sponges

Watch what happens when you offer a baby a sponge. The child may use both hands to explore it and then bite or chew on it. Reaching for a sponge can help develop muscle strength and eye-hand coordination. Most infants will reach with the right hand. If the sponge is at left, the infant may still reach with the right hand, which is fine because it requires reaching across the body.

Here's what you need:

- clean unused sponges, of varying colors and shapes

1. Offer the infant a sponge. Talk with the baby about the sponge's color, shape, and texture.
2. Place a sponge about 3 inches away, and encourage the baby to reach for it.
3. Offer a second sponge, then a third. Describe the color, shape, and texture.

4. Encourage the child to play with the sponges.

Extended activity: Encourage the child to stack the sponges on top of each other or drop them in the basket.

Dry versus wet

Children will usually be surprised to see what happens when dry sponges get wet.

Here's what you need:

- pie tin containing about an inch of water
- small sponges
- tray

1. Offer the child a dry sponge and talk about how it feels. Use the word *dry*.
2. Ask the child to predict what will happen if the sponge is dipped in water. Let the child

dip the sponge in water and talk about what happens. Use the word *wet*.

3. Describe the texture: Is it soft? What else is different? Talk about how the wet sponge is heavier than a dry one.
4. Encourage the child to play with the sponges.

Squeezing

This activity can enhance a child's eye-hand coordination and strengthen grip by squeezing with the hand and fingers.

Here's what you need:

- pie pan containing about an inch of water
- sponge small enough to fit into the infant's hand
- tray

1. Place the pan of water and



- sponge on the tray.
2. Show the infant how to dip the sponge in the water, hold it over the pan, and squeeze so that the water falls back into the pan. Say aloud what you are doing.
 3. Offer the sponge to the infant, and say, "Now you dip the sponge in the water and then squeeze." Allow the infant time to do the activity.
 4. When the infant loses interest, involve the infant in wiping up spills with the sponge.
- Extended activity:** Vary the number, size, and color of sponges. Show the infant how to use a wet sponge to wipe up a spill or clean off a table.

Sponge painting

Start with one color of paint. After the infant gains skill in painting

with a sponge, add other colors.

Here's what you need:

- newspaper
- tempera paints
- water
- small sponges or sponge pieces
- shallow plastic container
- white copy or construction paper

1. Spread newspaper over the work surface for easy cleanup afterward.
2. Pour a teaspoon or two of paint into a plastic container and just a bit of water to make a thin solution.
3. Show the child how to dip a sponge into the paint and then press the sponge onto the white paper. Encourage exploration. The child may swish the sponge across the paper or toss the

sponge aside and paint with his fingers.

Extended activity: For older children, cut sponges into geometric shapes (circle, square, and triangle), other shapes (heart, star, footprint, and handprint), alphabet letters, and numerals.

Doll washing

Toddlers will enjoy bathing the baby dolls in the dramatic play center.

Here's what you need:

- dish pan
- water
- washable baby dolls
- little bars of soap, such as those found in hotel rooms
- small sponges
- towels
- smocks

1. Spread towels on the floor to prevent slips and make cleanup easier. Encourage children to wear smocks to avoid getting their clothes too wet.
2. Pour about two inches of water into the dish pan.
3. Help children remove doll clothes from one or two washable dolls. Talk about how we take baths to clean our bodies and smell good.
4. Show children how to wet a sponge and lather with soap. Invite children to bathe the dolls.
5. Provide towels to dry the dolls. ■



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