

Poke, Pull, Squish

Cost: Under \$5

Mess factor: Some

Suggested location: Kitchen

Experiences your children will have

- Using the small muscles in their hands and fingers
- Hearing new vocabulary words

Materials

- Homemade play dough (softer in consistency than store-bought dough)
- Items for poking into the play dough (plastic pegs, plastic animals or people figures, Popsicle sticks)
- Items for pounding the play dough (lightweight wooden/plastic hammers)
- Items for filling (plastic cups or bowls)

Beginning

Give your toddler time to explore a mound of play dough. Imitate your child's actions, and introduce new vocabulary words to describe what your child is doing or experiencing (e.g., *squishy*, *poke*, *flat*, *heavy*, and *salty*).

Middle

Observe how your child plays with the dough. If your child pokes it, offer other items that are good for poking (e.g., Popsicle sticks, plastic pegs). If your child pulls it apart, provide a plastic bowl or cup to fill with play dough pieces. If your child pounds the dough, offer a lightweight wooden/plastic hammer. Use your mound of play dough and other materials in the same way your child is using them and describe what you are doing.

Homemade Play Dough

Materials

- 1 cup water
- 1 tbsp. vegetable oil
- ½ cup salt
- 1 tbsp. cream of tartar
- Food coloring
- 1 cup flour
- Parchment or wax paper

Directions

1. Combine in a pot the water, oil, salt, cream of tartar (so dough will last for six months), and food coloring (start with a few drops and add more as needed), and heat until warm.
2. Remove from heat and add the flour.
3. Stir and knead until smooth. (Knead the dough on wax/parchment paper until it begins to cool to keep the hot dough from sticking.)
4. Store dough in an airtight container or a plastic freezer bag.

End

Depending on children's interest, this activity might last a short or a long time. Follow their lead, and end the activity when they begin to lose interest.

Cleanup

Let your toddler know that it's almost time to put the play dough away. You might want to sing a cleanup song (singing a cleanup song gives your child a warning that the activity is almost over). Encourage your child to put the play dough back in the container, and then give them a wet rag to help you wipe the table.

Younger children

Expect younger children to simply explore the properties of play dough by poking, pulling, pounding, and squeezing; these experiences serve to strengthen the small muscles in children's hands as they play.

Older children

Older children can help you make the play dough by adding the ingredients, stirring the mixture, or kneading the cooled play dough.

Because older children can manipulate objects with more dexterity and precision, offer them tools such as rolling pins, cookie cutters, garlic presses, or scissors.

Hints

- Remember, at this age, children are exploring the dough and how to manipulate it rather than making something recognizable or intentional.
- Squeezing, kneading, and pulling apart play dough strengthens the small muscles in toddlers' hands. Helping toddlers develop strength and control in their fingers now will prepare them for handling writing tools and participating in other fine-motor activities (such as cutting with scissors or zipping their coat).

More!

Add bowls, muffin tins, and other cooking and baking utensils so that children can fill and empty the bowls and other containers with their play dough pieces.

Special needs accommodations

Children with special needs may be sensitive to new smells or to the way things feel in their hands. If your child reacts to play dough in a negative way, don't worry. There are many other ways to strengthen the small muscles in your child's hands (e.g., providing them with balls that light up when they are squeezed). Giving your toddler ample opportunities to manipulate a variety of objects (starting with chubby objects that are easy to hold) will help develop their fine-motor skills.