



Parenting

as a

learning

journey

A booklet full of resources  
and guidance for families  
with young children



This is a booklet that has been designed to support families with young children, starting with acknowledging how challenging parenting can feel at times.

Its aim is to provide you with some ideas and suggestions to explore at home and to guide you through some of the areas of learning and development. Our role as parents and carers is essential and it is important to support each other.

Please feel free to adapt the guidance according to your circumstances and your child's needs. Make sure you supervise their use of resources until they develop the necessary skills, knowledge and safety awareness.

The journey of parenting can often feel like a rollercoaster of emotions and uncertainties, walking into unknown territory while being willing to find the best way to contribute to our children's growth.

I wish you all the strength to try things out, step out of your comfort zone from time to time and connect with your child from heart to heart. In this way, we can raise children who are not only creative but empowered and free to be themselves.



Illustrations & layout:  
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Thanks to all those families I have been able to work with over the last few years.

Thank you Olivia - my daughter - for teaching me and inspiring me to be a better mum.

*Natalia Lema*

Early Years Cocoon CIC founder  
earlyyearscoocoon@gmail.com  
Instagram: @earlyyearscoocoon

Some people find it useful to say out loud or repeat in their mind some positive sentences that work as a reminder of what we ultimately believe and would like to be.

#### Affirmations for parents and carers

- I am constantly learning and growing while making mistakes.
- I am trying my best in this parenting role although it is full of surprises and unexpected events.
- I make choices about what is correct for my family. I also review those choices.
- I am flexible and allow changes, as I am not always sure of things.
- I reach out for support if needed, embracing that vulnerability.
- I create shared memories by spending time with my children.
- I do experience all sorts of feelings and it is okay to express them.
- I look after myself, knowing that this is often forgotten but is essential for my own and my family's well-being.
- I don't always know what to do but I can ask and find out.
- I have an opportunity to break old patterns and try out healthier ways of doing things.

#### Short phrases to use with our children to boost their confidence and self-esteem

You have done that so well!

I'm sure you can have a go at it

You are so talented!

I love how creative you are

You have done all that by yourself? Amazing!

That's a good idea!

I enjoy spending time with you

You are very good at this

You are an artist!

You can make a choice

Wow, that was brave

What do you think?

How are you feeling?

You can learn anything

I will always love you

# Top 10 ideas



## What to do with your young children at home

Children are not all the same and depending on their character, age and other circumstances, they might be able to follow some of these ideas.

**1** Involve them in household chores like cooking and cleaning, giving them small responsibilities and tasks. Creating a daily routine can help so that they know what you expect from them.

Recycle paper and boxes from food or deliveries, and let them create projects that involve cutting, sticking, painting and decorating. Even if these creations end up in the bin, what really matters is the process and the strengthening of skills.

**2**



**3**

Spend time in the garden - if you have one - and if not, go to the local park or just walk around. Bringing a ball, a scooter or a bike can make it more interesting. You can have picnics - healthy snacks - in the park.

Set up some activities - early morning if possible - so that they can spend some time on their own. Puzzles, threading and small world toys can keep them busy for a long time.

**4**

5 Cover the floor with a big sheet of paper or a cardboard and provide them with some mark making tools such as crayons, colouring pencils or chinks. They will make a start with early writing this way.

Choose some real objects from home that are safe to play with. Plastic plates, cups, pots, pans, tea towels, sponges, bowls, etc., and observe what they decide to do with them. Sometimes they just need resources and creativity will follow.

7 Spend some time reading books, listening to audio stories (even CDs), looking at photos, images, leaflets, magazines and talking a lot about the things they see. Model sentences such as “I can see...”



Surprise your child with unexpected things, like having balls in the bath or bringing toys out that you have stored already, or using a different place at home like under the table. Surprises are great fun.

9 Watch short videos or educational programmes - previously chosen if possible - that might enhance learning. Some documentaries, stories and performances available online are good alternatives.

Talk about feelings when conflict arises and involve them in making agreements so that they know the behaviour that is expected. To be both loving and firm is a skill for all parents to develop so that we can help our children grow healthily and empowered.

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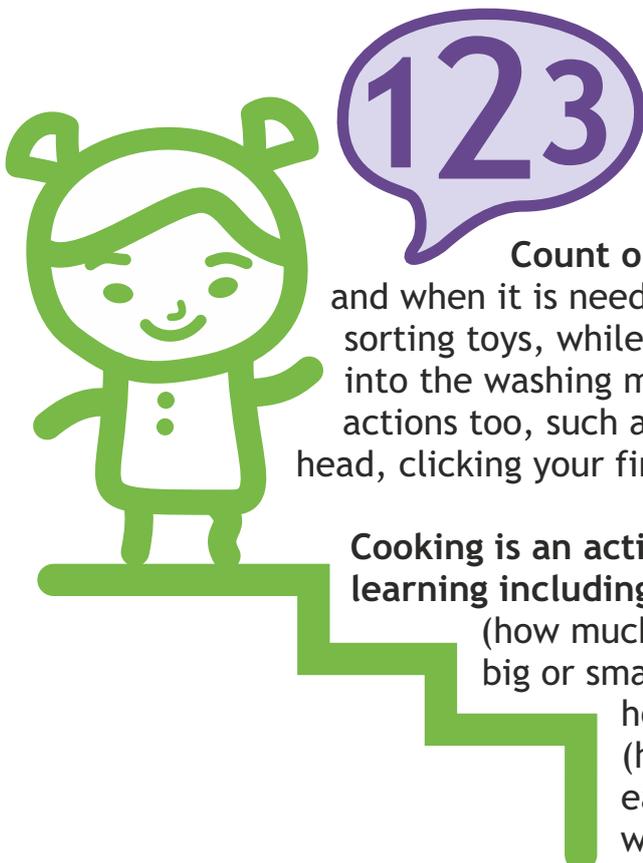
“I think it’s necessary to let kids get bored once in a while - that’s how they learn to be creative.”

Kim Raver

# Learning Maths



Maths is everywhere, but to realise this as a child requires many learning opportunities, which can happen spontaneously during daily life but can also be planned in advance. Children are often enthusiastic about topics related to maths such as numbers, colours, shapes, sizes and time so our role is to enrich their experiences.



**Count out loud** whenever you have a chance and when it is needed. Going upstairs or downstairs, sorting toys, while shopping, cooking, putting clothes into the washing machine, and so on. You can count actions too, such as clapping your hands, tapping your head, clicking your fingers or stamping your feet.

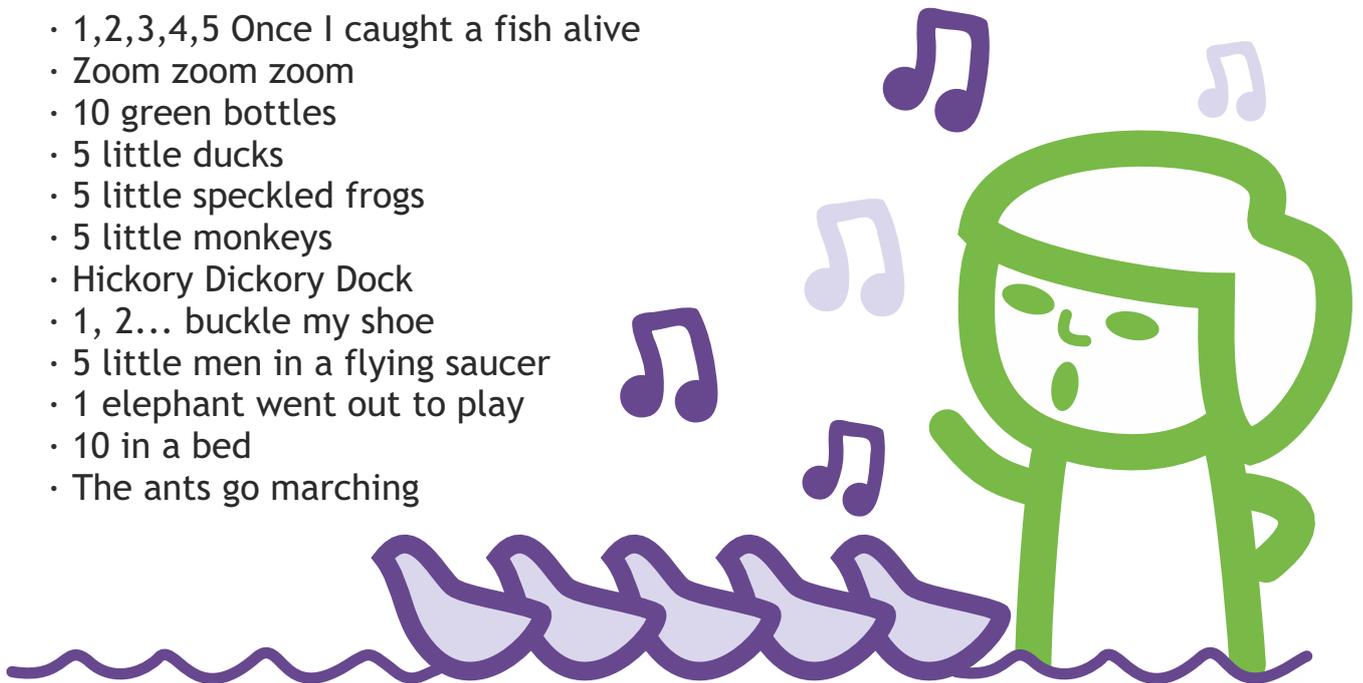
**Cooking is an activity that covers many areas of learning including maths.** You can explore capacity (how much milk is needed?), size (do we use a big or small bowl?), colours, temperature (how hot do we need the oven to be?), time (how long is it going to take until we eat muffins?), shapes (what cutter would you like to use for the biscuits?).

Purchase some **puzzles (second hand can do the job)**, and **construction toys** where pieces can be put together to create models. Boxes are very attractive so any delivery or recycled boxes can be transformed into creative models.

**Talk about the day of the week, month and if it is morning, afternoon or evening.** After a few times children will recall this vocabulary. Use a big calendar, write events that will take place and let them play with it.

**Singing nursery rhymes that include numbers** is one of the best ways to enjoy and learn.

- 1,2,3,4,5 Once I caught a fish alive
- Zoom zoom zoom
- 10 green bottles
- 5 little ducks
- 5 little speckled frogs
- 5 little monkeys
- Hickory Dickory Dock
- 1, 2... buckle my shoe
- 5 little men in a flying saucer
- 1 elephant went out to play
- 10 in a bed
- The ants go marching

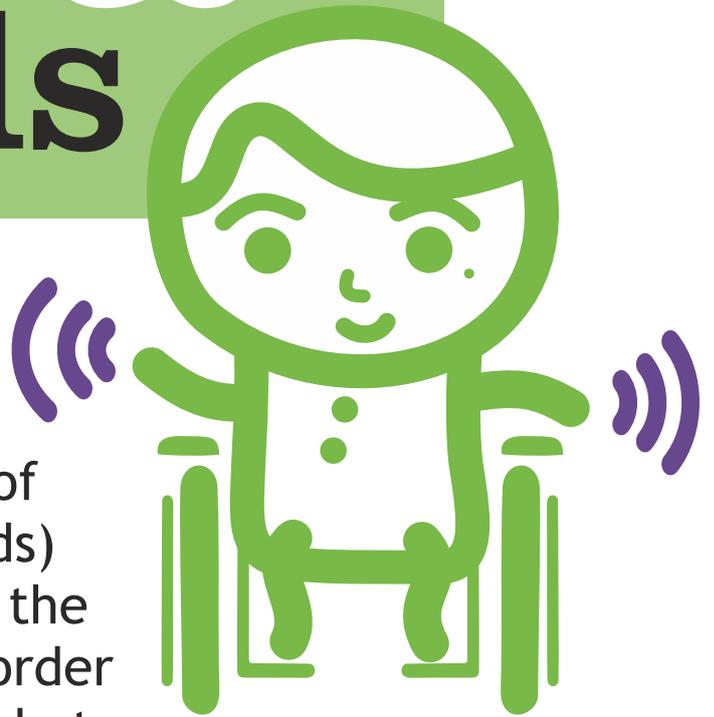


**Get a set of flashcards to play with them.** Show them what the numbers look like and match cards to real quantities of objects. Go number hunting around the house spotting numbers everywhere. You will be surprised to see how many numbers are in our environment.

**Water and sand play are very useful** for exploring concepts such as empty, half full and full. Pouring into smaller containers or filling bottles with small objects can invite them to predict and experiment with capacity.

Learning maths is about experimenting with life itself, trying things out in everyday tasks and making knowledge meaningful in the many interactions we have with our children.

# Letters & sounds



Many parents ask for guidance in the teaching of phonics (letters and sounds) but we often tend to skip the steps that are needed in order to understand and learn what phonics are about. The following are some ideas you could try with your children, knowing that if they start school at some point, you will have contributed a lot to their development and understanding.



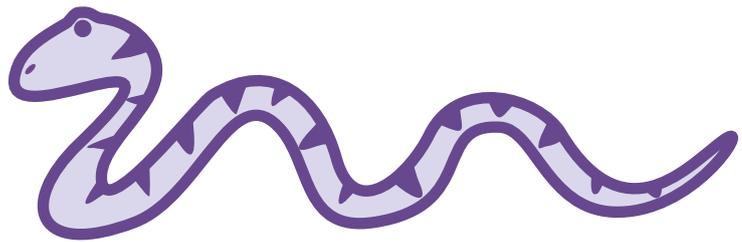
**Pay attention to the sounds you hear in the environment.** Ask 'Did you hear it too?'. Noticing sounds is an exercise that only requires our ears. Children are usually sensitive to sounds, so use their interest to expand on it. They will quickly attune their listening to their surroundings.

**Explore different musical instruments** (get them from charity shops!, they don't have to be new). Play with them, notice their sound and experiment with soft and loud instructions. Sing nursery songs while playing the instruments. Have a go at playing different styles of music and observe how your child responds.

**Explore the sounds you can create with your own body.** Clapping, stamping, clicking fingers and patting are some examples. Create rhythmic patterns with them. There are plenty of songs that include actions with the body. Make sure you learn a few of them and use them to encourage movement and exercise of the body.

When reading a story or a book, point at some of the words you see and exaggerate the initial sound of the word. You can say 'Sssssss for snake, Mmmmmm for mountain'. Be spontaneous about it and whenever you see the chance to highlight a letter and the sound, do it.

sssssss for  
snake



Play the game 'I spy with my little eye, something beginning with 'T'...'. When they are too young, you can adapt it and say the word so that they will look for the object. You will notice when your child is ready to have a go at saying the word, so then you can point at the object. This is a great game when you go for a walk or if your child is in the buggy or even in the car.

If you are not familiar with the sound of the letters (it's not the same as the name of the letter), check online videos. Some educational videos can be useful but moderation is the key. Having a set of alphabet cards can support the recognition of letters so have them available and every now and then look at the cards together.

In order to learn how to read and write, children need to develop some listening and speaking skills. As parents and carers, we have a great influence on this process and it is very important to help them build a solid foundation.

“The way we talk to our children becomes their inner voice.”

Peggy O'Mara

# Tips to support your child at home



Parents and carers are often enthusiastic about supporting their children at home and these are some suggestions if you are wondering how to do it. Every child has unlimited potential and by encouraging meaningful interactions and activities, they will be able to blossom into their best selves.



Talk to your child as much as you can. Explain what you are doing, how your day was, any thoughts and emotions. Enrich their vocabulary by using new words and give them time to talk to you.

Listen to their ideas and stories.



**Promote reading** by looking at books and all sorts of printed material (leaflets, tickets, menus, magazines). Engage in describing pictures, finding words, pointing at particular things, using different voices and asking them questions.

**Celebrate their progress and achievements** but also understand when things are challenging. Encourage them to keep trying if something is hard, learning to embrace difficulties by showing a 'can do' attitude.

Spend time singing nursery rhymes, dressing up and acting out stories so that children experience imaginary play. **Encourage creative activities** using resources independently. You don't have to spend a lot of money. Use boxes, old wrapping paper, bottles and any other recycled items.

**Encourage healthy habits** in eating and hygiene such as brushing teeth and having a healthy diet. Encourage getting dressed independently, helping to tidy up at home and listening to your instructions.

**Provide them with physical activities** in order to strengthen their fine and gross motor skills, such as going to the park, going for a walk and using large equipment and tools safely. Playing with balls, hula hoops, bean bags or skittles can be great fun for the kids.

**Look for numbers and shapes** in the environment. Become familiar with counting, sorting, adding, making sets, building models and creating patterns. Cooking is a great way to introduce maths and children often love helping with it.

**Explore mark making** (early writing) using different materials such as crayons, chalks, paints, pens and pencils. Let them draw pictures and display them around the home.



We become a role model to our children so it is very important to engage with their learning, show interest and curiosity about their explorations and support them as much as possible. It is not an easy task and at times it is quite tiring. However, it is rewarding to be able to participate actively in their growth even with our own parenting imperfections.

“A child who sings is a happy child.”

Elder Enrique Falabella

# Mark making



Children need to be provided with plenty of gross and fine motor skills opportunities in order to be able to write. Their physical development is essential but also the way we encourage them to make marks must be attractive and fun. Remember that mark making is the first step towards writing.



Eating is often one of the first experiences children have to explore textures and create marks with food or drinks. Allow your child to play with food such as yoghurt, jelly and cereal. Make sure you supervise your child at all times and be aware of allergies.

Promote play using their fingers and noticing how marks appear on the surfaces by making use of thick chinks, crayons, finger-paints, shaving foam or even water.

As they are getting older, introduce thick pens, colouring pencils, glittery pens, brushes, stamps, sponges and all sorts of equipment. Add glue, small pieces of paper or material to create collages.

Help them to strengthen their skills by offering activities such as: stickers, puzzles, threading, sand modeling, play-dough and some cutting with your support.

It is important that children are surrounded with joy and enthusiasm when doing these activities. Join in and become keen on exploring tasks with them, which will end up inspiring your child.

Use real life objects, signs and labels as opportunities to learn about letters. Point at them spontaneously and follow their interest.

Draw on the floor (perhaps on the pavement in front of your house if possible!) and use chalks to trace lines, circles and all sorts of shapes. Enjoy!

Carry a notepad and a few crayons for them to be able to draw whenever they feel like it, such as on a train, on a plane, in the car, in the park, waiting for an appointment or anywhere else.



Children usually engage in mark making activities on their own initiative. Allow them to spend time on developing the skills that are needed to make a good start into writing.

“Children learn more from what you are than what you teach.”

W. E. B. DuBois

# Creativity & imagination

## Great learning tools



Children are naturally inclined to engage in all sorts of adventures and stories, showing great creativity and a vast imaginary world. This is something to be treasured as it allows them to explore their skills, use their language in meaningful ways, release fears and empathise with others. As adults, we sometimes need to connect with our own inner child so that we can become part of their reality.

Read stories as much as you can and as often as your child demands it. Being exposed to a huge variety of stories nurtures their mind and brings them into contact with many narratives.



Play with **treasure baskets** and open-ended materials. That helps them to stimulate their exploration and it feeds their inquisitive minds. You will see how quickly they come up with interesting stories.

Use **wooden spoons** as a learning aid and explore playful ways of using them. They can become microphones, characters, magic wands, pens, animals. You can take a few, decorate them and make up stories.

A treasure basket is simple to make. Use a box as alternative. Items such as: blankets, fabrics, containers, sponges, shells, biscuit tins, wooden curtain rings, cardboard tubes and boxes.

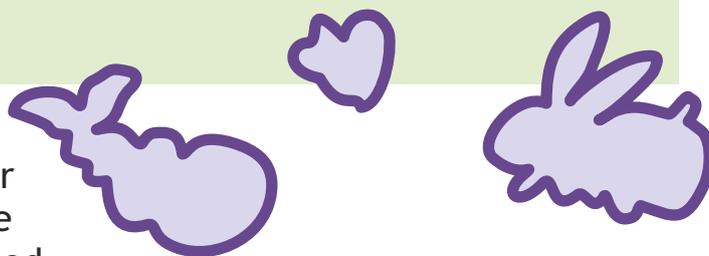
Offer some clothes and props for **dressing up** experiences. Simple costumes can easily be improvised using fabric and unwanted clothing. You can extend this by talking about how they have changed in appearance and invite them to develop different voices.

Look at the **clouds** and see what shapes you can identify. Use those findings to create short stories. Sitting on a rug can be suddenly transformed into a magic carpet to encourage imaginary journeys.

Have a go at **designing** projects with boxes and paper. A simple folded plane can be the initial spark for a set of activities and explorations. Taking the plane outside and testing it can inspire children to try new adventures.

Offer **puppets** or make some with a few resources - wooden spoons, images with a stick, pictures from a magazine, painted gloves, decorated paper bags. Children will quickly come up with ideas.

Acting out and participating actively in role-play games is vital for the very young because it is related to their imaginative play and increases their abilities to communicate with others. Children are free to try out different situations safely and grow as individuals, while building confidence.



# Singing together!



Stimulating musical experiences greatly benefits the development of a child as they discover the way music urges them to move rhythmically and with enjoyment. Singing nursery rhymes and playing instruments are activities that children usually engage in easily and learn a lot from. They develop listening skills, learn new words and strengthen hand-eye coordination. Some suggestions to enrich those experiences:

**Make a list of nursery rhymes** - those traditional ones - but also new ones and even from other cultures in other languages could be very special. If you speak other languages at home or come from a different culture, this will be an additional enriching element that your child will be exposed to.

**Create a singing bag** - use a sack, bag or box to collect items relating to songs. You can start with 10 items and add more as your child grows. Some items to start with are: spider, duck, bus, frog, mouse, boat, monkey. Find these items in charities or cheap stores.

**Explore speed and volume** when singing. Have a go at singing slowly and then fast, slowing down or speeding up as fast as you can.



Try the same with your voice. Sing with soft voices and swap to loud voices, going softer and louder. This is very engaging and bring lots of joy into the activity.

**Have a few instruments available or you can even make them with recycled resources.** Shakers can be made easily with plastic bottles and small items inside such as rice, beans, buttons, lentils or dried pasta. Make sure you reinforce the lid for safety reasons. Even pots and pans can make a lot of noise, and can be great fun too.

**Listen to all sorts of music,** offering a great variety for them to appreciate and explore. Sometimes you can play music softly while they are playing, especially classical music or lullabies which can help to calm and relax them.

**Look in charity shops or libraries** for nursery rhymes books or you can also download lyrics and learn new songs together. Visual support such as videos can be added according to the child's age but it's much better to sing together while having eye contact.

## List of familiar songs

Twinkle twinkle

5 little ducks

5 little monkeys

Row your boat

Incy Wincy spider

Old MacDonald had a farm

Humpty Dumpty

Hey diddle diddle

1,2,3,4,5 Once I caught a fish alive

Miss Polly had a dolly

Jack and Jill

Hickory Dickory Dock

Music is a powerful tool and it contributes to building a stronger relationship between parents and their children. Often music finds the way to enhance our emotions, plus it promotes a sense of community. Music can be very useful when dealing with transitions or new experiences, allowing them to express themselves in a healthier way.

# Let's talk about behaviour



Sometimes we find it challenging to deal with our children's behaviour. Our role seems to be about providing them with support, love and discipline while they develop self-regulation skills and discover how to deal with their own emotions. I decided to ask parents from our community to share their ideas of what works for them.

“I would like to say that it is about changing their attention to other things, like when she is crying asking for a snack, give her a toy or point to a sight and say 'look, a car' something like that.”

**Sarah**, Chloe's mum

“Every day you dedicate 15-20 minutes where you play freely with your child but they lead the play. They have your full attention. Use warnings e.g. 5 min and you set a timer that they can see so they know what to expect. Praise what you want to see and offer alternatives to redirect their behaviour.”

**Matina** - Eve & Jason's mum

“My advice to parents of young children, which we try to follow is to treat them as a subject and not an object; to respect their Will while at the same time ensuring their safety.”

**Sumit**, Anika and Arya's dad

“Sometimes poor behaviour takes place because the child wants to connect with his/her parent so it is important to spend time with them and play child-led games. Also, pillow fighting - within safety measures - can help them to discharge their anger.”

**Claire** - Leo and Ava's mum

“I think a good strategy that works for us is to be very loving but also firm when needed, finding the balance between love and discipline. Better to correct their behaviour focusing on the action itself. And give them lots of love!”

**Luz** - Lourdes & Lucia's mum

“This is what we do: we try not to overreact; we talk to him calmly; we try to stay consistent; we involve him in some tasks at home; we encourage him to say please, thank you and to share with others.”

**Kerris** - Luca's mum

“Some ideas I follow: children are unique; discipline is about love; important to say sorry when we get things wrong; be consistent; notice what makes your child misbehave and encourage positive behaviour.”

**Hannah**, Eddie's mum

“I recommend to step away, don't ever deal with naughty behaviour if you are angry/stressed. Explain why you don't like what they have done and how it makes people feel. And follow through, if you tell them there is a consequence then complete it all the way to the end.”

**Becky**, Isaac and Nathaniel's mum

“Sometimes understanding of kids' development and their abilities to cope with feelings at different ages can help to manage difficulties such as tantrums, which are just natural reactions due to frustration. All it requires is a calm parent nearby who can help the child to cope with it without any judgement.”

**Julia**, Antonio's mum

“I believe in sorting through his feelings, saying, "I see you are upset, it's ok to be upset and cry. Let mummy help you.””

**Antonia**, Rotimi's mum

“I think it is key to address all kinds of emotions. Such as “Oh I can see that you are sad because you could not have that chocolate.” Or, “I understand that you are upset because Mummy said we need to go home from the park.” Also, I often do self-reflection and I do say sorry to my son if I realise that I made a mistake.”

**Rita**, Noor's mum

“In my experience every child is different and you need to know your child and what works for them. Having trust and respect between parent and child is essential. Also that you can dislike a behaviour but you will never dislike your child. Lead by example because you can only expect a child to behave well if you do too.”

**Lesley**

“In my house, we have this little slogan, YOU CAN DO IT. I say this very often to make her not be shy towards her work, exercise, play and anything she attempts to do. She may end up not doing it perfectly, but I will be satisfied because I have achieved my aim to encourage her.”

**Ola**, Iman and Amal's mum

“I try not to overuse the word "no". Instead I give lots of positive praise, such as clapping, saying "Well done!" and giving kisses, when he demonstrates good behaviour. If he throws food on the floor, as frustrating as it is, I just let him, as this is part of his exploration and learning. When he eats well, I smile and say things like "Good eating!"”

**Mira** - Austin's mum

“What works in general is love and understanding that every child is different. I accept making mistakes so that he sees it is natural to make them. We talk about feelings and reasons for choices and we involve him in household chores so that he develops responsibility. We like celebrating achievements and encouraging him to find new ways of achieving something.”

**Nataliya** - George's mum

“So when he is upset, I put my arms around him and talk calmly. That seems to work. When he does something that I don't agree with, I put up a serious face and slightly raise my voice. We spend a lot of time with him and let him lead the way with his games. He responds well to cuddles.”

**Claudio** - Luca's dad

“Be firm on your ideas but calm. Know what you want to achieve and look at the bigger picture.”

**Chun**, Jake and Reece's dad

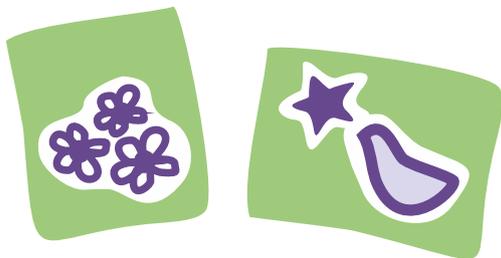
“I try to be realistic in my parenting by not to wrapping them in cotton wool. If they ask questions about certain things, I try to answer them honestly and to the best of my abilities. I teach my children to be kind, honest and caring.”

**David** - Father of 3

# Activities to strengthen fine motor skills

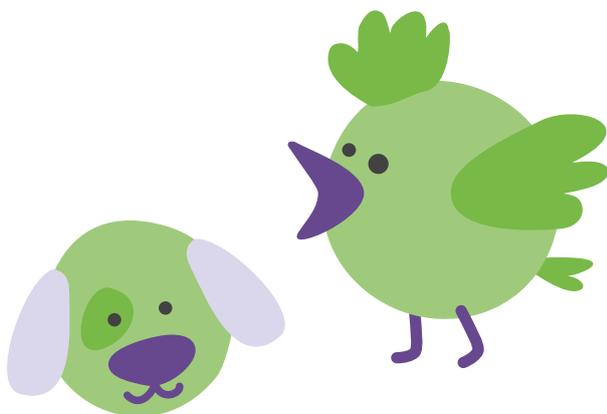


**Pipe cleaners** = create shapes, letters, numbers and small models like sunglasses, animals, flowers.



**Collage** = use magazines and recycled boxes from packaging to cut out small pictures and stick them on a piece of card.

**Painting** = use paint brushes, cotton buds, sponges, old toothbrushes, strings or even hands for drawing and exploring marks.

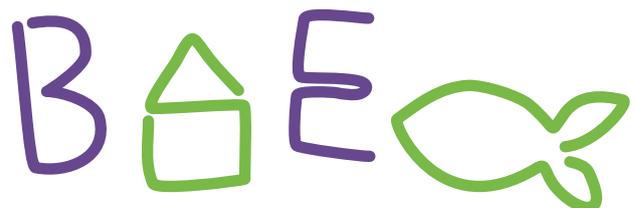


**Paper plate crafts** = use plates as a base for a human or animal face. Add buttons, pom poms, wool or any other material to design the different parts.

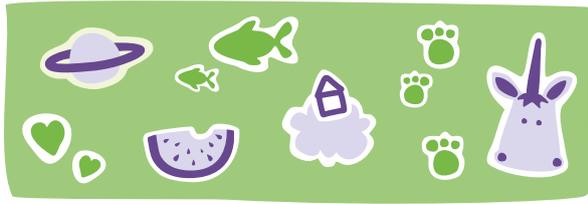
**Threading shapes** = use string to go in and out the shapes. You can create new shapes by cutting card and using a hole puncher.



**Play dough** = make some play dough and create models with other resources, e.g. bugs or monsters by adding googly eyes, pipe cleaners, plastic lids or wooden lolly sticks.



**String** = use long pieces for dancing by shaking up in the air, making big letters or shapes on the floor, wrapping toys with fabric.



**Stickers** = use them to decorate pictures, create patterns or shapes, make your own designs, use for colour recognition or for counting.



**Tape** = cut long pieces and show how you can hold things together like straws, wooden sticks, pictures, card and even big boxes. Assist with cutting if required.

**Fairy wind streamers** = collect some sticks from the park and add few strips of old material, ribbons or strings. Move them around and make magic spells.



**Cooking** = small tasks to be explored when cooking a meal, like chopping some soft vegetables, unwrapping food, adding ingredients to a bowl, mixing and any other tasks, with the safety and supervision that is required.

These are some ideas but as you know your child better, feel free to adapt to their needs and interests.



“The wider the range of possibilities we offer children the more intense will be their motivations and the richer their experiences.”

Loris Malaguzzi

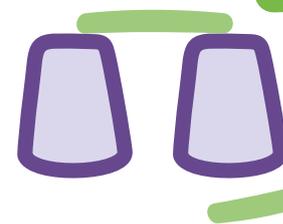


# Activities to strengthen gross motor skills



**Walk** = go to the local park or just walk a few blocks around your house. If possible, don't bring the buggy so that your child is encouraged to exercise.

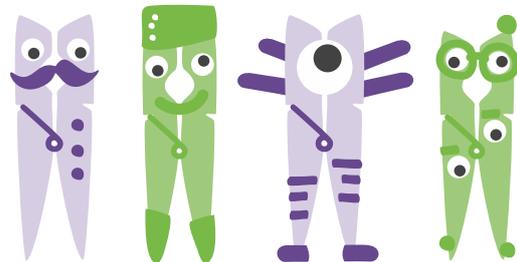
**Use large equipment** = at the park, in the garden or at home, encourage the use of climbing frames, slides, swings, balancing, hula hoops, scooters, bikes.



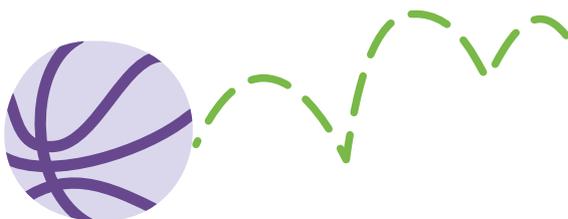
**Plastic cups** = explore building towers, houses, bridges and all sorts of models by stacking cups.



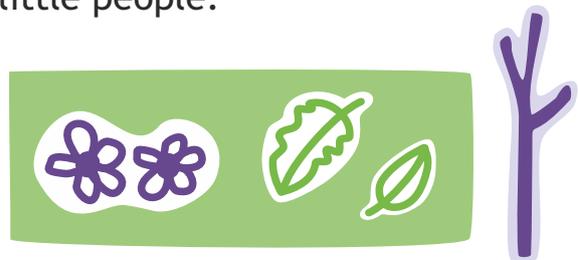
**Mark making** = draw on the floor with chalks - even on your driveway - paint with water and see how it evaporates, use big sheets of paper with crayons.



**Imaginary play** = engage in their stories, dressing up and acting out, pretending to be any character and following their lead. Make use of wooden pegs as little people.



**Ball games** = use a ball to develop skills such as catching, rolling and throwing. Model how to do it and keep trying many times. You can count to make it more enjoyable.



**Collection** = go to a local park and bring a bag or bucket for collecting any interesting object such as feathers, leaves, twigs or flowers. Make a collage.



**Dancing** = play different type of music and move the body, exploring rhythms, adding props like scarves or instruments, and using the space available with awareness. Use the 'fairy wind streamer'.

**Fun with boxes** = collect boxes of different sizes from deliveries and packaging. Bring them out and explore painting, decorating, building, hiding and any imaginary game.



**Water play** = use buckets or any containers to have a go at pouring, washing toys, watering plants and observing sinking and floating.

**On the spot** = give instructions for actions to be done on the spot such as running, skipping, star jump, stretching, turning around, hopping and dancing.

These are some ideas but as you know your child better, feel free to adapt to their needs and interests.

Cocoon offers a range of educational and playful activities for families with young children

Contact us on [earlyyearscocoon@gmail.com](mailto:earlyyearscocoon@gmail.com)

# Cocoon

empowering our children

Early Years Cocoon C.I.C. is a company whose activities and services are aimed at benefiting the community and in particular families with young children. Our objectives are: developing supportive services for families with young children; promoting positive parenting by focusing on the learning and development of the child; strengthening social, communication and artistic skills in young children and their parents; sharing creative and educational practice to ensure the well-being of children through a supportive family; and creating multidisciplinary stimuli for children by engaging with other local community organisations and individuals.

[earlyyearscocoon@gmail.com](mailto:earlyyearscocoon@gmail.com) | Instagram: [@earlyyearscocoon](https://www.instagram.com/earlyyearscocoon)



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