Hooray for Wordplay!

What do words and toys have in common? They’re both fun to play with! Wordplay builds children’s vocabulary and helps them learn to read, write, and spell. See how with these activities.

**Word bank**

A homemade piggy bank is a fun place for your youngster to save words from his favorite books. Have him make the bank by decorating an empty tissue box. Then, let him cut five “coins” from construction paper. Now it’s time to collect words. Before you read aloud to him, ask him to choose a type of word (five-letter words, words that start with his favorite letter). As you read, he can pick out words from the book that fit his criteria and write each one on a coin. Then, help him read each word aloud as he “feeds” it to his bank. He can cut out more coins and give the “pig” new words each time you read together. When his bank is full, let him dump it out—how many words can he read all by himself?

**Letter escape**

Can your youngster figure out which letter has escaped? This multiple-choice activity will help her become a better speller. Ask her to cover her eyes while you spell a word with Scrabble tiles. Leave one letter out and set it aside with two other letters. For example, you might spell g-ing and lay out p, t, and o as possible missing letters. When your child uncovers her eyes, it’s her job to look at the word and choose the escaped letter from the options on the table. Help her sound out each choice. (“Gping?” “Gting?” “Going!”)

**Word switcheroo**

Your youngster can play with word families to learn the sounds that letters make. A word family includes words that share the same ending sound (hug, mug, rug). Together, choose a word (bit), and write it down. Ask him to replace the first letter and say the new word he has made (sit). Take turns changing the first letter until neither of you can make another word. Then, choose a different word family to play with. A few to try include -an, -ing, -ill, and -ake.

**Refrigerator word search**

This hands-on word search can increase the number of words your youngster recognizes. Have her close her eyes while you use magnets to spell a three- or four-letter word (key, ball) on the refrigerator. The word can be vertical or horizontal. Surround it with random letters so that your word is hidden. Then, have your child open her eyes and try to find the word. Tip: If she’s struggling, remove one letter at a time from the refrigerator—she may be able to spot the word with fewer letters around it. After she finds it, let her hide one for you.
Alphabet actions
Try this silly way to pass time in a waiting room while boost-
ing your child’s knowledge of verbs, or action words. He can
start by saying, “I _____ a worm,” filling in the blank
with a verb that begins with a (ate, attacked, answered).
You repeat his sentence, but replace the verb with one
that starts with b (“I battled a worm”). Keep working
through the alphabet to see how many words you can
come up with. If either of
you is stumped, brainstorm
a verb together.

Vowel pictures
A mnemonic is a device that can help your child remember
something more easily. Here’s one that she can use to learn
vowel sounds. First, help her think of a word for each vowel (a, e, i, o, and u). Then, have her illustrate the word, making sure to
include the actual letter somewhere in her drawing. She might
draw a cat with a’s in place of its ears and nose and an umbrella
with a giant u in the curved handle. When she’s sounding out a
word while reading, she can remember her drawings. (“The
letter u makes the uh sound, like in umbrella!”)

Beginnings
and endings
Your youngster can explore pre-
fixes and suffixes
while waiting in line at the
grocery store or bank. Pick a
word with a common prefix
(re-, im-, un-), and ask him to
think of words that begin the
same way. For example, if you
choose rewind, he might say
replay and redo. Next, pick a
word with a common suffix
(-ly, -ing, -ed), and have him
come up with three words
that end the same way. For quickly, he could say quietly, care-
fully, and slowly.

Talking objects
If your refrigerator could talk, what would it say? Your
youngster can build her vocabulary and practice writing by
coming up with funny
things that household
items might say. Start by
having her choose an
object and brainstorm a
list of three words that
are related to it. For a
refrigerator, she might
write cold, food, and
freezer. Then, help her
use one or more of the
words to write dialogue
for the fridge. (“Don’t worry. I’ll keep your food
cold for you.”) Idea: She
can write the phrase in a
word balloon on a sticky
note and put it on the item.

Made-up definitions
Your youngster can practice reading and writing defini-
tions while building his vocabulary. Pick three words from
the same category (baby animals). Write a simple definition
for each word—but make one of the definitions false. Examples:
“A fawn is a baby deer.” “A calf is a baby horse.” “A chick is a
baby bird.” Help your child read each sentence aloud, and ask
him to figure out which one is fake (a calf is a cow, not a horse).
Then, let him pick words from a new category (planets, colors)
and make up three definitions for you. He can write them
down or dictate them to you, and you point to the false one.

Syllable snakes
Here’s a colorful way for your child to practice breaking
words into syllables—a skill that can help her sound out long
words. First, have her cut circles from several different colors
of paper. (Tip: She can trace around a soup can to make cir-
cles.) Look in a magazine for a word with several syllables
(television). Read the word to her,
and then say it together slowly,
clapping once for each syllable
(te-le-vi-sion). Help
her print the syllables
on individual circles
and glue them on
paper to make
a “snake.”
Encourage
her to find
more words
and make
other snakes.