Best Toys 4 Toddlers

Tot School

How to get started, plan and schedule tot school
How to Get Started with Tot School

Is tot school right for your family? Well, if you have a toddler between 10 months and 3 years old then the answer is most definitely yes! But what is tot schooling?

The book *Every Parent Can Teach Their Toddler* refers to tot schooling as "the means of raising a curious and hungry-to-learn child. It is exposing our toddlers to the world around them including diversity, multiculturalism, bilingualism, and simple every day practical life...It is part of parenting with a purpose."

Parents are their children's first and most important teachers. So if you're wondering how to get started becoming more purposeful with the time spent with your toddler or you're looking for new ideas the next few posts will take you through the why and how of tot school.

**What are the Benefits of Tot Schooling?**

Toddlers are curious and eager to learn. Little minds take in information at a rapid pace in the early childhood years. By providing meaningful experiences to explore their surroundings through their senses parents are shaping the way toddlers perceive themselves and the world around them.

Tot school doesn't have to be expensive or time-consuming. If we model appropriately and include our toddlers in daily routines they become valuable learning lessons. And to present a purposeful learn through play experience only takes a little planning and preparation and can often include items already in the household.
Tot school will be fun for everyone because playing is learning. Once the daily tasks have been mastered play, activities and crafts become part of the learning process. Activities and a designated place to play can easily be integrated into the daily routine to spark creativity and imagination.

Making connections, learning new skills and gaining self-confidence are the major benefits of providing a tot school experience.

**Getting Started with the Tot School**

- Set aside time each week to decide what materials or activities you would like to introduce.
- Have a plan but be flexible. Keep in mind that toddlers are unpredictable. Don't stress if an activity doesn't go as planned or needs to be postponed.
- Consider daily activities like diaper changes, meal times and naps and choose a time for activities around routines during a time when your toddler is rested and well-fed.
- Limit transitions and allow for uninterrupted play time.
- Keep in mind the developmental areas like cognitive skills, sensory, literacy, dramatic play and fine and gross motor and plan something for each area each week.

Every Parent Can Teach Their Toddler states, "Tot school should be about getting dirty, having adventures, and having no boundaries. Play is a non-threatening way to learn and completely exploratory; it indicates there is no danger and a child may explore freely and creatively." Hopefully, this post has gotten you interested and feeling like tot school is right for you and your little one. We'll soon go into more detail about ideas to get you started.
Imagine you go to a room in your home to complete a task but get distracted by the pile of laundry that needs to be folded. You fold some towels and go put them in the bathroom. Next you notice spots on the mirror so you clean it up and wipe the counters. And now you've gotten some things done but you've forgotten why you went into the room in the first place. Or simply consider how frustrating it is not to be able to find something you're looking for.

This is how it is for young children when their play materials are not set up in a way that makes sense and prevents distraction or their space is too cluttered. By taking a few steps to evaluate and set up your tot school environment your toddler will have the opportunity to explore and learn freely.

Most early childhood education philosophies consider the environment as a third teacher. Here we'll discuss how to set up a tot school environment that promotes learning and purposeful play and will make things less stressful for everyone.

**Evaluate Your Space**

- Evaluate the areas you use most from your child’s point of view. Assess for potential safety concerns and observe what seems most appealing.
- Consider the accessibility of your space. Children should have tools to be as safe and independent as possible. If your child is constantly asking for assistance in a certain area think about what you can change to help them be successful.
- Eliminate clutter. A cluttered or messy space will be distracting. Find some drop off areas you can use to contain clutter that accumulates to make the play spaces as clutter free as possible.
- Think about your goals for your spaces and your child and plan accordingly.
Remember less is more. If you take advantage of the benefits of rotating toys you will be able to set out a few carefully selected items that are changed every week or so to maintain engagement and curiosity. And, a more neutral color scheme will maintain focus more effectively than bright and colorful.

**Create Areas for Your Tot School**

- You may not have a completely separate space to use for play and activities. You can still designate certain parts of a room for certain activities.
- Take into consideration activities that make sense together. You may want a small table for writing practice next to the book area, for example. It would not make sense, however, to put riding toys or gross motor activities near an area where you usually do quieter, calmer activities.
- Include materials for the areas of cognition, dramatic play, literacy, art and gross and fine motor.

Once you have materials selected and areas planned out remember that if everything has a place children will be encouraged to be independent and motivated to put things away.

Also, keep in mind that things can always be reevaluated and rearranged and the main goal should be learning, play, exploration and fun!
How to Schedule and Plan Tot School

Tot school planning shouldn’t be complex or complicated. Here we’ll give you suggestions for how to start planning your time and materials.

How to Schedule a Tot School

Tot School Theme Planning

- It may be helpful to plan what materials and activities you introduce according to a theme. For example, you might present opportunities to learn about pumpkins in October or gardening in April. Take into consideration what seems to interest your child. But also consider that like everyone, toddlers are always evolving and interests may change day to day.

Toddler's Developmental Stage

- Think about what your child is able to do, what challenges them and what they are working toward. Keep in mind that toddlers develop at different rates. Present material and activities that provide opportunities for success, present a small challenge and won’t become frustrating.
- Consider the developmental areas of cognition, language and literacy, sensory, social and emotional and motor skills.
Materials to Use in Tot School

- Provide a variety of materials for each of the developmental areas. Rotate a few things out each week to keep curiosity engaged. Some examples include:
  - **Fine motor**: stringing beads, puzzles
  - **Cognition**: materials to introduce shapes, numbers, colors and other concepts
  - **Literacy**: take your theme into consideration and provide a supply of related books from the library
  - **Dramatic play**: dress-up clothes, puppets, dolls
  - **Art**: markers, crayons, paints, paper, glue

The majority of tot school time should be devoted to free play exploration. Some materials may require a demonstration and some assistance. But the most learning will occur when toddlers are given time to freely explore and play. Most of the planning will be used for what materials to introduce and when. Some time each week will also be dedicated to more structured activities you can do together.

- Plan a cooking activity
- **Sing songs** or finger plays or dance together with instruments
- Read aloud
- Take a field trip

So now you’re ready to dive into planning. Remember to be flexible and ready to adapt to rapidly changing needs and interests. Listen and observe how your toddler interacts with what you provide and adjust your plans accordingly. Most importantly, have fun!
Encouraging Independence with Tot School

Do you remember the first time you got dressed or used the bathroom by yourself? Probably not. But you probably do remember learning to drive a car or the first time you lived outside your family’s home.

Establishing independence makes anyone, no matter how old, feel proud and like a world of opportunity has just been opened.

A tot school experience can be as much about daily routine and success with independence as it is about learning through play.

Being purposeful in evaluating your home and your time spent with your toddler to support independence will have benefits for everyone.

Independence in the Home

- Place stools in various places so toddlers can easily reach what they need.
- Place utensils in a low drawer for toddlers to easily gather their own supplies for meals.
- Provide hooks at toddler level for them to hang outdoor wear.
- **Keep toys you have out in the same place** so toddlers know where to put things back when they’re finished.
Independence in Self Care

- Introduce learning to use the toilet with signs of readiness using books, discussion, and demonstration. Make the bathroom accessible with stools and a potty seat.
- Have a mirror at toddler height for tooth and hair brushing and cleaning their faces.
- Verbalize the steps of getting dressed while assisting and encourage toddlers to do what they can themselves.

Maria Montessori stated, "Never do for a child what he feels he can do himself." Sometimes we are in a hurry to get out the door or things in the home are simply just not safe or child-friendly.

But as much as possible if independence in taking care of one's self and an environment is encouraged the whole family will benefit with the success of the child!
You’ve probably noticed that you can have fancy, light up toys and if you are cooking or doing dishes in the kitchen your toddler will choose the pots and pans to play with over the toys.

One of the best things about Tot School is you don't need a lot of expensive, store bought materials to keep your toddler busy. Items found around the house can provide a variety of types of play.

**Materials To Collect:**

- Cardboard boxes
- Plastic cups and bottles
- Pipe cleaners
- Q-Tips
- Cups and bowls
- Containers and lids
- Toilet paper tubes
- Masking tape

**Ideas to Get Started**

- Stack plastic cups or use for pouring during sensory play.
- Use cardboard tubes to make a track on the wall for pom poms or for stamp painting.
- Set out containers and lids for matching.
- Cut holes in the top of a container to push pom poms or Q-Tips through.
- Use plastic bottles as bowling pins.
Household items and books can easily supply everything you'll need to keep your toddler engaged and learning.

Toddlers will naturally explore whatever is set out in front of them developing problem-solving skills as they observe cause and effect. Using household items will encourage creativity, save money and unnecessary trips to the store creating a pleasant Tot School experience for everyone!
"Play is often talked about as if it were a relief from serious learning. But for children play is serious learning. Play is really the work of childhood." Mr. Rogers

In our journey through getting started with Tot School we’ve discussed how to set up space, scheduling and materials.

But it’s important to remember that in early childhood learning is really all about play! When providing a Tot School experience there will be time for both purposeful and free play. Let’s take a minute to understand the difference.

**Purposeful Play**

- Involves some planning or set up
- Set out materials for a certain skill or concept
- Use what your child knows and says to encourage conversation while playing
- Usually more focused on cognitive and language development

**Free Play**

- Play is child-led in an environment that allows free and safe exploration of material
- Requires little to no adult interaction and can be done independently
- All developmental areas can be included in materials for free play and rotated to encourage engagement

Any early childhood educator understands that there is no such thing as "just playing." There are so many ways to play! And with the right environment, open ended materials and a little imagination children’s minds will naturally do the learning.
And now with an understanding of how to get started with Tot School the value of both purposeful and free play will become even more apparent. Now you are really ready to begin your Tot School experience.
Want to know more?

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