


Theraplay Activities by Dimension

 In this revised list, activities within each dimension are listed alphabetically within each of three age levels:

- *Young*: Chronologically or developmentally young; for example, one to three years
- *All*: All ages with appropriate modifications up or down
- *Older*: Chronologically or developmentally older; for example, eight to fifteen years

A few activities at the end of each dimension are especially suitable for use with a group of three or more participants, for example, when parents enter the session or when more than one child is present. Depending on the way an activity is carried out, it may fit more than one dimension, for example, hand-clapping games are both engaging and structuring. Many games enjoyed by young children throughout the world (not listed here) can also be adapted and used in sessions with children of all ages. Activities for very young children must be within their physical ability and must make sense to them. Simple activities can be adapted to make them more challenging or more interesting to older children. In order to encourage give-and-take

and extend the child's attention span, you or the parents can take turns with the child and vary the activity whenever possible.

STRUCTURE

The purpose of structuring activities is to organize and regulate the child's experience. The adult sets limits, defines body boundaries, keeps the child safe, and helps to complete sequences of activities.

A word about signals: Using signals for when to start will increase the structure in any activity. Start with simple signals, such as "One, Two, Three, Go" or "Ready, Set, Go"; advance to more complicated signals, such as listening for a selected word in a series, or watching for a visual signal, such as a wink or other facial movement. Signals should not be used for every activity as they can slow down the pace or become too predictable and they may take away from the lighthearted tone you want at a particular moment,

Young

BEANBAG GAME. Place a beanbag or soft toy on your own head, put your hands under the child's outstretched hands, give a signal and drop the beanbag into the child's hands by tilting your head toward the child. Take turns. Variations: For a child who cannot catch well, take his hands in yours and bring all four hands together to catch the beanbag. You can also open your hands to let the beanbag fall through.

JUMP INTO MY ARMS. Have child stand on pillows or sofa. Give a signal for the child to jump into your arms.

PATTY-CAKE. Hold child's hands and lead her through the activity. "Patty-cake, patty-cake, Baker's man / Bake me a cake as fast as you can / Roll it and pat it and mark it with a [child's initial] / And toss it in the oven for [child's name] and me!" You can use feet as well. This is also an engaging activity.

PLAY DOH SQUEEZE OR PRINTS. Place a ball of Play Doh between the child's hands. Place your hands on the outside of the child's hands and, while looking directly in the her eyes, say "Squeeeeeeze!" as you firmly press your hands and hers into the Play Doh. This firm pressure can help organize a dysregulated child. You can also use Play Doh to make finger, hand, and footprints.

POP THE BUBBLE. Blow a bubble and catch it on the wand. Have child pop the bubble with a particular body part, for example, finger, toe, elbow, shoulder or ear. This is a structured way of playing with bubbles. Bubbles readily capture the interest of young children and can be used as an engaging activity either in this structured form or in a manner that invites more spontaneity (for example, by having the child pop all the bubbles as quickly as he can).

All Ages

COTTON BALL BLOW. You and the child hold a scarf or long piece of cloth between you. Place a cotton ball at one end of the scarf and blow it back and forth to the child. An alternative is to place the cotton ball in your cupped hands and blow the ball into the child's hands. Another alternative is to fold up the long sides of a piece of foil (as long as the child's arm or leg) and blow the cotton ball back and forth on the foil tray.

COTTON BALL HOCKEY. Lie on the floor on your tummies (or sit with a pillow between you). Blow cotton balls back and forth trying to get the cotton ball under your partner's arms or off the edge of the pillow. Or you can cooperate and both blow hard enough to keep the ball in the middle. You can make it less competitive but increase the complexity by specifying how many blows can be used to get the ball across the pillow—one blow is easy, but two or three are harder to control.

DRAWING AROUND HANDS, FEET, OR BODIES. Make a picture of the child's hand or foot by drawing it on a piece of paper. Be sure to check on the child's reaction by looking at his face periodically. Full body drawings require the child to lie still for some time and are therefore more challenging and may make the child feel vulnerable; wait to do this until later in treatment when trust has been established. Be sure to maintain verbal contact with the child as you draw; for example, "I'm coming to your ankle; I'm coming to the tickle spot under your arm."

MEASURING. Measure the child's height, length of arms, legs, feet, hands, and so forth. Keep a record for later comparisons. Use a measuring tape, yarn, or ribbon. Measure surprising things, such as the child's smile, the length of his ears, the circumference of his head, or how high he can jump. You can use fruit tape for measuring, then

tear off the length and feed it to the child. “This is just the size of your smile.” You thus combine structure with nurture.

MIRRORING. Face the child, move your arms, face, or other body parts and ask child to move in the same way. For a very active child you can use slow motion or vary the tempo. Take turns being the leader.

PEANUT BUTTER AND JELLY. Say “peanut butter” and have child say “jelly” in just the same way. Repeat five to ten times varying loudness and intonation. Adapt the pair of words to the customs of the country; for example, “fish” and “chips” in Great Britain.

STACK OF HANDS. Put your hand palm down in front of child, have the child put his hand on top; alternate hands to make a stack. Take turns moving the hand on the bottom to the top. You can also move from top to bottom. This can be made more complicated by going fast or in slow motion. Putting lotion on hands first makes for a slippery stack and adds an element of nurture. You can stack feet, forearms, folded arms, and fingers; if a child is wary of touch, stack hands with one to two inches of space between each hand or finger.

Older

EYE SIGNALS. Hold hands and stand facing each other. Use eye signals to indicate direction and number of steps to take, for example, when you wink your left eye two times, both you and the child take two side steps to your left. If winking is difficult, tilt the head or purse the lips to the left and right. To make it more challenging, you can add signals for forward and backward movement as well (head back for backward, head forward for forward). You can hold a balloon or a pillow between you by leaning close to each other as you move.

RED LIGHT, GREEN LIGHT. Ask child to do something, such as run, jump, move arms. Green light means go, red light means stop.

THREE-LEGGED WALK. Stand beside the child. Tie your two adjacent legs together with a scarf or ribbon. With arms around each other’s waist, walk across the room. You should be responsible for coordinating the movement. For example, you can say “inside, outside” to indicate which foot to use. You can add obstacles (pillows, chairs) to make this more challenging.

TOILET-PAPER-BUST-OUT. Wrap child's legs, arms, or whole body with toilet paper, paper towels, or crepe paper. To let a hesitant child know what is in store, have her hold her arms together in front of her body and wrap them first. On a signal, have child break out of wrapping.

When Parents Enter or When There Are Three or More Participants

Young

RUN TO MOMMY OR DADDY UNDER THE BLANKET. Child sits on one parent's lap facing the other parent with a small blanket lying on the floor between them. On a signal, both parents lift the blanket and the child runs or crawls under the blanket into the arms of the other parent.

All Ages

FOLLOW THE LEADER. All participants stand and form a line holding on to the waist of the person in front of them. The first person chooses a particular way to move and all others copy. The leader goes to the back of the line and the new leader demonstrates a different way to move around the room. This can also be done sitting in a circle and moving only arms, head, and shoulders.

FUNNY WAYS TO CROSS THE ROOM. One adult and the child stand at one end of mat (or play space); other adult stands at other end of mat. Second adult directs child to come toward her in a certain way, for example, hopping, tiptoeing, crawling, or walking backward. Child is greeted with a hug or special greeting on arrival. The first adult then calls her to come back in a specified way. Adult and child can come across mat together if child cannot manage alone. With older children, each participant can choose a funny way to cross the room that everyone must try, for example, crab walk, elephant walk, or scooting.

HOKEY POKEY. Everyone stands in a circle and sings: "You put your right foot in / You put your right foot out / You put your right foot in / And you shake it all about / You do the Hokey Pokey / And you turn yourself around / That's what it's all about / Hokey Pokey!" Arms, heads, whole bodies can be put in to the middle of the circle and shaken. When you do the Hokey Pokey, you dance in whatever way you like, arms in air, with playful, energetic gestures.

MOTOR BOAT. Holding hands, everyone walks around in a circle, chanting “Motor boat, motor boat, go so slow / Motor boat, motor boat, go so fast / Motor boat, motor boat, step on the gas!” Gradually increase the speed until it is very fast. Suddenly “put on the brakes!” and start over with the slow tempo. This can also be done with the child and therapist alone.

RING-AROUND-A-ROSY. Hold hands and walk around in a circle chanting, “Ring-around-a-rosy / A pocket full of posies / Ashes, ashes, we all fall down.” All fall down at the end.

Older

“MOTHER, MAY I?” Parent gives instructions to the child to do something, for example, “Take three giant steps toward me.” Child must say “Mother, may I?” before responding to the command. If the child forgets, she must return to the starting line. The goal is to have the child come to her parent and get a hug on arrival.

SIMON SAYS. This is similar to “Mother, May I?” but with the added challenge that the child must watch out for commands that do not have “Simon Says” as part of the phrase. Thus when the game is going rapidly, the leader can suddenly omit to say “Simon Says,” and the unwary participant may do the action without thinking. If a player makes this mistake, it is his turn to be leader.

ZOOM-ERK-SPLASH. Everyone sits or stands in a circle. The word “zoom” is passed around the circle quickly. When one person stops the action by saying “erk,” the “zoom” reverses and is sent back the way it came. When the zoom-erk gets stuck in one part of the circle, the person receiving the erk puts his hands together in a diving movement and point his hands to someone across the circle, saying “splash.” The person splashed passes a zoom to the person next to her.

ENGAGEMENT

The purpose of engaging activities is to connect with the child in a playful, positive way, to focus intently on the child, and to encourage her to enjoy new experiences. At all times it is important to attend to the level of the child’s arousal and to modulate it when needed.

Young

BEEP AND HONK. Press child's nose and say "Beep!" then press chin and say "Honk!" Guide child to touch your nose and chin. Make appropriate beeps and honks, as you are touched. Child may be able to supply noises also.

HELLO, GOODBYE. Child sits in parent's lap face-to-face. Parent supports child's back with his hands and says "Hello" and then dips the child backwards while saying "Goodbye." Parent then brings the child back up and says "Hello." This can be done standing, as well with the child's legs around the parent's waist. In this position the downward dip puts the child's face farther out of view of her parent.

KNOCK ON THE DOOR. This is a simple baby activity. There are many variations in different cultures. "Knock on the door" (tap on the child's forehead); "Peep in" (peek at child's eyes); "Lift up the latch" (gently push up child's nose); and "Walk in!" (pretend to walk fingers into child's open mouth or pop a piece of food in).

PEEK-A-BOO. Hold child's hands (or feet) together in front of your face. Peek around or separate the hands (or feet) to "find" the child. A lovely variation is to use a sheer scarf to hide your face or the child's, then pull it off to discover each other.

POP CHEEKS. Inflate your cheeks with air and help child to pop them with his hands or feet. Child inflates cheeks and you pop them in turn.

POPCORN TOES. As you take the child's shoes off, ask if she has popcorn, peanuts, grapes, and so forth, inside her shoe. Then take the shoe off and discover wonderful toes.

PUSH-ME-OVER, LAND-ON-MY KNEES. Kneel in front of standing child (so that child comes to your eye level) or sit in front of sitting child. Hold child's hands. On a signal, have child push you. As you fall back pull child onto your knees and "fly" the child smoothly or bounce child up and down.

STICKER MATCH. Put a colorful sticker on the child and have the child put stickers on you or his parent in just the same place until both are decorated in the same way. After the stickers are applied, child and parent touch matching stickers together, for example, nose to nose, elbow to elbow, before removing them.

STICKY NOSE. Put a colorful sticker on your own nose. Ask child to take it off. Or stick a cotton ball on your nose with lotion. Have child blow it off.

THIS IS THE WAY THE BABY RIDES. Adult holds child on knees and bounces the child, varying the pace as she moves from baby, to lady, to gentleman, to farmer. Another version of this activity is “Trot, trot to Boston, Trot, trot to Lynn, Trot, trot to Boston, All fall in!” Let the child gently “fall” off adult’s lap at the end.

THIS LITTLE PIG WENT TO MARKET. Wiggle each toe as you chant, “This little pig went to market / This little pig stayed home / This little pig had roast beef / This little pig had none / This little pig cried ‘Wee, wee, wee,’ all the way home.” Change details to fit the particular child, for example, “this little pig likes pizza.” As you say “all the way home,” walk your fingers up the child’s arm in a playful way rather than tickling his tummy. With an easily dysregulated child use firm pressure and a calm approach.

WIGGLE TOES. Feel for wiggle toes through the child’s shoes as a part of greeting and Checkup. Remove the shoes to discover the toes.

All Ages

BEEP AND HONK VARIATION. Make a special noise when you touch a specific face or body part, for example, elephant trumpeting when you touch a knee. Try to remember which noise goes with the part when you do a series of touches.

BLOW ME OVER. Sit facing the child and, holding hands (you can cradle a younger child in your lap), have child “blow you over.” Fall back as the child blows. Once the child understands the game, you can blow her over.

CHECKUPS. Check body parts, such as nose, chin, ears, cheeks, fingers, toes, knees to see if they are warm or cold, hard or soft, wiggly or quiet, and so on. Count freckles, toes, fingers, and knuckles. Check strong muscles and high jumps.

FOIL PRINTS. Shape a piece of aluminum foil around the child's elbow, hand, foot, face, ear, or other body part. It helps to place a pillow under the foil and have the child press her hand or foot into the soft surface to get impressions of the fingers and toes. Parent may be called in to guess which print goes with which body part. This is also structuring since it defines body shapes and boundaries.

HIDE AND FIND. Hide a cotton ball (wrapped candy, a touch of lotion or powder) somewhere on the child (in a cuff or folded sleeve, under the collar, behind the ear). An older child can hide the cotton ball on himself. If parent or another adult is available, she can find the cotton ball, if not, you can find it. Young children will want to show where the hidden object is. Help parents accept this as the child's eager involvement in the game.

PIGGY-BACK/HORSEY-BACK RIDE. Help the child get onto your back. Jog around the room with the child on your back. Child can give signals, "Whoa!" and "Giddyap!" The strength of your back determines how old the child can be for this game. All children enjoy it.

PUSH-ME-OVER, PULL-ME-UP. Sit on the floor in front of child. Place child's palms against yours, or put child's feet against your shoulders. On a signal, have child push you over. Fall back in an exaggerated way. Stretch out your hands so that child can pull you back up.

ROW, ROW, ROW YOUR BOAT. Sing the familiar song, adding the child's name at the end ("Erin's such a dream"). Small children can be held in your lap. Older children can sit facing you. Claspings forearms rather than hands makes this feel more secure and connected. If another adult is available, child can be seated between you as if in a boat as you row back and forth. The tempo can be varied from fast to slow and back again to practice regulation. You also can rock from side to side. The second, more exciting verse concludes, "If you see a crocodile, don't forget to scream." Then both scream loudly.

Older

COUNTING FINGERS AND KNUCKLES. Count from one to five on one hand and then starting with ten on the other hand count down to six. Say with a puzzled look, “Five and six makes eleven. Do you have eleven fingers?” Older children will enjoy the joke, younger ones won’t get it. You can also count all the knuckles on both hands. Children are often surprised to learn that they have twenty-eight knuckles.

CREATE A SPECIAL HANDSHAKE. Make up a special handshake together, taking turns adding new gestures, for example, high five, clasp hands, wiggle fingers, and so on. This can be cumulative over several sessions and can be your beginning or ending ritual. It can be used to good advantage when parents join the session.

HAND-CLAPPING GAMES. Children of all ages enjoy these games and many have a good repertoire of rhymes and rhythms. You should have a few chants that you know well, for example, “Miss Mary Mack” or “A Sailor Went to Sea.” You can vary the complexity of the rhythmic pattern and the chant depending on the skill of the child. Always make sure that you first rehearse the clapping pattern slowly so that you can easily get into a satisfying pattern once you add the rhyme.

When Parents Enter or When There Are Three or More Participants

BLANKET PASS. Everyone sits (or stands) in a circle and holds on to the edge of a small blanket, sheet, or parachute. Each person takes a turn choosing who they want to pass a soft ball to across the blanket. Everyone must cooperate in lifting or lowering their part of the blanket to make sure that the ball gets to the right person. A variation is to pass the ball around the edge of the circle.

HIDE AND SEEK. Hide with the child under a blanket or under pillows and ask parents or other adult to find you both. Hiding with the child is important, because it gives you the opportunity to help the child contain the excitement generated by being alone and anticipating the surprise of being found. Parents should be coached

to make appreciative comments about their child as they look for him and to find him quickly if he is very young and impatient. A big hug is in order once the child is found.

HIDE NOTES OR OTHER OBJECTS ON THE CHILD FOR PARENTS TO FIND. One adult hides and the other finds, for example, notes directing the finder to do something with the child (“Pop Sara’s cheeks”); or, find a cotton ball and give a soft touch, or find food and feed it to the child.

MAGNETS. Everyone stands in a wide, loose circle. Each time the leader gives the cue, everyone comes closer and closer until they are touching side-by-side.

MATCH THE BEANBAGS. Give the parent and child five beanbags each. The parent balances a beanbag on the child’s body (on the head, shoulder, knee, in the crook of an arm) and the child places a beanbag on the same place on the parent; they take turns dumping the beanbags from the same body part into each other’s hands.

PASSING FUNNY FACES. Each person in the circle makes a funny face which is passed in turn to the next person around the circle. Each has a turn to create a funny face.

PROGRESSIVE PASS AROUND. Sitting in a circle, one person passes a gentle touch to the next person (such as a nose beep, or pat on the back). The second person passes that touch to the third person plus one of her own. Each person adds a new touch. Everyone helps each other recall the sequence of touches. If a child is wary of touch, this may be done first by doing the touches only on oneself.

WHOSE TOES DID I TOUCH? Everyone sits in a circle with feet all entwined under a blanket. The person who is “it” touches the lumpy blanket and has to guess whose toes she has touched.

NURTURE

The purpose of nurturing activities is to reinforce the message that the child is worthy of care and that adults will provide care without the child having to ask. Nurturing activities help to calm and regulate the anxious child and enhance feelings of self-worth.

Young

COTTON BALL SOOTHE. Have child relax on pillows or in your arms. You, or a parent, gently stroke the child's face, arms, or hands with a cotton ball. You can quietly describe the features that you are outlining: rosy cheeks, smiling mouth, upturned nose.

FEEDING. Cradle the child in your arms while feeding pudding, applesauce, or juice.

LULLABY. Cradle the child in your arms in such a way that eye contact can be maintained. Sing your favorite lullaby or any quiet, soothing song. Add details about the particular child to the traditional words.

All Ages

CARING FOR HURTS. As part of the general checkup for the child's special qualities, notice and care for scratches, bruises, hurts, or "boo-boos." Put lotion on or around the hurt, touch with cotton ball, or blow a kiss. Check for healing in the next session. Do not announce, "Let's see how many hurts you have."

COTTON BALL OR FEATHER GUESS. First demonstrate by touching the child's hand with a cotton ball and a feather; ask the child to notice the difference between the two sensations. Then have child close her eyes and tell where you have touched her and whether you did it with a cotton ball or a feather. This adds challenge to a nurturing activity. If the child is not comfortable closing her eyes, have her look away.

COTTON BALL TOUCH. First have child hold out hand and demonstrate a gentle touch on one finger, and have her point to or tell you which finger you touched. Then have child close eyes (or turn her head if closing eyes bothers the child). Touch child gently with cotton ball. Have child open eyes and indicate where she was touched.

DECORATE CHILD. Make rings, necklaces, bracelets with Play Doh, crepe foam, crepe paper streamers, or aluminum foil.

FACE PAINTING. Paint flowers and hearts on cheeks or make the child up like a princess or a prince. Mustaches and beards are interesting for boys and their fathers. A variation on this is to use a soft dry brush

and pretend to paint the child's face, describing her wonderful cheeks, her lovely eyebrows, and so forth as you gently brush each part.

FEATHER MATCH. Prepare two sets of five feathers; if they are colored, have the sets match. The parent or therapist decorates the child with one feather (in the child's hair, tucked into a sleeve, between fingers) and the child places a feather on the adult in the same place. Admire each other.

FEEDING. Have small snack and drink available for all sessions; never insist that a child eat. Take child on lap or face seated child. Feed the child, listening for crunches, noticing whether child likes the snack and when he is ready for more. Encourage eye contact. You can add to the interest of the feeding by having two or three kinds of snack—raisins, nuts, crackers. Have the child close his eyes and guess which snack it is. If the child refuses to let you feed him at first, allow him to feed himself but make yourself a part of the activity, for example, by commenting on how long he chews, how loud his chews are, or what you notice about him that lets you know he likes the food.

LOTION OR POWDER PRINTS. Apply lotion or powder to the child's hand or foot and make a print on paper, the floor mat, a pillow, your dark clothing, or on a mirror. If you make a lotion print on dark construction paper, you can shake powder on it and then blow or shake it off to enhance the picture (take care to keep the powder away from the child's face). You can also make a pile of powder on a piece of paper and have the child rub his hand or foot in it to make the print.

LOTIONING OR POWDERING. Put lotion or powder on child's arms, hands, legs, or feet. You can sing a personalized song as you do this, "Oh lotion, oh lotion on Sarah's feet / It feels so good, it feels so sweet. Oh lotion, oh lotion on Sarah's hand / It feels so good, it feels so grand." Attend to the child's sensory needs by using firm pressure, or choosing powder rather than lotion for the child who has tactile sensitivity.

PAINT PRINTS. Rub finger paint on child's hand or foot, using one color or creating a pattern with several colors. It is best to do one hand or foot at a time. Press the painted hand or foot onto paper to make a print. After prints are made with paint, gently wash, dry, and powder the hand or foot.

POWDER PALM. Sprinkle some powder in the child's palm and partially rub it in so that the lines on the palm stand out; notice shapes and letters. Also rub into parent's palm; look for differences and similarities between the child's and the parent's palms.

PREPARING PIZZA, TACOS, HOT DOGS, OR COOKIE DOUGH. Have the child lie on pillows on his tummy. Knead his back while describing how delicious the cookie or pizza, taco, or hot dog is going to be. Firmly put the appropriate condiments on the pizza or cookie dough.

SLIPPERY, SLIPPERY, SLIP. This is a lotioning activity with an added element of surprise (as well as giving an opportunity to apply firm pressure to the child's body). First rub lotion on the child's arm or leg. Then holding firmly well up his arm or leg, say "slippery, slippery, slip" and pull toward you, falling backward with an exaggerated motion as the slippery arm or leg escapes. An alternative is to see how quickly the child can pull her hand out from between your two slippery hands and squeeze it back into your clasped hands.

SOFT AND FLOPPY. Have the child lie on floor and help him get "all soft and floppy." Gently jiggle each arm and leg and let it flop to the floor. If child has difficulty getting floppy, have him get "stiff like a board" and then let go to be "soft like a noodle." Once the child is relaxed, ask him to wiggle just one part of his body: his tummy, his tongue, his big toe, and so forth.

"TWINKLE" SONG. Adapt the words of "Twinkle, twinkle, little star," to the special characteristics of the child. "What a special boy you are / Dark brown hair, and soft, soft cheeks / Bright brown eyes from which you peek / Twinkle, twinkle little star / What a special boy you are." Touch the parts you refer to as you sing.

Older

DOUGHNUT OR PRETZEL CHALLENGE. Put a doughnut or pretzel on your finger. See how many bites the child can take before breaking the circle.

MANICURE OR PEDICURE. Soak the child's feet or hands in warm water. Using lotion, massage her feet or hands. Paint the child's toes or fingernails using a variety of colors or letting the child choose the color she wants. Make sure that the child is comfortable having the nail polish remain when she leaves the room. If not, take it off.

POWDER TRAIL. Place a small pile of powder on newspaper on the floor. Have the child put his feet into the powder so that they are liberally covered with powder. Have the child walk on the dark mat leaving footprints as he goes. This can be used as a lead-in to having the parents come into session to find the child who is hidden at the end of the trail of footprints.

TEMPORARY TATTOOS. Apply tattoos or, using washable body paints, draw designs on the child's arms, face, or hands.

TRACE MESSAGES. Using your finger, trace shapes or simple positive messages on the child's back for her to decipher.

*When Parents Enter or When There Are
Three or More Participants*

Young

SHOE AND SOCK RACE. Adults race to put kisses on feet and then put child's shoes back on before the kiss flies away. Ask parents to see whether the kisses are still there and add new ones when the child goes to bed at night.

SPECIAL KISSES. *Butterfly Kiss:* Parent places her cheek against the child's cheek and flutters her eyelashes so that the child feels the brush of her eyelashes. *Elephant Kiss:* Hold both fists in front of your mouth (like a pretend trumpet), keep one fist by your mouth as you make a kissing noise. Move the other fist toward the child's cheek, completing the kissing noise with a flourish as you touch his cheek. *Eskimo Kiss:* Parent and child rub noses.

Note: the therapist describes the special kisses above or may demonstrate with a gesture; the therapist makes clear that real kisses are special signs of affection to be shared only by parents and children.

All Ages

BLANKET SWING. Spread a blanket on the floor and have the child lie down in the middle. The adults gather up the corners and give a gentle swing while singing a song. At the end bring him down for a “soft landing.” Position parents so that they can see the child’s face. If the child is fearful of being lifted off the floor, let her remain in contact with the floor as you gently rotate the blanket around in a circle.

FACE PAINTING. Using washable body paints, parents decorate their child’s face with small designs. Older boys with their fathers enjoy making mustaches and beards on each other. The removing of the paint is an opportunity for more nurturing.

FANNING. After a vigorous activity, one adult or both parents rest with child in their arms, and the other adult fans with a large pillow, a fan, or newspaper. Watch how everyone’s hair blows.

PASS A SQUEEZE OR TOUCH AROUND. Pass a squeeze, a gentle touch, a dab of lotion, or a fresh touch of powder from person to person around the circle.

WEATHER REPORT. Everyone in the circle turns to the right and puts his hands on the back of the person in front of him. The leader describes the weather and each person rubs the back of the next person to match the weather. For example, it’s a warm sunny day: make a large warm circle. The wind is beginning to blow: swoop hands lightly across the back making a swishing noise. Thunder: use the sides of your hands to pound gently on the back. Rain: make light finger taps. Lightning: make a big zig-zag across the back.

CHALLENGE

The purpose of challenging activities is to encourage the child to take age appropriate risks in order to foster feelings of competence and mastery. These activities are most often done cooperatively with the parent or therapist. Challenge activities also allow a child to accept structure, engagement, and nurture that they might resist in more direct forms.

Young

CRAWLING RACE. You and the child crawl on your knees as fast as you can around a stack of pillows. Try to catch the other's feet. Switch direction.

All Ages

BALANCE ON PILLOWS, JUMP OFF. Help child balance on pillows, starting with one and adding more as long as the child can easily manage. While the child is gaining her balance, hold her around the rib cage—rather than holding her hands. This steadies her and reduces the child's impulse to jump up and down. Once the child is balanced, you can remove your hands and let her experience the feeling of balancing on her own. Then tell her to “jump into my arms (or down to the floor) when I give the signal.”

BALLOON TENNIS. Keep balloon in the air using specified body parts; for example, heads, hands, no hands, shoulders. If you choose feet, everyone lies on the floor and keeps the balloon in the air by kicking it gently. To create more structure and focus, choose a goal for how long you can keep it in the air, for example “Let's see if we can count to twenty.”

BUBBLE TENNIS. Blow bubbles high in the air between you and the child. Choose one bubble and blow it back and forth between you until it pops.

COOPERATIVE COTTON BALL RACE. You and child get on hands and knees at one end of room. Take turns blowing a cotton ball (or a Ping-Pong ball) to the other side of the room. You can try to better your time on repeated trials. A competitive version would be for each to have his own cotton ball and see who can get it across the room first. Parent and child can be teamed up against the therapist team.

FEATHER BLOW. You and the child each hold a small pillow in front of you. Blow a feather from your pillow toward the child's pillow. Child must catch it on her pillow and blow it back.

KARATE CHOP. Hold a length of toilet paper or paper streamer in front of the child and have her chop it in half when you give a signal.

MAGIC CARPET RIDE. Have child sit on a large pillow or small blanket, holding firmly to the edge. When the child looks at you, pull him around the room. When he breaks eye contact, stop. This works well on a slippery surface, such as a wood or vinyl floor.

MEASURING. Measure the child's height against a wall and mark it in some way, then measure when she stands on tiptoes and when she jumps up and touches the wall as high as possible. Measure various lengths of jumps on the floor as well.

NEWSPAPER PUNCH, BASKET TOSS. Stretch a single sheet of newspaper tautly in front of child. Have child punch through the sheet when given a signal. You must hold the newspaper so firmly that it makes a satisfying pop when the child punches it. Make sure that you hold the paper so that the punch does not hit your chest. To extend the activity, you can add a second or third sheet of paper, have child use the other hand, and vary the signals. For the basket toss crush the torn newspaper into balls. Have child toss a ball into the basket you make with your arms.

PICK UP COTTON BALLS OR OTHER SMALL OBJECTS WITH YOUR TOES. Start with one or two and increase the number. Once the cotton balls have been picked up, you can add tossing them across the room. You can make this more challenging by having the child hop around the room with the cotton ball between his toes.

PILLOW PUSH. Place a large pillow between you and the child. Have child push against pillow trying to push you over.

SEED-SPITTING CONTEST. Feed the child chunks of watermelon or orange or tangerine with seeds. You should eat some, too. Both save your seeds. Have the child spit her seed as far as she can. Try to spit your seed as close to hers as possible. Tic Tacs, beans, or other small objects can be used as well.

Older

BALANCING ACTIVITIES. Child lies on back on the floor with feet up in air. Place one pillow on child's feet and help her balance it. Add additional pillows one at a time as long as the child is successful. Balance books, beanbags, pillows, or hats on child's head and have her walk across the room.

BALLOON BALANCE. Hold a balloon between you and the child (for example, between foreheads, shoulders, elbows, or hips) and move across the room without dropping or popping the balloon. See if you can do this without using hands.

PARTNER PULL-UP. Sit on the floor holding hands and facing each other with toes together. On a signal, pull up together to a standing position. A variation is to have the partners sitting back to back with arms interlocked. On the signal, they both push up to a standing position. For these activities to work the partners need to be close in size.

STRAIGHT FACE CHALLENGE. Child has to keep a straight face while you try to make him laugh either by gently touching him (avoid sensitive spots or prolonged tickling) or by making funny faces.

THUMB, ARM, OR LEG WRESTLING. Adult guides activity, giving starting signals and ensuring safety.

WHEELBARROW. Have child put her hands on floor. Stand behind her and clasp her firmly by the ankles or just above the knees. Child “walks” on her hands. This is hard work for the child so you should stop as soon as it becomes too tiring.

When Parents Enter or When There Are Three or More Participants

Young

WIGGLE IN AND OUT. Child wiggles out of one adult’s encircling arms and into the other’s arms. This is best with small children and is useful when the child is already wiggling and wanting to get out of your arms.

All Ages

COTTON BALL, MARSHMALLOW, OR NEWSPAPER BALL FIGHT. Divide into two teams. Using cotton balls, marshmallows, or newspaper balls, each team throws the balls at the other team trying to get rid of all balls on their side. Players may set up a “shield” with pillows and throw from behind it.

COTTON BALL OR PING-PONG BLOW. Everyone lies on tummies on the floor. Someone starts the game by naming a person across the circle to whom he intends to blow the cotton ball or Ping-Pong ball. That person names someone else and the ball is blown back and forth across the circle.

KEEP BALLOON IN THE AIR. When there are more people this activity can become quite exciting. You can organize it by taking turns around the circle or by counting how many times the group can keep the balloon in the air before it hits the ground.

SHOE AND SOCK RACE. Adults race to see who can put the child's shoes and socks back on first.

TUG-OF-WAR. Divide into teams, for example, child and parents versus therapists. Each team holds on to the ends of a scarf, a blanket, or a soft rope and tries to pull the other team to their side. Make sure that the child has a good grip and that there is nothing to bump into if one team falls.

TUNNELS. Child crawls through a tunnel made of pillows or of kneeling adults to meet you or his parent at the end.

Older

COOPERATIVE CARRYING. Tie four to six strings or ribbons approximately thirty-six inches in length to a medium or large rubber band, with equal spacing between the knots. Four to six people each hold one string (or two or three people can each hold two strings) and work together to pick up a paper cup or empty water bottle by pulling the rubber band wide enough to drop it around the object. Once the group captures the object, they can carry the object to an appointed place. For more difficulty, stack objects on top of each other. The number of strings can be adjusted to fit the size of the group.

COOPERATIVE RACE. There are many ways to organize a cooperative race, for example, taking turns blowing Ping-Pong balls across the room, or kicking balloons. This can be done as a parent-child team against the therapists or timed to see how quickly the goal can be reached.

TANGLE. Everyone stands in a circle. One person crosses her arms and takes the hand of someone across the circle, that person crosses his arms and takes the hand of another person across the circle until everyone is holding hands, deliberately creating a tangle of hands. Participants then untangle without breaking the handholds. It is likely that some people will be facing in and some out when the circle is untangled. It adds to the fun to put lotion on everyone's hands first. Another alternative is to have two participants stand to one side and close their eyes while the tangle is being created. They then direct the process of untangling.