

Playing with Puzzles!

Emily Ferjencik, MS, CCC-SLP

Everyone knows what to do with a puzzle and that puzzles are great, educational toys for little ones. Figuring out where the pieces fit helps children look at size, shape and color. It tests their fine motor skills...and maybe their frustration, if the pieces don't fit well. Once a puzzle has been completed a few times, how do you keep it interesting and get beyond simply naming the pieces?



1. DESTRUCTION – Take it apart instead of putting it together

For the little ones, simply putting a puzzle together may be too hard. Try taking the pieces *out* instead of putting them *in*! You can still name the animals or foods or vehicles, but instead of saying “in” you say “out”. To give the activity more purpose, get any kind of container to put the pieces in. This way you’re making the puzzle less about getting it right and more about just filling up a basket (kids love fill and dump games). Since you aren’t giving them a complicated motor/cognitive task, this gives you more time to practice words like “pull”, “out”, “more”, “my turn” in addition to naming the pictures. When all the pieces are out, YOU can put them back in so that the game can go on and on and on...

2. MYSTERY BOXES – Fun storage containers

Sometimes the fun of a puzzle is the container in which the pieces are hiding! If you have an empty box of wipes or tissues, these can be fun to store pieces in and create a little more anticipation about which pieces your toddler will find! You might just need to widen the opening to be able to pull out larger puzzle pieces. Storing the pieces in boxes with lids, plastic bags that zip closed, or containers with slots allows for guessing and asking questions like “Oooo, What’s next?” and “Is it a *dog*? nooooo. It’s a *cat*. Yippee!” Pulling out the puzzle pieces (especially if you re-close it each time) can also be an opportunity for your toddler to ask you to “open” or for help.

3. SCAVENGER HUNTS – Make learning active!

If the puzzle board has the matching picture on it, then you can use it like a scavenger hunt and hide the pieces around the room! Now the puzzle has just become a movement game. Call out to each piece as you look for it: “banana, where are you?” When you find it be sure to GASP! “Aha! I found the...” (let your toddler try to fill in the word). This makes finishing the puzzle a bit more exciting because you’ve found ALL the pieces “hip hip hooray!”

4. PLAY WITH THE PIECES – No need to complete the puzzle at all!

Some of my favorite puzzles are more like boards with doors on them. Make sure you “knock knock” on the door and ask/sing “who’s in there?” before you open it. Purposefully put the dog in the garage and the car in the birdcage so that your toddler can tell you “nooooo”. Better yet, tell the dog to “move” or “get out” or “that’s not your house”. With these types of puzzles the pieces are magnetic so either play near your refrigerator or get out a cookie sheet so you can stick the pieces on. Now your toddler has a better opportunity to request them from you (because you put them up too high and out of their reach).



*For the FULL article and more play ideas, go to www.letsplaythespeechandlanguage.com.