

Helping Babies Entertain Themselves Screen-Free: An Introduction

Do you ever feel that you have to constantly entertain your baby? That kind of pressure can be exhausting. It may seem that screen time is the only alternative to always “being on” with your baby. But that’s not the case. As long as they are safe, and their needs are met, it’s perfectly fine and important for babies’ development to provide them with opportunities to relax and play independently. It’s how they learn to take an interest in the world, develop imagination, and enjoy their own company. Babies certainly thrive on interaction, but—like you – they also need down time. Here are some screen-free ideas that encourage independent play.

- Babies are curious from the moment they are born. Infants, especially those too young to hold items, are often content to spend a short time watching you or looking around. If you are comfortable using a bouncy seat or car seat, place it on the floor so your baby can see you as you fold laundry or do other things around the house.
- Give infants the time and space to explore safe household objects. For babies who are not yet sitting up, you can place one or two objects near them so they can look at, reach, and hold them. Once a baby is able to sit up without support, you can create baskets filled with the objects. It can be fun and relaxing sometimes just to sit back and marvel at how your baby plays. Here are some items that babies tend to enjoy*:
 - Small pots and pans (these also work as musical instruments!)
 - Wooden spoons
 - Cardboard boxes
 - Paper towel rolls
 - Measuring spoons or cups
 - Blunt cookie cutters
 - Funnels
 - Coasters
 - Empty ice cube trays
 - Baby-safe mirrors
 - Plastic tubs with lids (clean yogurt or margarine containers)

Safety First!

Avoid objects that can be swallowed, have sharp edges, or might be harmful if touched or mouthed.

Even as babies play independently, it’s important to be close by, aware, and available.

Truthfully, we waste our energy ‘occupying’ a baby’s time. And keeping a baby busy undermines her natural desire to be an initiator of her own activities and absorb the world on her terms. Babies are self-learners and what they truly need (and pays enormous developmental benefits) is the time, freedom and trust to just “be.”

- Janet Lansbury, www.janetlansbury.com

Nurturing independent play is important for your baby—and for you. Here are a few resources if you’re interested in learning more:

- Visit Janet Lansbury’s website for the following blog entries:
 - A Creative Alternative to Baby TV Time at www.janetlansbury.com/2010/07/a-creative-alternative-to-baby-tv-time/
 - Infant Play – Great Minds at Work at www.janetlansbury.com/2010/02/infant-play-great-minds-at-work-captured-on-video/
- Access TRUCE Action Guides that help parents deal with screens and promote play in supportive and user-friendly ways at www.truceteachers.org

*All material suggestions adapted from:

Infant – Toddler Play, Toys, and Media ACTION GUIDE, Teachers Resisting Unhealthy Children’s Entertainment, www.truceteachers.org/docs/infant-toddler-guide-color.pdf

101 Items to put in treasure baskets for babies, www.examiner.com/article/101-items-to-put-treasure-baskets-for-babies