



Enjoy these activity ideas for your little ones! They are excerpted from "The Growing Homeschool" by Cynthia Carrier.

- How do you homeschool older children *and* adequately nurture your little ones?
- Is it possible to keep a clean house, raise infants and toddlers, homeschool—and more?
- Can you successfully “do it all” *and* enjoy doing it?

As a homeschooling mom, your day is *full*. Juggling home management, family, ministry, often work-at-home, *and* your children’s education is a challenge. When you add infants and toddlers into the mix, things can get downright hectic. ***The Growing Homeschool*** can help you not only survive, but *thrive*!

You will discover the difference between *balance* and *integration*, and how to leverage both for maximum effectiveness. Learn from an experienced, but in-the-trenches homeschool mom of six how to prioritize, develop a workable routine, address the needs of different ages and stages of children, homeschool with greater ease, keep the little ones productively occupied during school time, and—most importantly—continually focus on the things that are of greatest value to God.

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***Following is an excerpt from “Getting Practical: Activities for Toddlers and Preschoolers,” in The Growing Homeschool by Cynthia Carrier.***

## ***Toddlers***

Toddlers are tricky because they are at the in-between age where you can give them some independence, but they can't independently do a lot of the things that they would like (or that you would like them to!). The trouble is, they often try—and usually when you are right in the middle of something else! I save many, if not most, of the toys and activities suggested here just for “School Time,” so that my little ones have something fresh and fun to occupy them for a little longer than the usual “everyday” toys. I give them one thing at a time and encourage them to stick with that one thing for at least 20 minutes, in a selected location. Here are some things I have found useful (and of course these activities are just fine for preschoolers as well):

**Lacing Cards.** Buy some at your local Wal-Mart or make some by cutting shapes out of colored paper or card stock, punching some holes with a hole punch, and tying on a long piece of yarn. You might want to wrap a piece of Scotch tape around the end to make it easier to put through the holes. You can laminate these for added durability or just make some on-the-fly to go along with what everyone else is doing. For example, if the older children are talking about the fall equinox, make your toddler a “fall leaf” lacing shape out of orange construction paper.

**Coloring Books.** Although it is my preference to encourage the children in creative artwork of their own, toddlers love coloring books! Having a picture in front of them keeps them focused much more than just giving them a piece of paper and a crayon and asking them to draw a picture. I spend the extra money on the “Twistable” crayons for these little guys—they are less likely to eat them! Twistables are reasonably priced at Wal-Mart and I have even seen them in some of the dollar stores. Unfortunately, toddlers also love markers (because everyone else uses them!) so you might want to make sure you have a good washable set or just give them yellow, which does not stain so badly on the face or tabletop.

We got a Crayola *Color Wonder* book and marker set as a gift once, and I appreciated that even the toddlers could use it—with no mess anywhere else! Normally, though, things like this are not in our budget.

**Magna Doodle/Etch-a-Sketch.** This is an ideal toy for toddlers: creative, no mess, and easy clean up! It is well worth the investment to get a *big one*.

**Wooden Puzzles.** You can get these cheaply at Wal-Mart or even your local dollar store.

**Refrigerator Magnets.** I got some of the really big letter magnets and try to collect cute refrigerator magnets so my littlest ones can make pictures or say their letters during school time. These can be used on the fridge or on a cookie sheet somewhere else. Again, these usually only come out for school time, which makes them special.

**Bubbles.** Indoors or out, toddlers love a “bubble break.” Even though I occasionally take out the bubbles just for my toddlers (particularly during those long, indoor days of winter), usually everyone joins in on the fun! Of course, do not let your toddler use these on his own.

**A Kitchen Cabinet.** Toddlers are notorious for wanting to do what the “big people” are doing. For this reason, all of my kitchen cabinets are off-limits to the little ones, except for two. There are real things in these cabinets but things that I do not use often or that can’t be harmed by some toddler play. Reminding a little one who is underfoot that she can go and open *her* cabinet to do some cooking or baking (for pretend, of course!) is very helpful, whether during meal preparations or homeschool time. Some of the things I have in these cabinets include: shaped baking pans, cooling racks, plastic containers and covers, coffee carafe, plastic plates, and bread baskets.

**Doctor Kit.** Our daughter just recently got a doctor kit as a gift and she loves it! However, if you do not have one, remember that you can make one with items you have on hand. Toddlers and preschoolers love imaginative play, whether with each other or with a baby doll. You can put doctor things in a small backpack or bag: a few band aids, a bulb syringe (what we call a “nose sucker” in our house!), a pair of plastic tweezers, an empty medicine bottle, cotton balls, and whatever else you can think of. We even have a broken ear thermometer that the children have started using as a doctor prop.

**Restaurant.** Put out some plastic dishware, utensils and napkins so your little ones can play restaurant. Sometimes, to add to the play and to throw a lesson in there, I will take out a piece of paper and draw the outline of the plate, utensils, and napkin on a piece of paper. It can be used as a placemat, and it reminds the children of how a table should be properly set. Include some baby dolls or stuffed animals (as guests), a few large cooking/serving utensils from the kitchen and some boxes and cans of food (to remain unopened, of course!) and you will provide for quite some time of imaginative play.

**Store or Garage Sale.** I have some play money that I got at a dollar store, and the toddlers love to use the paper bills (no coins, though). I let them have some money and invite them to set up a garage sale by putting some small household items or toys on a blanket. Other times, it is a store and we stock it with cans and unopened boxes from the pantry. The baby’s pop-up toy becomes a cash register and a few grocery sacks make for some added fun.

**Dress up.** Yes, you can spend your money on themed outfits and fancy dress up clothes, but you don't have to! I find that toddlers just love to put on everyone else's shoes and clothes and walk around the house showing off. It is a good idea to have a box of things that your toddler can rummage through as a school time activity. Some items you may include: belts, long necklaces, old shoes (big ones!), sweaters, scarves, winter hats, baseball caps—anything that toddlers can easily put on and take off that will make them feel like one of the grown-ups.

**Blocks.** We were fortunate enough to get a *huge* set of blocks as a Christmas gift one year. It included large letter blocks, colored blocks of various shapes and sizes, and the standard wooden blocks. I put them all in a big covered tote and we leave them out-of-the-way most days, but I pull them out and get the little ones going with them as a fun school time play activity. Mega Blocks or chunky Legos are also good for little hands.

**Housekeeping Helper.** During school time I will often ask my toddler to help me with some housekeeping. Usually it is just a distraction for them, but of course they like to feel like they are big helpers. I will have them use the broom and dustpan to sweep an area of the floor, or carry around a spray bottle of water and a sponge to “clean” tables or other surfaces.

**“Squishy Bags.”** I used these with my toddlers when I worked in a day care. They are lots of fun. I definitely recommend double-bagging these in good zip-top bags, and even putting a good seal over the top with some packing tape or duct tape.

### Squishy Bags

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1 c. cornstarch  
1/3 c. sugar  
4 c. water

Cook all ingredients in a large sauce pan over medium heat, stirring frequently. The mixture will start to turn lumpy, and then thicken into a sort of Vaseline-looking product. Remove from heat and allow to cool. Divide into 4-6 small zipper-top storage bags. Squirt in a few drops of food coloring in primary colors, aiming for different areas of the bags. Press out as much air as possible, and seal the bags. Fold a piece of duct tape over the top for added security. Let the children squeeze and press the colors around. The colors will blend beautifully, and the bags will last for quite a while.

**Fine Motor Activities.** Sometimes toddlers respond well to challenging activities, and other times they just get frustrated and cranky. Some things to try:

- Cut the top off of an empty, clean milk gallon or a cereal box. Put some clothes pins (the spring kind) inside the container and show your toddler how to clip them onto the edge of the container. When they are done, they can play “clothes-pin basketball” to clean up.
- Use tweezers or kitchen tongs to pick up small objects (even if it is just pieces of paper) and put them in a larger container.
- Scissors: even though toddlers do not usually use scissors well independently and can become frustrated with them, you might give them a blunt pair of scissors to use to cut play dough.

**Couch Cushions.** Children of all ages love to build and imagine. Give them some couch cushions, blankets, pillows, and/or chairs and let them go crazy!

**Flannel Board.** As a preschool teacher, I discovered that young children *love* the flannel board. You can buy a nice one commercially at a teacher’s supply store but you can also easily make one. I purchased a large cut of felt and a mid-sized cork board and used spray adhesive to put the felt onto the board. Alternatively, you can make a lap-sized version with a piece of cardboard or a cereal box and a sheet of sticky-back felt (available at Wal-Mart or craft stores for less than \$1 a sheet). The idea is to make felt-backed pieces that stick to the board; you can illustrate a song or story or make letters, numbers, and so on, for teaching.

It is an investment of time to create your own flannel board pieces, but cheaper than buying the sets that are commercially available these days. I have tried to make the process both easy and economical. I typically print out colored clip art images, cut them out and back them with sticky-back felt. I also put contact paper over the top for added durability. Now that there are so many wonderful types of stickers, I have also been known to use some regular felt and just stick stickers to it, cut out the shapes, and—presto!—instant flannel board pieces.

I have made pictures to tell Bible stories, sing songs, and re-tell some of the children’s favorite stories. Some fun songs to sing with flannel board are “Old MacDonald had a Farm,” “Five Little Monkeys,” and “One, Two, Buckle my Shoe.”