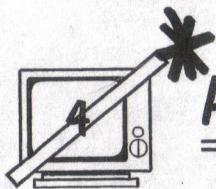


365 TV-FREE ACTIVITIES



YOU CAN
DO WITH
YOUR
CHILD

Steve &
Ruth
Bennett



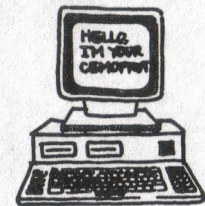
Alphamixup

Can you write with a cemoprut? Do you know how to ride a bccceily? Did you ever eat in a aeenrrsttu?

These mixed-up words aren't nonsense—they're Alphamixups. To make one, you take an ordinary word and put the letters it contains in alphabetical order. In this way, apple becomes aelpp, doggie becomes deggio, and so on.

If your children have some spelling ability, they'll probably get a kick out of constructing Alphamixups. But the real fun is in the game you play *after* you've made them up. Two players take as much time as they need to come up with ten good mixups; then they exchange lists and, under a predetermined time limit, try to guess the words. (You can gauge the time limit to your children's abilities, and offer written or verbal hints if appropriate.)

Now then: you knew that cemoprut was computer, bccceily was bicycle, and aeenrrsttu was restaurant, didn't you?



Required:

- Pencils
- Paper

Ambidexterity (Or, Two Hands Are Better Than One)



When we say someone is "ambidextrous," we're using two old Latin words that suggest that the person has "two right hands." To be fair, they really should come up with another word; lefties would probably rather think of themselves as having two *left* hands.

In this activity, have your child draw or write with the hand that he or she does not favor. This is a fascinating exercise, one that clearly shows how much "automatic pilot" work the brain does for us most of the time. By using the non-favored hand, your child actually has to think of each step as he or she draws or writes—and after a few minutes, this can be very tiring.

Feeling brave? Take the activity on yourself, and show your child what your non-favored artistry looks like—or demonstrate how to eat Cheerios with a spoon in your non-favored hand!

Required:

- Pen or pencil
- Paper





Balancing Act

Can your child balance a ruler vertically in the palm of his or her hand?

It's fun to try; demonstrate for your child how you can catch up with the ruler's center of gravity by carefully shifting hand position. The object is to keep your adjustments smooth and minimal—too much reaction to a shift, and you'll find yourself running around the room to catch up with the ruler.

Which, come to think of it, isn't that bad an idea. When it's your child's turn, clear away a safe space and let him or her move as the spirit dictates. After the ruler test, you can try more challenging objects—but be sure to monitor all balancing activities closely.

This activity is a great exercise in hand-eye coordination. Perhaps you'll be laying the groundwork for a career in juggling.

(See also: Vials and Glasses, #344; Which Row Has More, #358.)



Required:

- Ruler



Balloon Volleyball

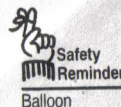
A rigorous game of volleyball is probably the last thing you want in your living room . . . unless the "ball" happens to be a balloon.

You can easily turn any room into a safe volleyball court. Clear away a space, then tie a string between the backs of two chairs. You now have a playing field and a net. Blow up a balloon. You're ready for action. For more formal play, decorate the net with streamers, lengths of yarn, etc. While you're at it, spill up the balloon with markers. Every good volleyball can use a pair of eyes, a nose, and a mouth.

Encourage your kids to develop their own rules; after all, this is no high-pressure tournament. Be inventive. A group of kids might get a special charge out of trying to keep a flotilla of balloons afloat!

This game, which should always be supervised by an adult, is limited only by your imagination—and the size of your living room.

(This game is intended for older children only. Younger children should not play with balloons because of the possibility of suffocation.)



Required:

- Six to ten feet of string
- Two chairs
- Large balloon

Optional:

- Decorating materials





Required:

- Quarters

Coin Toss

The common quarter can provide a great time for kids with supple thumbs.

Kids can flip it and try to set the world's record for a high toss. There are two technicalities that must be observed for the record to count, however. The coin must spin in the air, and it must be caught in the palm of the hand before striking anything else.

As a game for two, this can be a lot of fun, and may even necessitate a move out onto the porch, where ceilings won't get in the way. You and your kids can also flip quarters to one another, or take turns spinning a quarter and seeing how long it stays in rotation. If it looks like a winner, check it against the Family Book of Records (#93).

That beat-up old quarter may not look like anything special, but given the chance . . . your kids will flip for it.

(Keep coins away from small children.)



* Color Blots



Required:

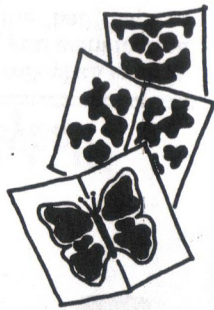
- Paper
- Tempera paint
- Pen, pencil, or crayon

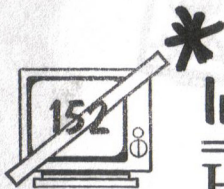
Ink or "Rorschach" blots have long been thought to reveal secrets about the inner recesses of the mind. Whether you believe in this idea or not, ink (or in this case, color) blots can be a blast for you and your kids to make.

Fold a piece of paper in half, then open it up. Place various pools of tempera paint on one side of the crease. Now fold the paper in half again, so the paint smears. (It will take a little practice to gauge how much paint is appropriate for the size sheet you're using.) When you unfold the paper, you'll find all sorts of interesting patterns and colors.

What does your child see in those patterns? If it's a face, draw the outline (after the paint dries, of course). If it's animal tracks, do the same. If it's a butterfly, draw an outline of the wings and body. Add antennae if you feel the urge! Of course, you may not want to draw anything at all—the color blots may speak for themselves.

Red panthers? Purple cookies? Orange feet? Blue suns? Anything is possible once you let your imagination go to work.





Initial Game

Here's a game that requires only a few sheets of paper and some pencils. Draw a vertical line down the left-hand side of one of the sheets; on the left-hand side of that line, write the alphabet. When you're done, think of a letter at random. On the right-hand side of the line, write that letter across from the letter A at the top of the page—then continue alphabetically until you pass Z, start again at A, and exhaust all 26 letters. Duplicate the sheets for as many people as are playing. You should then be left with two or more identical sheets with columns along the left-hand side that look something like this.

AQ	EU	IY
BR	FV	JZ
CS	GW	KA (etc.)
DT	HX	

The challenge is to come up with as many celebrities, historical figures, or friends *known to all players* as possible—with initials that match your list. For instance, GW could translate to George Washington; DT might be your family friend David Tucker.

Have the person who made the list call out the initials. Everyone can work together to think of people to match each pair. Finally, count how many you come up with at the end and go back and fill in the impossible pairs with silly entries like "Henry Xissinging."



Required:

- Paper
- Pencils

Instant Orchestra

The following easy-to-play musical instruments are tried-and-true winners guaranteed to get toes tapping and heads bobbing. Your kids may not always be in tune, but isn't that a matter of opinion?

Have your child gather and assemble:

The basic comb-and-tissue-paper organic synthesizer. Wrap a comb with two or three layers of tissue paper and switch on. Have your child hum with gently parted lips and hold the synthesizer to his or her mouth. No electricity required.

The empty oatmeal container drum. These days the cardboard cylinders come with plastic lids; purists prefer the standard cardboard-lid model. A wooden spoon is the drumstick of choice.

The pop-bottle wind ensemble. One or more plastic pop bottles will yield superior tone; all the musician has to do is blow gently across the top of the spout. Add water to vary the tone.

On the count of three . . .



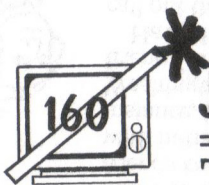
Required:

- Comb
- Tissue paper
- Oatmeal container
- Wooden spoon
- Pop bottle

Optional:

- Water





Judy's Clay



Required:

- Flour
- Salt
- Water
- Poster or tempera paints

Optional:

- Cookie cutters
- Plastic containers



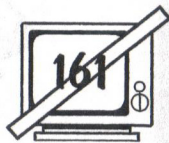
This recipe for homemade clay allows you to "fire" any objects your children make in your kitchen stove. (A grownup job.)

To make Judy's Clay, have your child mix four cups of flour, one cup of salt, and 1½ cups of water. When the material has a nice even texture, roll it out, then let your child get down to business with some shaping activities. Supply cookie cutters and plastic containers for making imprints (plastic strawberry baskets make neat patterns). If the kids are making ornaments or other treasures to be hung from a string, remind them to punch a small hole in the object.

Once your kids are done with their masterpieces, bake the clay at 200 degrees for about three hours. It's important to keep the temperature low and the baking time long; you're evaporating the water. (Again: managing the oven is not for kids.) Once the objects have cooled, use poster paint or tempera paint to decorate them.

Thanks go to Judith Burros for this recipe—her kids' homemade clay Christmas ornaments are just as good today as they were 20 years ago.

Juice Bar Delight



In the summertime, your kids may be used to slurping down lots of frozen "pop" bars. The only problem is, these treats have minimal value (most are essentially colored sugar water). Plus, they're expensive. Why not make a project out of making your own juice bars with your kids?

All you need are a few paper cups, some reclaimed, washed plastic spoons, and a bottle or two of your favorite fruit juices. Pour juice into the cup, set the spoon in (it will freeze at an angle, but that adds to the character), and place the cup in the freezer. Approximately two hours later, run the cup under warm water and you'll have a delicious homemade frozen treat.

Your kids will eventually find themselves experimenting with various juice combinations, some of which will be quite tasty. We can vouch for apple/cranberry juice bars; other, more adventurous flavors proved too intense to sample. You'd flinch, too, at a gourmet tomato juice/pickle drainings/peach nectar bar.

Required:

- Juices
- Paper cups
- Spoons
- Refrigerator





Monster Bubbles



Required:

- Wire coat hanger or pipe cleaners
- Pan
- Dishwashing soap
- Corn syrup

Kids have been entertaining themselves with soap bubbles for years. You can introduce a new twist on an old theme by making your own bubble mixture and wands.

Start off with the bubble mixture. In a small mixing bowl, combine six cups of water, two cups of *Joy* dishwashing liquid, and three-quarters of a cup of corn syrup (to give the bubbles added strength). Make the bubble mix four hours in advance of play time, then pour it into a shallow pan.

Wands can be made out of pipe cleaners or reshaped wire coat hangers. Leave part of the hanger as a handle and stick the ends into the cardboard tube from a pants hanger. (For safety's sake, do not let your child use the coat hanger wand—let him or her chase after your masterpieces. Also, be sure to curl the ends back to avoid exposed sharp edges.) A wand with a six-inch bubble area can make bubbles the size of a watermelon. Just dip the wand into the pan, and, in one smooth motion, wave your arm. Once you get the hang of it, you can create blimplike bubbles that will drift lazily across the sky before descending. Toddlers, especially, will delight in chasing after your creations. (Note: keep mix away from carpets, floors, and lawns.)



Morse Code

Once you know Morse code, you can send all manner of secret messages by clicking two spoons together, tapping on walls, or even using a flashlight. Learning the code itself is relatively simple—try copying it out for your child, then having him or her go over it with you letter by letter. Flash cards are great too! Need help? Just click three shorts, three longs, and three shorts.

A	•—	S	•••
B	•••—	T	—
C	•—••	U	••—
D	•—•	V	•••—
E	•	W	•—•—
F	••••	X	•—•—
G	—••	Y	•—•—
H	••••	Z	—•••
I	••	1	•••••
J	•—•—	2	•••••
K	•—•	3	•••—
L	••••	4	••••—
M	—•—	5	•••••
N	•—	6	•••••
O	—•—	7	•••••
P	••••	8	•••••
Q	•—•—	9	•••••
R	•—•	0	•••••



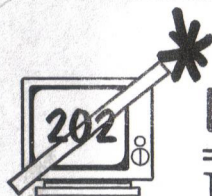
Required:

- Your time

Optional:

- Spoons
- Flashlight
- 3 x 5 cards





My Own Place Mat

Is your child tired of staring at the same old place mat each meal? If so, try this activity.

First, cut out a piece of stiff cardboard to the desired size of the placemat. If the cardboard is not a color you want, affix a sheet of white paper over it with double-stick tape or a few dabs of nontoxic glue. Now have the child decorate the paper with crayons or markers, or pictures cut out from magazines. Dried leaves (#172) or flowers (#110) can also make for neat decorations—just make sure they're completely dry.

When the artwork is completed, cover it with clear contact paper (a grownup job). The top and bottom edge of the contact paper should wrap around the cardboard an inch or so to make a good seal. Trim the corners as necessary before folding so that you can get a good seal on all the corners, too. For kids prone to spills, you might also want to cover the bottom for complete protection.

The only thing left to do now is sit down and have a meal.



Required:

- Stiff cardboard
- Double-stick tape or nontoxic glue
- Crayons or markers
- Clear contact paper
- Safety scissors
- Magazine pictures
- Clear contact paper



Mystery Clues

Here's something you can do while fixing a meal—or doing anything that prevents you from hunkering down on the kitchen or playroom floor at the moment. (This activity is also a lifesaver when you're just too beat to do anything but talk.)

First, pick a theme, such as animals. Then say: "I'm thinking of an animal that stands on two legs, has a short tail..." and so on. Encourage your child to ask questions ("Is it big or small?" "Does it have fur or smooth skin?" "Does it like water?") When you answer the questions, provide just the right lack of information to keep your child guessing and requesting more clues (but not enough to cause frustration). Reverse the questioning, and have your kid give you clues about an animal or object that he or she selects.

You can tailor the game to your child's interests and abilities. For older children, consider using historical events or issues being discussed in school. The possibilities are virtually limitless!



Required:

- Your time only





Parental ESP

This game will amaze your kids, and give you a few thrills, too. All it requires is two conspiring adults—a “Pointer” and a “Guesser.”

The Guesser leaves the room; a child picks an object. The Guesser then returns and the Pointer motions to various objects, one by one, asking the Guesser if that is indeed the object that the child has chosen.

Unbeknownst to the child, the Guesser and the Pointer have previously agreed that the object the child has chosen will always follow another agreed-upon object in the room—say, the sofa. Thus, the Guesser always knows that as the Pointer indicates objects in the room, one by one, the object *after* the sofa will be the one that the child has chosen. (In the event that your child selects the telltale object, the Pointer and Guesser should develop a code, like two blinks, and adjust accordingly.)

Do it right, and your kids will think you're psychic. Just be sure to share the secret at some point so your child and a cohort can astonish their friends.



Required:

- Your time only
- (Two adults)



Pen Pals

Most children enjoy receiving and sending mail. Here's how you can set up your own correspondence system.

First, tell a relative or the parents of one of your child's friends that you'd like to start a pen pal arrangement. The only rule: each party should respond within five days. If everyone is game, get things rolling by taking some dictation from your child (unless he or she can read and write). The letter might describe some special events that have recently taken place—a visit to the playground, a vacation, something in school, etc. The letter might contain more information about life in the household and community.

Let your child sign the letter, seal it into an envelope, and affix the stamp. Walk together to the mail box, and let your child mail the letter. When the response arrives the following week, you'll have another activity ready to go. Note: you can also set up “household pen pals” between siblings, or between parent and child. And you'll save on stamps.



Required:

- Paper
- Envelopes
- Postage stamps





Reverse Tic-Tac-Toe (Or, Three *Not* in a Row)

Here's a new twist on an old classic your kids are sure to enjoy.

In reverse tic-tac-toe, the object is *not* to get three in a row. It's a refreshing change, and one that requires a little new thinking for those of us who are used to the old game. (Kids adapt to it with remarkable ease, however.)

Other than the change in the point of the game, there is only one rule change: The person who goes first *must* take the center square. This puts that player at a slight disadvantage for the current game—it all evens out after a couple of matches. (You'll probably remember that the center square was the most coveted spot in regular tic-tac-toe.) Players alternate taking the first turn.

Try it yourself—it's a fascinating exercise in reverse thinking!



Required:

- Paper
- Pencils

* Reverse Writing

Sure, your older kid can write his or her name in the normal way. But what about in reverse?

Reverse writing doesn't affect some symmetrical letters (such as A, H, or M), but it does force you to take a new approach with nonsymmetrical ones (such as J, Z, or R). And, of course, the sequence of the letters must be backwards, too. Have your child try writing a sentence the normal way, then in reverse—without checking it in the mirror half-way through! The mirror is only for use in decoding completed messages (Besides, it's interesting to see which words or letters didn't quite make it into reverse-writing.)

Hold this book up to a mirror to decode the following reverse message; it will help get your child started.

CAN YOU READ THIS?



Required:

- Paper
- Pen or pencil





Rhyming Game

Want to encourage the budding poet in your child? Try this activity.

Select a common word, then ask your child to think of as many rhymes to that word as possible. (This is an excellent game for younger children developing language skills.) Following is a list of sample rhymes for the word "critter"; it will give you an idea of the potential play value.

bitter
fitter
fritter
glitter
jitter
knitter
quitter
skitter
twitter

(And some more advanced samples . . .)

babysitter
counterfeiter
rail-splitter
steamfitter
transmitter



Required:

- Your time only

Rice Maracas

Children love noise, especially when they're making it. Here's a fun activity that allows your child to make noise that will help teach the fundamentals of rhythm.

Take two paper cups of equal size and stand them side-by-side. Fill one of the cups approximately 1/4 to 1/2 full with uncooked rice. Place the empty cup on top of the full one so that the rims are aligned. When the cups are in place, secure them by wrapping tape around the rims two or three times. Now you and your child are ready to start a mambo band with your rice maracas.

You might want to start by showing your child how to get a variety of sounds and rhythms out of the maraca simply by slowing down or speeding up the shaking motion. After your child is comfortable with this, you could make a maraca for each hand and show how to make music by shaking the instruments at different speeds.

One, two, three—rhubma!



Required:

- Rice
- Paper cups
- Tape





Scavenger Hunt

Did you ever go on a scavenger hunt at a birthday party or at summer camp? If not, you missed out on one of the great rambunctious joys of youth. Here's how you can recapture the fun.

Make up a list of objects around the house, your backyard, your neighborhood—as far as you want to extend the hunt. Be very specific. The pre-reading set can enjoy the fun if you give them a picture list; draw simple pictures of the objects they are to find. Keep it easy—a blue sock, a red truck, a book about teddy bears, and so on. Give your child the list and a bag or basket specially decorated for the occasion, and be sure to tag along for the fun.

Have everyone work together on one list, time the hunt, and encourage the team to work even faster the next time. Alternatively, you might have your kids make a list of things for you to find. If you have trouble, just ask a toddler for help—these things are often clearer when you're closer to the ground.

Required:

- Paper
- Crayons or markers
- Household objects

Optional:

- Paper or cloth bag
- Basket



Scramble!

Here's yet another use for the giant dice (#117)—one that will test how limber you are.

Make sure that the faces of the one die all have a color marking (use a crayon or marker if you need to). Take eighteen $8\frac{1}{2}$ " x 11" sheets of paper and color them so you have three fully colored sheets to match each face of the die. Next, arrange the sheets randomly on the floor, letting the colors fall where they may. Tape each sheet to the floor securely (this is a good job for your child).

At this point, you're ready to play. Roll the dice and note the color facing up. You must now place some part of your body on one of the sheets corresponding to the color. Roll again and then select another matching square; place any body part there. Alternatively, you can have two players play at the same time, taking turns rolling. Inevitably, they will end up completely entangled. If that happens—or if you fall over laughing—it's someone else's turn.

Feeling really brave? Let your child dictate which body part of yours must be placed on a square of a given color!



Required:

- One color-coded giant die (#117)
- Pieces of paper
- Markers or crayons
- Tape





Silent Game

This one requires a little cooperation from your child—but it should be forthcoming if you're willing to give the game a try.

Here's the question: What is it like to have to go through the day without being able to communicate by speaking to the people around you? The only way to find out is to try silence for a given period—say, ten minutes for starters.

It's tougher than you might think. Writing notes would be cheating, of course—the idea is to try to make yourself understood *without* recourse to a common language. The experiment offers a fascinating look at what many disabled and non-English-speaking people face every day.

Again, this will work best if it is clear to your child that the game is a mutual attempt to learn something about the ways we communicate. Your best bet is to volunteer to go first . . . and see what happens!

(See also: Lip Reading, #178.)



Required:

- Your time only



Silhouettes

A photograph freezes a moment and a likeness, but the old-fashioned silhouette still does something most cameras can't—capture a life-size profile of your child.

Use masking tape to affix a large sheet of paper on a wall, then have your child sit sideways next to the paper. Take the shade off a household lamp, then position the lamp so that the light casts your child's shadow on the paper. The farther the light from the wall, the less distortion you'll get; move the lamp as far away as possible. The farther your child is from the wall, the larger the shadow will be. Adjust the lighting until the shadow size is accurate.

Trace the shadow with a pencil, then remove the paper and cut out the image. Write the date and the child's age on the back. Your child can decorate his or her shadow image . . . and then do a silhouette for each member of the family. When the images are all decorated, be sure to hang them in the family gallery.



Required:

- Lamp
- Sheet of paper
- Pencil
- Crayon





Wind Chimes

If you have a porch or a handy tree limb, you're in luck—music is just a few minutes away.

Take a paper towel tube and punch four holes at least two and a half inches apart through one side. On the opposite side, punch two holes. Now take four empty tin cans, with the bottoms still intact. (Make sure all edges are smooth!) Turn the cans upside down and punch a hole in the bottom of the can. (Your job.) With the assistance of your child, pass a fourteen-inch piece of string through the hole in the can, then tie a knot to prevent it from slipping out. Pass the other end of the string through the first of the four holes in the paper towel tube, feeding the string through the opening at the end of the tube. Again, tie a knot to keep the string from slipping out. Repeat this for the remaining three cans.

When the cans are attached, thread a piece of string (about a foot long) through the two holes on the top of the tube, then tie the ends together. Tie another length of string at the midpoint. You now have a working set of wind chimes. Let your child help you hang it from a tree limb or porch beam. Each time the contraption chimes, the two of you will be reminded of this unorthodox way of making your own wind music.



Required:

- Paper towel tube or dowel
- String
- Clean tin cans

* Wordgrams

Here's a great activity for children with some spelling and writing ability.

Give your child a piece of paper marked off into a ten-by-ten square grid, then have him or her create a "find-a-word puzzle" by placing words that run forwards, backwards, diagonally, or vertically. The words can intersect as long as the letters all work; no "turning corners" by mixing, for instance, horizontal and diagonal formats. Try having your child work within a certain theme (such as "things that have wheels"). To make the puzzle simpler, your child can list the hidden words at the bottom of the puzzle.

After coming up with an appropriate number of words, your child can fill in the blanks with random letters, then circulate the puzzle. Try your luck! The clues will give you some intriguing insights into the way your child's mind works.



Required:

- Paper
- Pencil

