

DIY playthings let kids stretch their imaginations

By VIRGINIA JUSTICE

Providing children with entertaining playthings doesn't have to be expensive or elaborate. Many hours of fun can come from something as simple as a cardboard box and some water-based markers. The box can become a rocket ship or whatever your child's imagination creates. When your child loses interest, just recycle it and start on another.

Perhaps the most popular do-it-yourself toy is playdough. It's easy to make and fun to play with. Some recipes don't require cooking, but I prefer the traditional version. For uncooked playdough, you will need 1 cup flour, ¼ cup salt, 1 tablespoon citric acid (you can use powdered lemonade in a pinch), 1 tablespoon cream of tartar, ½ cup warm water, and food coloring. In a large bowl, mix together the flour, salt, and cream of tartar, then make a well in the center of the mixture. In a cup, mix warm water with food coloring, then slowly pour water into flour mixture while stirring. Stir until combined, then knead by hand until the dough is consistent and does not stick to your skin. Repeat for each color desired. The citric acid acts as a preservative and it should last about a month.

For cooked playdough gather 1 cup flour, 2 teaspoons citric acid (you can use cream of tartar in a pinch) 1/3 cup salt, 1 cup water, 1 tablespoon vegetable oil and food coloring. In a saucepan, blend together dry ingredients. Over medium-low heat, add water and vegetable oil. Add the food coloring after the other ingredients are well



blended. Continue stirring until the mixture becomes thick and starts to clump on the spoon, then move dough onto a plate to cool. Store either type of playdough in airtight container or ziplock bag.

To spice things up, try mixing mica into the dough (a little goes a LONG way, so start small). You'll find mica online for crafting; start with an assortment pack before buying larger quantities. Kids can form playdough with kitchen items: forks, butter knives, spoons, garlic press (makes hair) cookie cutters, rolling pins, a potato masher or anything with a pattern.

The internet is a great place to look for other DIY playthings. Slime is a favorite with my daughter, Rachel (now 22), using mica to color, glitter for sparkle, and fragrance oils to scent her slime. Here's her recipe: start with 12 ounces Elmer's glue (use clear glue for transparent slime), ½ teaspoon borax (on the

laundry soap aisle), and 1 cup hot water. In a measuring cup, dissolve borax in hot water. Pour glue into a large mixing bowl, and use a spatula to mix in any extras, like confetti, glitter, coloring, etc. While stirring with the spatula, add the water/borax mixture and blend thoroughly.

Tips from Rachel: If you want stretchy slime add a tablespoon of hair conditioner or hand lotion; for foamy slime add shaving cream or foaming hand soap. Start with a tablespoon and add more if you want your product very foamy. She uses 1 teaspoon of baby oil to make a super shiny slime — any more will make the slime very sticky. These additives are put into the glue before adding the borax mixture.

These homemade "toys" can also provide teaching moments. "Oobleck" is a great science project. This product, made from equal parts water and cornstarch, is a non-Newtonian fluid. It appears to

be liquid, but you can pick it up and hold it in your hands. Drop it onto a hard surface and it doesn't splash, as water does. It can be colored and made to glow in the dark. Oobleck can be a bit messy, so I highly recommend it for the bathtub or put down plastic prior to creating this fun stuff.

Speaking of bath time, bath paints are easy to make. In large bowl, mix 2 cups of liquid soap (dish soap, baby shampoo, hand soap) with 1 cup cornstarch, stir or whisk until well blended, divide into containers, and add food coloring. Small containers with sealable lids are best for storing bath paints.

Make bath time even more fun by crushing vitamin B12, then dissolving the powder into a small amount of vinegar. You will need a black light or UV light bulb for your bathroom light fixture or lamp. Add the mix to the bath water for glow-in-the-dark fun! Vitamin B12 is a water-soluble vitamin so it's harmless and other vitamins, such as thiamine B1, niacin B3, and riboflavin B2, will also glow under black light.

You don't need a house full of toys to entertain children — you might be surprised at what you can make with what you already have on hand. Often homemade or everyday items are the best toys because they foster creativity in children. Tune in next month for outdoor DIY playthings!

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