



12–36 Months

Cognitive: Object Inquiry

WHEN INTRODUCED: Block 1

BEHAVIORS TO OBSERVE¹

- Uses one or more senses to explore an object’s characteristic(s) (12–24 months)
- Explores how an object(s) might be used in play
- Shows a sign(s) of spatial awareness²

EXAMPLES OF OBSERVATION OPPORTUNITIES

This *Guide* uses 12–24 months and 24–36 months age designations in relation to when specific types of emerging skills often can be observed. The age parameters are not firm; the timing of developmental pathways and milestones varies considerably across children.

Behaviors may be observed during a care routine, playtime, or guided activity. Pertinent ELM activities (Cognitive) are cited in parentheses. The activities pertain to the age group indicated in the example.

Uses one or more senses to explore an object’s characteristic(s) (12–24 months)³

- Engages in different types of interactions with an object(s)
 - manipulates dry and wet sand with hands, containers, scoops, or pails (Block 1, Options 1–3)
 - uses own body, toys, and bowls to explore differences in size (Block 4, Options 1–3)

Explores how an object(s) might be used in play

- 12–24 months: Tries one or more approaches to using an object(s)
 - arranges blocks in different ways, such as a pretend road and farm (Block 5, Options 1–3)
 - uses child-sized clothes to dress a doll (Block 9, Options 2 and 3)
- 24–36 months: Creates with blocks and other objects
 - builds a pretend road with blocks, possibly including boxes as tunnels and props at a road’s destinations (Block 1, Options 1–3)
 - builds pretend houses and boats with blocks (Block 5, Options 1–3)



Shows a sign(s) of spatial awareness

- 12–24 months: Moves an object from one place to another
 - carries a toy duck to a pretend faraway place (Block 6, Options 1 and 2)
 - carries jugs of water to a sand area (Block 6, Option 3)
- 24–36 months: Plays with two or more items in relation to each other or plays with one item in relation to a destination
 - carries a ball between two baskets placed on opposite sides of an activity area (Block 6, Option 1)
 - considers size of toy turtle in relation to size of a pretend house for the toy turtle (Block 11, Options 1 and 2)
 - considers size of self and size of a pretend animal in making a house for pretend animal (Block 11, Option 3)
 - explores ways to connect blocks of different sizes (Block 15, Options 1–3)

EXAMPLES OF FOLLOW-UP LEARNING SUPPORTS

Reintroduce

Uses one or more senses to explore an object's characteristic(s) (12–24 months)

- Offer Block 1, Option 1, 2, or 3 as a one-to-one experience. In Option 1, emphasize how the sand feels in the toddler's hands and ways to manipulate wet sand, such as patting it to make it flat. In Option 2, encourage the toddler to use his/her hands to fill each container and to pat the sand into the cup. Also, draw attention to the sand shape that is left after a container is turned over. In Option 3, follow the toddler's lead with the scoop and pail. Emphasize characteristics of the sand, pail, and/or scoop, depending on the toddler's interest.
- Promote attention to differences in the size of objects by offering Block 4, Option 1 or 2 as a one-to-one activity. Include opportunities for the toddler to show big and small with his/her body. In Option 2, provide opportunities for the toddler to hold and manipulate a smaller teddy bear and a larger teddy bear. Encourage the toddler to hold the two bears next to each other to look at size differences.
- Provide 3–4 balls of different sizes, firmness, and/or texture. Support the toddler in feeling differences with one or both hands. Use words to describe the differences, such as hard and soft, small and big, smooth and bumpy.
- During a snack or mealtime, draw attention to differences in the look (appearance), texture, and/or taste of two different food items.



Explores how an object(s) might be used in play

- Emphasize how we can pretend a toy or other item can be something else in our play.
 - 12–24 months: Offer the Block 5, Option 2 activity as a one-to-one experience, with a collaborative approach to building a road with blocks. Encourage the toddler to add more blocks to make the road longer or to build a separate road or maybe a road that comes off a road. Talk about how you and the toddler are “building a road.”
 - 24–36 months: Offer the Block 1, Option 2 activity as a one-to-one experience that invites the toddler to pretend a cardboard box is a tunnel through which a toy vehicle travels. Begin with one pretend tunnel (box) and add one or two more tunnels if the toddler shows interest.

Awareness of spatial relations

- Offer the following activities as one-to-one experiences, with an emphasis on the distance between objects or between a carried object and its destination.
 - 12–24 months: Invite the toddler to carry 2–3 toy ducks to a designated area, one at a time, and then return each toy duck to the starting point, again one at a time (Block 6, Option 1). Omit use of the “Five Little Ducks” song suggested in the activity description if it seems to distract the toddler from his/her task.
 - 24–36 months: Invite the toddler to pull a toy wagon to a pretend store to secure food for a toy animal or doll and then return to the location of the animal or doll with the food in the wagon (Block 6, Option 2).

Reinforce

Uses one or more senses to explore an object’s characteristic(s) (12–24 months)

- Encourage the toddler to line up nesting cups by size (Block 11, Option 1). Offer three cups initially and add more if the toddler readily lines up the cups. Emphasize the concepts of smaller and bigger. For more challenge, support the toddler in stacking the cups by size (Block 11, Option 2). More advanced attention to size differences can be offered with Block 24, Options 1 and 2 for children 24–36 months of age.
- Invite the toddler to rummage through a collection of child-size clothing and compare two or more pieces of clothing by size and other characteristics, such as whether it has buttons, zipper, or Velcro® (Block 9, Option 2). Talk about where and when different clothing items would be worn.
- Encourage the toddler to look at differences between toys when placing each toy in a muffin pan opening (Block 14, Option 1 or 2).



- Support the toddler in comparing the use of his/her hands and a small container for holding water that is in a water table (Block 18, Option 3). The comparison can highlight a characteristic of a free-flowing material, such as water, and the difference between our hands and a container for holding the water. Use a nonbreakable see-through cup and add a small amount of color to the water so the toddler can see changes in the amount of water in the cup as he/she pours water slowly from the cup into the water table.

Explores how an object might be used in play

- Enhance opportunities to pretend an object represents something else.
 - 12–24 months: Follow a toddler’s lead in using blocks, empty boxes, or other items in open-ended play (Block 21, Options 1 and 2). With the toddler’s permission, introduce props that might extend the play.
 - 24–36 months: Provide props, such as felt squares for the pretend beds of animal figures or people, in an activity that promotes use of blocks for building a house (Block 5, Option 1) or boat (Block 5, Option 2).
- Support play that uses familiar items in their intended ways.
 - 12–24 months: Describe a toddler’s uses of a washcloth or sponge in cleaning toys (Block 8, Option 3; Block 22, Option 1) and uses of cooking materials (Block 22, Option 2).
 - 24–36 months: Talk with a toddler about his/her uses of familiar materials, such as toy dishes or building tools, during a playtime.

Awareness of spatial relations

- Enhance experiences that support a toddler’s exploration of the distance between objects or between a carried object and its destination.
 - 12–24 months: Add a simple barrier in the path a toddler can use to push a shopping cart from one area of the room to another area of the room (Block 13, Option 1). Offer more items than available shopping cart space so the toddler has experience in deciding what to transport in the cart (Block 13, Option 2). Emphasize location words, such as up and down (Block 17, Options 1 and 2).
 - 24–36 months: Describe how a toddler navigates a physical barrier in an established path used for pushing a cart from one area to another area of the room. Consider increasing the challenge by encouraging the toddler to stop at two different stores as part of the trip (Block 6, Option 3). Draw attention to size differences in a toddler’s efforts to build simple houses that accommodate toy animals (Block 11, Options 1–3). Emphasize location words when a toddler walks under a ribbon waterfall (Block 13, Option 1), moves a toy over and under a cloth (Block 13, Option 2), and carries a toy fish around a pretend pond (Block 13, Option 3). Also, promote location words in sharing a book about two cats in different locations (Block 17, Options 1 and 2).



EXAMPLES OF PORTFOLIO ENTRIES

Layla is becoming creative in her pretend play. She moved two different sizes of blocks from the block area to the spot where she likes to play in our housekeeping area. She used a long block as a bed for a doll and a short block as a bench where the doll sits. She likes me to watch and talk about what she is doing. I will continue to support Layla's creative thinking about items in our room.

Jalon likes to play with the nesting cups in our room. I think the bright colors of the cups are appealing. This past week I joined Jalon twice in playing with the cups. He is now noticing differences in the sizes of the cups and how one cup can fit inside another cup. I will continue to support Jalon in exploring the nesting cups and, when he seems ready, I will help him stack some of the cups by size. Noticing the characteristics of objects is an important skill that supports cognitive growth.

Endnotes

- 1 You may wish to observe a toddler's progress in exploring cause-effect relations with an object, a skill emphasized in Birth–12 month activities. There is an opportunity to observe exploration of cause-effect relations in a guided activity for younger toddlers (12–24 months) focused on making water move (Block 8, Options 1 and 2).
- 2 Some Cognitive activities focused on problem-solving skills also support the development of spatial awareness and are included as examples in this *Guide*.
- 3 An older toddler's (24–36 months) exploration of an object's characteristic(s) may be observed as part of the toddler putting objects together and/or taking objects apart during playtime or guided activities (see the Cognitive: Problem-Solving version for toddlers of the *Guide for Observing and Individualizing*). An older toddler's attention to object characteristics also may be observed in a toddler's work with blocks, such as a decision to use big or little blocks in building a house for an animal he/she is pretending to be (Block 11, Option 3).