

The Connection Play Kit

10 Zero-Prep Games for Reading Readiness & Deeper Connection

A Resource from TransformNations

A Note for the Grown-Ups

Being a parent right now means holding two competing ideas in your mind at all times. The first is a deep desire to give your child a joyful, play-filled childhood. The second is a quiet, persistent pressure to make sure they are “ready”—for school, for reading, for... everything. If you’ve ever felt a pang of guilt wondering if you’re doing enough, or felt overwhelmed by the pressure to turn every moment into a lesson, please know: you are not alone. It’s a conflict almost every parent feels.

So, let’s take a deep breath and release that pressure.

This little kit is designed to be an antidote to that feeling. It’s not another thing to add to your to-do list. It’s a tool for relief. It’s a simple, joyful invitation to connect with your child for a few minutes, using nothing more than your voice and your presence.

Here’s the wonderful secret: those small moments of playful connection are the most powerful preparation you can give your child. Researchers at world-class institutions like the **Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University** have shown that our children’s brains are built through back-and-forth interactions—what they call “serve and return.” Every time you play a silly rhyming game or sing a song together, you are literally building the **brain architecture** that provides a strong foundation for all future learning, behavior, and well-being. These simple, oral games are one of the most powerful predictors of future reading success.

At the end of each game, you’ll find a “**Connection Corner.**” This is the heart of the kit. It’s a gentle prompt to use the theme of the game as a bridge to your child’s emotional world—to talk about big feelings, kindness, and curiosity. Because we’re not just raising future readers; we’re nurturing whole, happy humans.

So please, put the flashcards away. You have everything you need. Your job isn’t to be a teacher; it’s to be their safe, loving grown-up. Relax, play, and just enjoy your wonderful child.

The Games

1. Rhyme Time Rally

- **Quick Intro:** A perfect game for car rides, waiting in line, or during a diaper change. No materials needed, just your voices!
 - **The Skill:** Hearing that ‘cat’ and ‘hat’ share a sound helps your child's brain start to notice the patterns in words—a key step to becoming a reader.
 - **How to Play:**
 1. Start by saying, “Let’s play Rhyme Time! I’ll say a word, and you say a word that rhymes. My word is **bug**.”
 2. Your child might say “rug!” or “hug!” or even a silly nonsense word like “zug!” It all counts.
 3. Keep the rally going back and forth. “Great one! My turn. How about **pen**?”
 4. Continue for as long as it feels fun.
 - **Make it Easier/Harder:**
 - **Easier:** Accept any silly nonsense words with enthusiasm! This shows your child they understand the *sound* of rhyming, even if they don't have the vocabulary yet.
 - **Harder:** Try to stick to a theme. “Let’s think of all the rhyming words we can that are animals! I’ll start: **bear**.” (hare, etc.)
 - **The Connection Corner:** Rhyming words have a pattern that feels predictable and comforting. Our days have patterns, too! You could ask your child: “**What is your favorite, most comforting part of our daily routine? Is it our morning cuddle, the story we read before nap, or something else?**”
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2. Rhyme & Freeze

- **Quick Intro:** Get the wiggles out with this active twist on rhyming that turns listening into a full-body game.
- **The Skill:** Connecting sounds with movement helps your child’s brain create stronger, more memorable pathways for learning.
- **How to Play:**
 1. Put on some music and have a dance party!
 2. When you pause the music, everyone has to freeze.

3. While frozen, say a word like **“map.”**
 4. Your child has to say a word that rhymes (like “cap” or “tap”) to “un-freeze” and start the music again.
 5. Take turns being the one who says the first word.
- **Make it Easier/Harder:**
 - **Easier:** Give them a choice. “To un-freeze, you need a word that rhymes with **bee**. Is it **tree** or **house**?”
 - **Harder:** Challenge them to come up with two or three rhyming words before the music can start again.
 - **The Connection Corner:** Sometimes when we have a really big feeling, it can make our bodies feel stuck or “frozen.” This game is a great chance to talk about that. You might say: **“What does it feel like in your body when you feel frozen with frustration or shyness? What’s one thing that helps you ‘un-freeze’ and feel calm again?”**
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3. Syllable Safari

- **Quick Intro:** Let’s go on an adventure! We’re on a safari to find the hidden beats in every word we see.
- **The Skill:** Hearing the smaller parts or “beats” in a word (syllables) helps your child’s brain understand that words are made up of building blocks.
- **How to Play:**
 1. Announce, “We’re going on a Syllable Safari!” Look around the room together.
 2. “I spot a... **banana!**” Say the word together, clapping for each syllable: “ba-na-na.” (3 claps!)
 3. Let your child, Kenji, spot the next thing. Maybe it’s a **“win-dow”** (2 claps) or a **“ta-ble”** (2 claps).
 4. You can clap, stomp, tap your knees, or pat your head for each beat.
- **Make it Easier/Harder:**
 - **Easier:** Start with the names of family members. Clapping out “Ma-ma” or “Da-da” or “A-ma-ra” is a perfect way to begin.
 - **Harder:** Try longer words you find in a book or see on a sign, like “hip-po-pot-a-mus” or “cal-en-dar.”
- **The Connection Corner:** Every word has its own rhythm, just like our days do. This is a lovely way to talk about routines and favorite moments. You could ask: **“Our day has a rhythm, like the beats in a word. What is your favorite ‘beat’ in our day together?”**

Is it story time, snack time, or our goodnight hug?"

4. Word Stomp Parade

- **Quick Intro:** Time for a parade! This marching game helps us feel the rhythm of our words.
 - **The Skill:** Understanding that spoken sentences are made of separate words is a huge first step toward learning to read them on a page.
 - **How to Play:**
 1. Say a short, simple sentence out loud, like "I love you."
 2. Then say, "Let's march it out!"
 3. March together across the room, taking one big, loud STOMP for each word: "(stomp) love (stomp) you (stomp)." That's three stomps!
 4. Try another one: "The dog is brown." How many stomps is that?
 - **Make it Easier/Harder:**
 - **Easier:** Use very short, two-word phrases: "Hi, Priya!" or "Big hug."
 - **Harder:** Let your child make up the sentences for the parade. They are often much longer and more complex than we expect!
 - **The Connection Corner:** In our parade, every single stomp was important to make the whole sentence. It's a great picture of teamwork! You could ask your child: "**Can you think of a time we worked together as a family team, where everyone's part was important? What did we do?**"
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5. Silly Sound Story

- **Quick Intro:** Let's tell a story together, but with a silly, tricky twist! Every word has to start with the same sound.
- **The Skill:** Noticing and playing with the first sound in words (a skill called alliteration) tunes your child's ears into the smallest, most important parts of language.
- **How to Play:**
 1. Pick a sound to start with, like the /s/ sound.
 2. You start the story: "Once, a silly snake..."
 3. Invite your child to add the next part, using another /s/ word. They might add,

“...sat on a sandwich!”

4. Keep going back and forth, making the story as silly as you can. “The silly snake sat on a sandwich and sang a song!”

- **Make it Easier/Harder:**

- **Easier:** Instead of a story, just take turns naming things that start with that sound. “Let’s think of /m/ words! **M**oon, **m**onkey, **m**ilk...”
- **Harder:** Try using a sound blend, like /st/ or /bl/. “The **bl**ue **bl**ob **bl**ew **bl**ack bubbles.”

- **The Connection Corner:** This game is all about being creative and letting our imaginations run wild. Celebrate that wonderful skill by asking: “**It’s so fun to be silly and creative! What was one of your most creative ideas today? It could be something you built, a game you invented, or even just a funny thought.**”
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6. I Spy First Sounds

- **Quick Intro:** A new way to play a classic road-trip game that secretly builds powerful pre-reading skills.

- **The Skill:** Being able to isolate the very first sound in a word is a critical skill for connecting sounds to letters later on.

- **How to Play:**

1. Start with the classic line: “I spy with my little eye, something that starts with the sound...”
2. Instead of saying the letter name, make the sound. For example, “...something that starts with the sound /ffff/.” (Not “the letter F”).
3. Your child looks around and guesses things that start with that sound, like “flower” or “fork” or “feet.”
4. Celebrate their great listening when they get it right!

- **Make it Easier/Harder:**

- **Easier:** Give them a clear choice. “I spy something that starts with /b/. Is it the **ball** or the **cup**?”
- **Harder:** Let your child be the “spy” and give you the beginning sound clue.

- **The Connection Corner:** In this game, we have to look and listen very closely to find the answer. We can do the same thing with people we care about. You could ask: “**We’re getting so good at noticing sounds. What are some clues we can look for to notice how a friend is feeling, even if they don’t say any words?**”

7. Secret Word Blend

- **Quick Intro:** Can you solve the mystery? I'll give you the sound clues, and you put them together to guess my secret word.
- **The Skill:** Blending individual sounds into a whole word (like /c/ /a/ /t/ → "cat") is the exact mental magic a child's brain uses when it learns to read.
- **How to Play:**
 1. Tell your child you have a secret word, and you're going to say it in a slow, stretched-out code.
 2. Say the individual sounds of a simple word, with a short pause between them. For example: "My secret word is... /sh/ ... /i/ ... /p/."
 3. See if they can blend the sounds together to guess the word: "ship!"
 4. Start with simple, three-sound words. You can even move your hand from left to right as you say the sounds to give a visual clue.
- **Make it Easier/Harder:**
 - **Easier:** Use words with only two sounds, like "up" (/u/ /p/) or "on" (/o/ /n/).
 - **Harder:** Move on to words with four sounds, especially ones with blends at the beginning, like "frog" (/f/ /r/ /o/ /g/).
- **The Connection Corner:** We just took small, separate sounds and blended them together to make a wonderful whole word. This is a great metaphor for gratitude. You could try saying: "**Let's think about our day. What are some small, happy moments we can blend together in our minds to make one big, happy memory of today?**"

8. Sound Detective

- **Quick Intro:** Put on your detective hat! Your mission is to listen for a target sound inside different words.
- **The Skill:** Identifying where a sound appears in a word (beginning, middle, or end) demonstrates a very flexible and advanced understanding of spoken language.
- **How to Play:**
 1. Say, "Detective Javier, your mission is to find the /p/ sound. Listen carefully. In the word **pot**, is the /p/ sound at the beginning, middle, or end?" (Beginning!)

2. Try another: “Okay, what about in the word **happy**?” (Middle!)
 3. And another: “How about in the word **jeep**?” (End!)
 4. Use hand motions to help: tap your left shoulder for the beginning, tummy for the middle, and right shoulder for the end.
- **Make it Easier/Harder:**
 - **Easier:** Just focus on one position. “Let’s just listen for words that have the /t/ sound at the very *end*.” (hat, boat, sit).
 - **Harder:** Use trickier sounds or longer words. Finding the middle sound is the most advanced challenge.
 - **The Connection Corner:** The best detectives are full of curiosity—they love asking questions! Nurture your child’s inner detective by asking: “**You are such a great sound detective! What is one thing you are really curious about in the world right now? What’s a big question you’d love to find the answer to?**”
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9. Karate Chop Sounds

- **Quick Intro:** Hi-ya! Let’s be word ninjas and use our karate chops to break words into their smallest sounds.
- **The Skill:** Breaking a whole word into its individual sounds (“sun” → /s/ /u/ /n/) is called segmentation, and it’s the foundation for being able to spell words later on.
- **How to Play:**
 1. Hold one hand out flat, like a board you’re going to chop.
 2. Say a word, like “**fish**.”
 3. Then, say the word again slowly, making a light “karate chop” motion onto your flat hand for each individual sound: **/f/ (chop) /i/ (chop) /sh/ (chop)**. Three sounds!
 4. Let your child try with a new word.
- **Make it Easier/Harder:**
 - **Easier:** Start with two-sound words like “go” (/g/ /o/) or “me” (/m/ /e/).
 - **Harder:** Try four-sound words with blends, like “fast” (/f/ /a/ /s/ /t/) or “stop” (/s/ /t/ /o/ /p/).
- **The Connection Corner:** Sometimes a big feeling can feel overwhelming, just like a long word. It can help to break it down into smaller, more manageable pieces. You could ask: “**If you were feeling a big feeling like ‘frustrated,’ what smaller feelings might be hiding inside it? Maybe a little bit of ‘sad’ and a little bit of ‘confused’?**”

10. Silly Sound Swap

- **Quick Intro:** This is a super-powered word-magic game for expert listeners! Let's see if we can change a whole word by swapping just one sound.
- **The Skill:** Mentally manipulating the sounds in words (like changing "cat" to "cut" to "cup") is one of the most advanced pre-reading skills and shows amazing brain flexibility.
- **How to Play:**
 1. Start with a simple word, like "**pig**."
 2. Say, "Okay, we have the word **pig**. Let's do some word magic. Change the /p/ sound to a /d/ sound. What's our new word?" (dig!)
 3. "Awesome! Now we have **dig**. Let's change the last sound, the /g/, to a /p/. What's our new word?" (dip!)
 4. Keep changing one sound at a time to see how many new words you can make.
- **Make it Easier/Harder:**
 - **Easier:** Only change the first sound in a word. (e.g., man → fan → pan → can).
 - **Harder:** Challenge your child to change the middle vowel sound, which is the trickiest of all. (e.g., cat → cot → cut).
- **The Connection Corner:** This game shows us how changing just one small thing can make a big difference. We have that power in our lives, too. You might ask: "**We just saw how changing one little sound can change a whole word. What is one small, kind thing we could do right now that might change a grumpy moment into a happy one?**"

More Than Just a Game

As you've played these games, you've done something truly profound. You haven't just been practicing skills; you've been strengthening the most important connection in your child's life—the one they have with you. These small, joyful moments are the richest soil in which a child's brain, heart, and spirit can grow.

By listening, laughing, and being present, you are giving your child the strongest possible foundation for everything that comes next. You are showing them that learning isn't a chore, but a delightful adventure you can have together. You are nurturing their curiosity, their confidence, and their sense of security in the world.

That is the real meaning of “readiness.”



If you enjoyed weaving connection into learning, you might love our book, *The Intentional Alphabet*. It continues this journey, exploring the alphabet through shared values like kindness, empathy, and wonder. It's another simple way to have big conversations with your little one and build a foundation of not just letters and sounds, but of character, too.

[Explore the Book](#)