

Puzzle Play

by Linda Mawhinney &
Mary Scott McTeague



Puzzles are excellent toys for learning vocabulary, developing fine motor skills, turn-taking, joint attention, task completion, and interacting with others. The best puzzles for toddlers are sturdy, simple wooden or plastic puzzles with knobs on the pieces and five to ten pieces. Practice lots of fun language activities with puzzles. Try these:

- Empty the puzzle pieces, and keep the pieces away from the child.
- Hold one piece at a time by your face and name it. Then give it to your child. Point to where it goes. You may need to use hand-over-hand to help. Words to use: *"Turn, turn, turn," "No, no fit," "Yes, in," "Where go?"*
- Hold up two pieces and ask your child to make a choice. *"Do you want the horse or the cat?"* Your child may reach for one, just look at one, or try to say one. Whatever the response, reinforce by handing him/her the piece and say the word.
- Use puzzle pieces to practice turn-taking. Empty the pieces into a bag. Take turns picking one and labeling the turns *"My turn"* and *"Your turn."* Use the sign for *"mine"* (pat your chest) every time you say, *"My turn."* Occasionally ask, *"Whose turn is it?"* If your child even attempts a verbalization, say *"Good job! You said 'Mine.'"* If your child remains silent, help him/her pat his/her chest while you say *"My turn"* and then hand over the puzzle piece.
- Use puzzles to practice yes/no questions. *"Does the piece go here?" "No!" "Does it go here?" "Yes!" "Do you want another piece?" "May I have one?"*
- If the puzzle pieces are people or animals, use the piece to practice naming and action words. As you give each piece to your child, make the piece *"walk-walk-walk"* to the puzzle. Try *run, hop, jump, ride, etc.*, or ask your child what animal it is.