

Activity 1

THAT'S MY NAME, DON'T WEAR IT OUT

Ready, Set

Here's what you'll need:

- containers or storage tubs that are wider than they are deep—preferably clear plastic with a lid
- dry fillers (pick one and vary): rubber bands, birdseed, coffee beans, craft puffs, feathers, dried beans or pasta, popcorn or popcorn kernels, buttons, rice, pebbles or sand. OR:
- wet fillers: shaving cream, whipped dessert topping, water beads (from the floral section at craft stores), gelatin, wet sand, “insta-snow,” or cooked noodles
- tools: magnifying glasses, spoons, funnels, tongs (various sizes); glass cups for measuring, manipulating, pouring and transferring; ice cube trays, small bowls, cups or cupcake liners for sorting.



Now, try to engage as many senses as possible—think of “coordinated music” (if you have a theme) or bells for sound, ribbons or shells for texture variation and even tiny mirrors or “jewels” for reflecting and refracting light. Don’t forget scents! Add essential oils (rose,

eucalyptus, vanilla or peppermint), dry spices (cloves, cinnamon or lavender buds), cupcake sprinkles and even baking mixes.

In this particular go, I also used household items that represented the sounds in my son's name.

Go! G-A-V-I-N

Gavin has always loved puzzles—since, as he puts it, he was really little...but don't snicker. Playing is serious business.

Inspired by a favorite puzzle that spelled "G-A-V-I-N," this series of sensory bins began with an idea to assemble individual tubs containing items that corresponded with the letters in his name. However, when that turned out to be too easy, it wasn't hard to amp up the challenge as led by the child.

The first tub contained objects representing the hard "g" (to avoid confusion, so no "giraffe" here). I gathered a toy goat, a gear, a guinea pig puzzle piece, plastic glasses, a ghost-shaped cookie cutter and so on, finally submerging them all into the tub of bird seed. Cue ambience (singing "They Might Be Giants" and "Go for G!" on my iPod) and every letter "g" I could find for good measure. Then, the little guy went for it.

Using the scoops and a "g-lass," he dug around through the bits, pulling each discovery out and raising it high as he called out its name. Yet even here, there was an additional "sneaky" flexible thinking skill in play. "Present?" he asked, holding up a little plastic package and bow. "Does 'present' have a 'g'?"



sound?" I asked back, not leading one way or the other with my tone. "No," he scowled, and thought. He certainly knew the synonym in question, but word retrieval was stumping him. So, before he got too frustrated, I supplied, "We could also call it a gi...?" "Gift!" he finished triumphantly. He knew that every item had to begin with the same sound, so the "control of error" was built right into the game (alternatively, the child might have to sort out items which didn't belong).

The same thing happened the next day in our "a" (short "a" only) variation. He pulled a piece out and questioned, "Puzzle?" But that wasn't an "a." He tried, "Continent?" Closer, I assured him. "Africa!" And that was it. Happy dance!

So adept was he at this game that I decided to make it a bit more challenging the next day. Instead of one beginning sound, the objects could represent any of the three remaining letter sounds in his name: "v," short "i," or "n." He would determine which starting sound he heard and sort it into the correct letter group.

To help give visual structure to the length of the task (too big is too daunting!), I set out three papers, each one with one letter written in large block print AND in cursive (thereby helping him to link the concepts).

They would act like the check boxes do in a to-do list. I also listed in dot counters and in a numeral the amount of items to be sorted there, followed by a card that showed the



outline of each correct object. He would have to dig for each treasure, decide which sound applied, find the correct letter category AND sit the object into the correct silhouette!

Now, we were involving sound discrimination, letter and quantity comprehension, sorting and—hardest of all—the visual-spatial and fine motor skills to match an object with its general shape. (Note: I gave explicit instructions that having any object perfectly in the lines was NOT important so he wouldn't obsess and get stuck.) And just to make it extra fun, of course I had to have him run and jump and get in some good wiggle work, too!



Then the game was on! Would the noodle be a “v,” “i,” or “n”? Once decided, would it fit in the round spot (reserved for the base of a nutcracker) or the swirly spot? There were four places and we'd filled in three, so how many were left to be found? Which letter had the most items? Which one had the least? You could take the questions anywhere...and when he was all done, we arrived at the crowning moment. Taking the “g” puzzle piece from the first bin and each of the additional letters, Gavin filled in his “name puzzle” from beginning to end, utterly satisfied that he had mastered the challenge—and had a whole lot of fun along the way.

This activity very soon expanded to include miniature objects in rhyme families, and the letters that would spell each word—a tiny frying pan and a “p,” “a,” and “n,” along with Spider M-A-N, a toy V-A-N, a B-A-G, a F-L-A-G, a tiny C-A-T, a Lego B-A-T and a doll's H-A-T, for example.

Fishing each item out with tongs, Gavin sorted the letters into a cupcake liner and the objects onto a tray. NEVER having attempted this before, we then divided up the word groups, with Mom constructing the ending sounds. Gavin would then pull the appropriate starting letters for each object and help me “build” each word in turn. He read every one. I’d mix the letters up, away from their objects, and he would do it again, completely independently. After all the words had been made, we scrambled the objects, and I drew three words out to the center. “Can you match the object to this word?” Out came the Lego bat to sit next to B-A-T, and so forth. By working to find and concretely construct language, he was reading and “writing” long before his motor skills would ever have allowed him to do the same.

And if this wasn’t a face of utter self-satisfaction and triumph, I just don’t know what would be.

