

COACH'S CORNER

Coach's Corner is a DIEEC blog dedicated to providing fresh ideas for all early childhood education professionals.



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Unboxing Potential: 8 Uses for Cardboard Boxes in the Early Childhood Classroom

The month of January can be tough in early childhood education. Many children are adjusting back into a routine after lots of fun over the holidays, and outdoor time may be limited due to weather conditions. It's a great time to pull out some new activities.

If you don't already know, cardboard boxes provide endless possibilities for play! Many people seem to have an abundance of cardboard boxes, especially after the holidays. Consider sending a note home to families asking them to send in any extra boxes they may have lying around. It's even better to have a variety of sizes on hand for different types of activities. Check out our list of activity ideas below!



Cardboard boxes offer a low-cost, high-impact way to spark creativity, providing endless possibilities for any learning program.
(Image credit: iStock)

Cardboard Box Activities

- **Blocks**– One of the simplest ideas is to gather lots of different-sized boxes and create large building blocks. These can be used to make larger structures and even forts! Take the creativity a step further and let children decorate them with paint, markers, crayons, stickers, etc. You can also wrap them in colorful paper or contact paper.
- **Lacing**– Educators can use a hole punch to make pictures or patterns in pieces of cardboard. Children can use yarn, ribbon, or string to practice lacing. Tip: Knot one end of the yarn/ribbon/string behind one of the holes so that it stays with the intended lacing card. **Safety note: keep yarn, ribbon, and string out of reach of infants and toddlers, and/or avoid using strands longer than 7 inches.**
- **Box city**– Using different-sized boxes, create buildings to use with block area accessories such as people, cars, animals, signs, etc. Encourage children to create buildings that they see in their communities or use their imagination to come up with their own ideas.
- **Drive-in movie**– If you are able to collect multiple large boxes, have each child make their own “car” out of a box. Allow them to decorate their car. Plan a day to have a “drive-in movie”. Each child can sit in their box car with a snack to listen to storytime or watch a movie! (Note: Ensure that your plan complies with OCCL regulations on screen time for children.)
- **Dramatic play**– Larger cardboard boxes are a great addition to the dramatic play area. Items that can be made out of cardboard boxes include a mailbox, a stove/oven, washer/dryer, and many other things. Use your imagination!



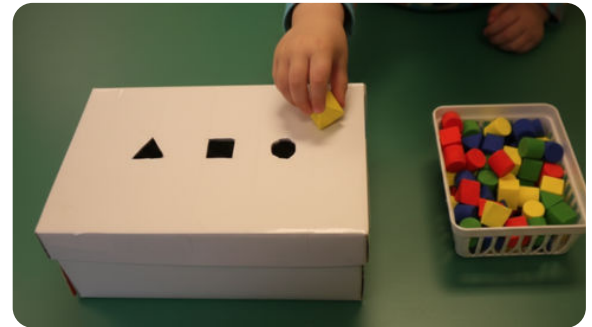
Boost fine motor skills by lacing yarn or ribbon through hole-punched cardboard patterns. (Image credit: Nano Banana)



Transform various sized boxes into a miniature community. Children can use toys like cars and figures to bring their custom-built neighborhood to life. (Image credit: @gettyimages)

Ideas for Infants and Toddlers

- **Shape-sorter**– This idea works best with a shoe box.
 - Preparation (adults only): Gather some different block shapes: triangle, square, rectangle, etc. Trace them on the lid of the box. Use a box cutter to cut out the shapes.
 - With the children: Let them experiment with putting the blocks into the correct holes. You can even paint the boxes or decorate them!
- **Texture boards**– For the little ones, take a piece of cardboard and glue different types of fabric and materials on it. Encourage the babies to feel each different texture. Talk with them and describe what each material feels like.
 - As always, **be sure to select safe, age-appropriate materials and provide adequate supervision.**
- **Tunnel**– Open both ends of a larger cardboard box to create a tunnel for infants/toddlers to crawl through; they can also push toy cars/trains or roll balls through. You can even combine two boxes to create a longer tunnel!
 - Be mindful that small children may become scared after entering the tunnel. Keep the tunnel short initially, ensure plenty of light is reaching the center, and stay positioned at the exit so they can always see your face and hear your encouraging voice.



Turn a shoebox into a learning tool by tracing and cutting out shapes for children to match with blocks. (Image credit: Nano Banana)



Support tactile exploration by gluing various fabrics and materials onto a flat cardboard base. This activity encourages sensory development as babies discover and touch different surfaces. (Image credit: Nano Banana)

Children will have just as much fun if you simply give them some plain boxes and let them get to work. You will be amazed at what their imaginations can do!

Cardboard boxes provide such a simple and cost-effective way to add some creativity and variety to your program. **We would love to see examples of how our educators are using cardboard boxes! Feel free to tag DIEEC on social media! Get creative and don't forget to think outside the box (pun intended)!**

Resources

- **Not a Box** by Antoinette Portis. This children's book is [available through the Delaware Libraries](#).
- **5 Ways to Play with a Cardboard Box (Zero to Three)**