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Little Autumn Explorers

11 Autumn Busy Tray Activities for Infants

Age range: 0–2 years

Little hands, big discoveries.



Activity 1 — Little Leaf Explorers



Description:

Babies explore large, soft autumn leaves by reaching, grasping, turning and feeling different fabrics.

What You Need:

A shallow tray; large fabric or felt leaves; a soft blanket; one oversized fabric ring.

How to Set It Up:

1. Place the blanket beside the tray.
2. Arrange the large leaves in a single layer.
3. Add the fabric ring for grasping and transferring.
4. Sit with the infant and name the colours and textures.

Learning Focus:

Reaching and grasping; visual tracking; two-handed exploration; sensory vocabulary; shared attention.

Adapt It:

Younger or less mobile infants: hold one leaf within easy reach and move it slowly. More mobile infants: place leaves around the tray to encourage reaching, turning and transferring.

Safety Reminder:

Adult supervision at arm's reach is required. Use only oversized, washable, one-piece materials with no loose threads, buttons or small parts. Check everything before each use.

Activity 2 — Autumn Colour Match

Description: Babies notice and compare autumn colours by exploring large fabric pieces and matching them to colour cards.



What You Need:

A shallow tray; three large fabric colour cards in pumpkin orange, mustard yellow and sage green; three matching oversized fabric shapes.

How to Set It Up:

1. Lay the three colour cards flat in the tray.
2. Place the matching fabric shapes beside the tray.
3. Offer one shape at a time.
4. Talk about colour words while the infant touches, lifts and places each piece.

Learning Focus:

Colour awareness; visual discrimination; reaching and placing; early matching; receptive language.

Adapt It:

Younger infants: offer one colour card and one fabric shape.
Older or more mobile infants: offer all three colours and invite them to find a match, without expecting a correct answer.

Safety Reminder:

Use large, soft, washable pieces that cannot fit into a child's mouth. Supervise closely, remove damaged fabric and avoid loose ribbons, beads or small cards.

Activity 3 — Pumpkin Patch Discovery

Description:

Babies investigate a small patch of oversized soft pumpkins, discovering shape, weight and texture through safe hands-on play.



What You Need:

A shallow tray; three large soft fabric pumpkins sewn closed; a soft green cloth; one large fabric basket.

How to Set It Up:

1. Line the tray with the green cloth.
2. Place the soft pumpkins in the tray.
3. Put the basket beside the tray.
4. Encourage the infant to touch, lift and move the pumpkins while you describe 'round', 'soft' and 'orange'.

Learning Focus:

Whole-hand grasp; arm strength; cause and effect; object permanence; descriptive language.

Adapt It:

Younger infants: offer one pumpkin close to the hands.
Older infants: place the pumpkins in and out of the large basket and encourage carrying with two hands.

Safety Reminder:

Use only oversized, securely stitched pumpkins with no removable stalks, beads or filling exposed. Stay within arm's reach and inspect seams before use.

Activity 4 – Woodland Posting Play



Description:

Babies post large autumn leaves through a wide opening, exploring release, disappearance and retrieval.

What You Need:

A sturdy posting box with one wide, smooth opening; large fabric leaves sewn securely; a soft tray mat.

How to Set It Up:

1. Check that the posting opening is wide and smooth.
2. Put the box on the mat.
3. Moded posting one large leaf slowly.
4. Help the infant retrieve the leaf and repeat the game.

Learning Focus:

Hand-eye coordination; releasing objects; problem solving; anticipation; turn-taking.

Adapt It:

Younger infants: hold the leaf near the opening and let them push it through with help.
Older infants: place the leaves beside the box and pause so they can choose when to post.

Safety Reminder:

The opening must be too wide to trap fingers and the leaves must be much larger than a choking hazard. Use no tubes, pegs, coins or small posting objects. Supervise throughout.

Activity 5 – Rustling Autumn Ribbons

Description:

Babies watch, reach for and listen to broad fabric ribbons that make a gentle rustling sound as they move.

What You Need:

A sturdy sensory board or large wooden ring; broad fabric ribbons securely stitched or knotted; a soft tray mat.

How to Set It Up:

1. Check every ribbon attachment and trim any loose threads.
2. Place the board flat on the mat or hold it securely.
3. Move one ribbon slowly so the infant can track it.
4. Let the infant touch and pull while you describe 'swish' and 'rustle'.

Learning Focus:

Visual tracking; reaching; tactile exploration; listening; early sound imitation.

Adapt It:

Younger infants: use one wide ribbon and slow movements. Older infants: offer two textures and pause for them to initiate the movement.



Safety Reminder:

Use only broad, short, securely attached fabric strips. Never leave ribbons loose, looped around the neck or within reach without an adult. Supervise at arm's reach and check for fraying.

Activity 6 – Squirrel's Soft Acorn Hunt

Description:

Babies find and move oversized soft acorns hidden among fabric leaves, inspired by a friendly squirrel's autumn gathering.

What You Need:

A shallow tray; a few oversized soft acorn shapes sewn closed; large fabric leaves; a soft squirrel puppet or picture.

How to Set It Up:

1. Place the fabric leaves loosely in the tray.
2. Hide one soft acorn partly beneath the leaves.
3. Show the squirrel puppet and invite the infant to look.
4. Celebrate each discovery and place the acorn in the tray.



Learning Focus:

Visual attention; reaching and pulling; object permanence; pretend play; shared language.

Adapt It:

Younger infants: leave the soft acorn fully visible.
Older infants: hide it under one or two large leaves and encourage searching without covering the face.

Safety Reminder:

Use sewn fabric acorns only, never real acorns, nuts or small balls. Make every item oversized and remove any with loose stitching or filling. Stay close and supervise all mouthing.

Activity 7 – Floating Autumn Leaves

Description:

Babies watch large leaves drift and float in a very shallow tray of water, building attention and sensory awareness.

What You Need:

A very shallow, stable water tray; two or three large washable foam or silicone leaves; a towel; a dry change of clothing.

How to Set It Up:

1. Place the tray on a stable, low surface.
2. Add only a very shallow layer of water.
3. Put in the large leaves one at a time.
4. Sit directly beside the infant and let them splash, touch and watch the leaves move.

Learning Focus:

Visual tracking; cause and effect; hand control; sensory regulation; shared attention.

Adapt It:

Younger infants: let them watch while you move one leaf slowly. Older infants: invite them to push a leaf across the water and notice what happens.



Safety Reminder:

Water play requires constant, close adult supervision at arm's reach. Never leave an infant alone, even for a moment. Use only large one-piece leaves, keep the tray shallow and dry the floor immediately.

Activity 8 – Cosy Autumn Textures

Description:

Babies explore a small collection of cosy autumn textures, comparing smooth, soft, bumpy and ribbed surfaces.

What You Need:

A shallow tray: large securely backed fabric swatches; smooth cotton, fleece, corduroy and knitted fabric; a soft mat.

How to Set It Up:

1. Secure each texture to a large backing card or fabric panel.
2. Arrange the panels in the tray.
3. Offer one texture at a time.
4. Use simple words such as 'smooth', 'soft' and 'bumpy' as the infant explores.

Learning Focus:

Tactile discrimination; sensory vocabulary; reaching and grasping; attention; communication.

Adapt It:

Younger infants: present one texture and support hand-over-hand exploration. Older infants: offer two textures and pause so they can choose and compare.



Safety Reminder:

All swatches must be large, firmly secured, washable and free from loose loops, buttons, sequins and fraying. Supervise closely and stop if the infant becomes uncomfortable.

Activity 9 – Woodland Friends

Description:

Babies meet friendly woodland animals through large soft puppets and simple face-to-face interaction.

What You Need:

A shallow tray; large washable woodland animal hand puppets or cloth animal faces; a soft scarf; a floor mat.

How to Set It Up:

1. Place the puppets in the tray where the infant can see them.
2. Introduce one animal with a gentle sound.
3. Bring it slowly into the infant's view.
4. Pause for eye contact, touch and vocal responses.

Learning Focus:

Social communication; eye contact; listening; imitation; emotional connection; early vocabulary.

Adapt It:

Younger infants: use one high-contrast animal and slow movements. Older infants: offer two animals and model simple sounds such as 'fox says hello' or 'owl goes hoot'.



Safety Reminder:

Use large, washable, securely sewn puppets with no plastic eyes, beads or detachable parts. Keep the scarf away from the face and neck. Supervise every interaction.

Activity 10 – Autumn Tap and Listen

Description:

Babies discover that gentle taps make sounds by exploring a sturdy drum and large, sealed sound-makers with an adult.

What You Need:

A low, sturdy hand drum; one large soft-tipped drum beater held by the adult; one large, sealed, washable sensory shaker that cannot be opened.

How to Set It Up:

1. Place the drum securely on the mat.
2. Sit beside the infant and e demonstrate one gentle tap.
3. Offer supported hand-over-hand tapping if appropriate.
4. Pause and listen together before repeating.

Learning Focus:

Cause and effect: listening and attention, rhythm; motor control, turn-taking.

Adapt It:

Younger infants: let them watch and feel a gentle vibration while the adult taps. Older infants: support them to tap once, pause and listen, then repeat.



An adult must remain beside the infant. Use only large, robust, sealed equipment with no detachable parts. The beater is adult-controlled and must never be left with the infant. Keep sounds gentle.

Activity 11 – Build an Autumn Nest

Description:

Babies help arrange large soft leaves and fabric pieces around a soft bird to create a cosy pretend nest.



What You Need:

A large soft felt nest base; oversized fabric leaves; broad fabric strips securely stitched to the nest base; one large soft bird toy sewn closed.

How to Set It Up:

1. Place the nest base in the tray.
2. Add a few large fabric leaves around the edge.
3. Put the soft bird in the middle.
4. Invite the infant to touch, move and place the leaves while you talk about 'in', 'out', 'soft' and 'cosy'.

Learning Focus:

Fine and gross motor coordination; spatial awareness; pretend play; language; nurturing interaction.

Adapt It:

Younger infants: offer the bird and one leaf for touching.
Older infants: encourage them to place leaves around the bird and remove them again.

Safety Reminder:

Use a soft nest with firmly stitched, oversized pieces only. Do not use real twigs, straw, feathers, moss, eggs or small decorations. Supervise closely and inspect all seams before use.