

3 great games for a Wading Pool

The idea: to get wet,
cool off, and have fun.

The bonus: hands-on
experiments with H₂O.

BY NATHANIEL READE

Looks pretty simple, doesn't it, that wading pool behind the house with the grass clippings fermenting in the bottom? Hose it down, add water and children, and you've got a nice, easy way to pass a few hours. But wait, there's more. While the kids are splashing, they're also conducting scientific research. And that engagement of curiosity causes these experiments to produce some startling results: a toddler who ordinarily won't let go of her father's leg now laughing and squealing with the older kids; boys and girls ages 1 to 7 happily at play together; a 4-year-old spontaneously discussing water physics with her mom.

We found the most fun (and engaging) water activities by filling our wading pool, tossing in some household items, offering up ideas, and inviting in the experts (some pictured here). These kids didn't hold back. They rejected many, revamped some, and approved a few. At the end of the day, we came away with three wading pool games that worked across a wide age range and inspired merry mayhem (not to mention that learning thing).

Look out! It's an octopus!

Use a screw to drill a hole near the top of a clean, de-labeled soda bottle, and another near the bottom. Fill the bottle halfway with water, replace the cap, and you're ready to perform magic. When you cover the top hole with a finger, nothing flows out of the bottom. Remove your finger, and out pours the water. At our testing, 5-year-old Lila played with this for half an hour, and later



What has the head of an octopus, wears a bathing suit, and is wet all over? It's wading pool adventurer Danielle, age 5.



announced, “I’m going to be a scientist when I grow up, because I like to figure things out.”

Now add more holes. Our kids loved watching air bubbles float upward when the bottle was submerged. Once it was filled with water, we pointed out how the holes, while all the same size, produce different-sized streams, and how the streams change as the water level decreases in this bottle we called “the leaky boat.” (Watching streams of water flying in all directions, like tentacles, Danielle, 5, yelled, “It’s an octopus!” A much better name.)

Ask the kids . . . how the water flow will change if you block different holes or add holes.

What’s going on? Water can’t escape from the bottle unless something else (here, air) can take its place. With multiple holes of the same size, greater pressure makes bigger streams, such as at the bottom of the bottle, where there’s more weight from water.

Raid the kitchen, the playroom, the recycling bin.


Take some plastic funnels to a hardware store and find the right size of clear plastic tubing to fit over the end (1-inch tubing costs about \$1.50 a foot). Cut the tubing into lengths of 1 to 3 feet, at least one piece per child. Some kids will use the tubes alone to blow bubbles. Older children can attach a funnel to one end of a tube and use it to fill bottles and buckets. Show them how pinching the end of a tube leads to discoveries about water pressure and flow.

Toss into your pool some plastic watering cans, clean yogurt containers, funnels, buckets, measuring cups, sponges, 2-inch paintbrushes, a Barbie in need of a bath. Then step back. Aaron, age 3, created a game he called “paint the baby,” which consisted of brushing water on 19-month-old Stella, who actually tolerated it.

EXTRA CREDIT

Octopus Relay

Each team gets an “octopus”—poke lots of holes in the side of a plastic soda bottle and cut the top off, covering any sharp edges with duct tape. You’ll also need buckets—same size for each team. Set up an obstacle course with chairs, toys, a sprinkler—anything handy. Each team fills its octopus in the pool, runs through the course, and dumps into its bucket whatever water hasn’t streamed out. The first team to fill its bucket wins. Our kids were so excited by this game, they started running before we placed the obstacles.



Filling a pail with water—so simple, yet two games in one: a quiet, solo exercise (here, for Kyle, 2½) and a competitive event (above right, Danielle, 5, and David, 7). Even mid-diaper change, Gracie, 2, doesn’t want to be left out.





Ava, 4, finds an iceberg magical: Now you see it, now you don't. For Kayla, 2½, the coolest thing about the wading pool is the wading.

Ask the kids . . . how many scoops of a measuring cup it takes to fill each container. Ask them to predict what will sink and what will float. Ask them why.

What's going on? Lessons in counting, measurement, and the conservation of volume—a pint is a pint, whether it goes into a tall, skinny container or a short, wide one.

Watch for icebergs and see them disappear.

A few days ahead, cut the tops off some cardboard milk cartons. Let your kids fill them halfway with water, then freeze them solid. Remove the chunks of ice from the containers and toss them in the pool. Icebergs! The kids in our pool were amazed that something so heavy actually floats. They also liked watching it slowly, slowly, slowly melt. Gracie, 2, marveled, "It's disappearing!" Six-year-old Will had bigger plans: "Let's play Antarctica!"

Ask the kids . . . what's different about the water now that it's frozen. (Aside from being colder and hard, it's grown in volume and become opaque.)

What's going on? Ice floats because when it freezes it expands and becomes less dense than the water it displaces. †



Senior associate editor Nathaniel Reade says you should have seen his sons, Henry, 6, and Charley, 2, playing octopus in the bathtub with their swim goggles on.

Wading Pool Tips

- A typical 5-foot wading pool can usually entertain three kids. If you've got a crowd, use two pools.
- No matter how hard you discourage it, little kids will want to drink the pool water and suck on sponges. Keeping drinking water on hand may offset some of that.
- Most important, remember that even in shallow pools, children need constant supervision.