

Manipulation: A Negatively Viewed Word Turned Positive

When we hear the word *manipulation*, it usually sounds negative. But when it comes to development, manipulation is actually a **beautiful** thing.

- Manipulation is exploration.
- Exploration leads to learning.
- Learning leads to growth.
- And that's what we want our children to do, GROW!

Think about a time you recently manipulated something. Here's mine... It's Christmas! I had to "manipulate" or move my furniture so that the Christmas tree could fit in my living room. Not so negative anymore, right? 😊

Manipulation Starts From Day One

It may not seem like it at first, but learning through *manipulation* begins the moment your baby is born. That very first exploration happens through touch. Skin-to-skin helps babies learn about warmth, comfort, and connection. EVERY day after that, your baby is learning by interacting with the world around them!

Sensory Manipulation in Infants

As babies continue to grow, *manipulation* shows up everyday. Infants explore by:



- Touching different **textures**
- Making sounds and discovering their voices
- Watching faces and tracking movement

We as parents provide our kids with soft toys, board books, and even **safe** household items to help them learn. You don't always need toys...Sometimes a wooden ladle or a crinkly package is just as exciting. These "manipulative" moments are building the foundation for their future.

Toy Manipulation in Early Toddlers

As some say, **now the fun really begins!** During early toddlerhood, *manipulation* becomes more purposeful. Toddlers start to understand cause and effect, and toys begin to act as learning tools.



- **Stacking blocks** teach balance and spatial awareness
- **Shape sorters** build problem-solving skills & perseverance
- **Puzzles** help develop patience and fine motor strength

These toys, and many more, can support academic and social-emotional skills kids need. ALL of this while having FUN!

Toy-to-Tool Manipulation in Toddlers

As your toddler continues to grow, *manipulation* gets more creative. They start combining toys and ideas, with a purpose, in new ways:

- Building with blocks,
- Using crayons, markers, and paint
- Pretend play with kitchen set, dolls, animals, or vehicles
- Playing with play dough, sand, or water

These hands-on activities not only encourage independence, but also help to develop early literacy and math skills . Play becomes their “work” and *manipulation* is their tool to get the job done!

Tool Manipulation in School-Aged Kids

How are you in school already? Didn't I just have you? Every moment your child spent exploring and *manipulating* things will show over time. *Manipulation* for school-aged children extends beyond toys and into tools. “*These are tools not toys*” – a phrase many children hear often when transitioning to school. But it's not a bad thing! They're just exploring and figuring out what these new tools can do. Once that understanding is there, children *manipulate* these tools to explain thinking. Here are just some of the common ones children will see and use:



- Math manipulatives (counters, unifix cubes, ten-frame)
- Reading tools (highlighter tape, elkonin boxes)
- Science tools and experiments (magnifying glass, robots)
- Technology integration (Chromebooks, Smartboards)

At school, kids use *manipulation* to help understand new learning and think abstractly. *Manipulation*, or moving objects help kids to make more sense of things.

Manipulation in Adults

Think about the question I asked before. What is something you recently manipulated? We, as adults, are manipulating things everyday!

- How we pose for a photo
- Cooking our meals
- Packing our suitcases
- Wrapping a present

We are lifelong manipulators. Exploration never truly ends.

So Why Manipulation?

When children are given the opportunity to manipulate, they gain more than academic skills. They develop:

- Problem-solving skills
- Persistance
- Creativity
- A growth mindset

Manipulation teaches children that learning is an active process. It allows them to explore, question, and persevere. So start early! Encourage *manipulation*. Because when children learn through *manipulation*, they aren't just playing—they're learning!

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