



Pen Green Centre
for children and their families

TREASURE BASKETS

NURTURING BABIES' DEVELOPMENT
THROUGH HOLISTIC PLAY



At Pen Green we believe that even the youngest children are capable, curious learners. One of the simplest yet most powerful ways we can support babies' development is through the use of treasure baskets.

WHAT IS A TREASURE BASKET?

A treasure basket is a shallow, sturdy basket filled with a wide variety of everyday natural and household objects. Unlike plastic toys, these items are chosen for their different textures, weights, shapes, sounds, and smells. Examples include:

- Wooden spoons
- Metal whisks
- Natural sponges
- Silk scarves
- Pine cones
- Brushes

**Pen Green Centre for Children
and their Families**

enquiries@pengreen.org
www.pengreen.org

The idea was first introduced at Pen Green in 1994 by Elinor Goldschmied, who had travelled widely, studying cultures and approaches to independent baby play. Her work highlighted the value of offering babies rich, sensory experiences through simple everyday objects.

The basket is placed on the floor where a baby, able to sit securely, can reach in and explore freely. The adult's role is not to direct play, but to be attentive and present, offering emotional security while the baby investigates at their own pace.



THE ROLE OF THE ADULT

It is important that a baby is never left alone with a treasure basket. The parent or carer sits nearby—close enough to respond, but without taking over. The trickiest part is resisting the urge to guide or correct the baby's play. Instead, adults support by:

- Offering verbal encouragement ("You found the spoon!")
- Using non-verbal cues (eye contact, smiling, mirroring gurgles and gestures)
- Providing quiet presence and reassurance
- This gentle support boosts confidence while protecting the baby's independence.

TREASURE BASKETS AND HOLISTIC PLAY

Holistic play recognises that learning is not divided into neat subject boxes – babies learn with their whole body, mind, and emotions. A treasure basket experience brings together many aspects of development at once:

Physical: grasping, lifting, mouthing, passing objects from hand to hand.

Cognitive: discovering cause and effect, comparing sizes, shapes, and weights.

Language: hearing descriptive words linked to their sensory experiences.

Emotional: building confidence through independent exploration while feeling secure in an adult's presence.

Social: sharing the basket alongside other babies, beginning to notice and imitate.

Treasure baskets also work directly through the five senses:

Sight – colour, form, reflection, shininess

Smell – wood, leather, herbs, fruit

Taste – safe natural items (babies often explore with their mouths)

Sound – crunching, ringing, rustling, banging

Touch – smooth, rough, heavy, light, warm, cold.

Exploring with bare hands and feet enhances these sensations further.

PRACTICAL TIPS

- Choose a basket made of natural materials, about 4–5 inches deep, with a flat base.
- Fill it to overflowing with at least 20 varied items, so babies can make genuine choices.
- Keep the basket clean and safe: check items regularly, remove broken or unsuitable ones, and refresh the selection to maintain curiosity.
- As older siblings may want to join in, provide them with their own collection of safe items to protect the baby's play.

GROWING WITH THE CHILD

Treasure baskets are just the beginning. As babies grow into toddlers, some items are rotated out and play naturally evolves into heuristic play – exploring collections of everyday objects in new ways such as filling, emptying, stacking, rolling, or transporting. This continues to nurture independence, problem-solving, and creativity.

BENEFITS FOR BABIES

Treasure basket play offers babies:

Sensory richness – stimulating sight, touch, sound, taste, and smell.

Deep concentration – uninterrupted time to focus on one object at a time.

Independence – the freedom to choose what interests them.

Brain development – creating neural pathways through repeated sensory experiences.

Emotional wellbeing – secure exploration in a calm, unhurried environment.

Treasure baskets are more than just collections of objects; they are a foundation for lifelong curiosity and learning. By trusting babies' ability to explore, and by providing a rich environment for discovery, we nurture the whole child – body, mind, and spirit.

