

Where To Begin with...

TOT SCHOOL

*"Tot School isn't really school at all,
it's just a focused time with your tot,
exploring together and having FUN!"*

Written by, Carisa from $1 + 1 + 1 = 1$
© www.1plus1plus1equals1.net 2013

Where Do I Begin with Tot School?

Thank you for subscribing to the 1+1+1=1 newsletter, I hope this eBook version of the most popular post on my blog {[Behind the Scenes ~ Where Do I Begin with Tot School](#) which I wrote in 2009} will help you with your journey of leading your tot at home!

Tot School isn't really school at all, don't let the name itself confuse you! It is simply a focused time during your day that you spend with your tot as you explore and play together. *Focused play time* is another simple way to put it!

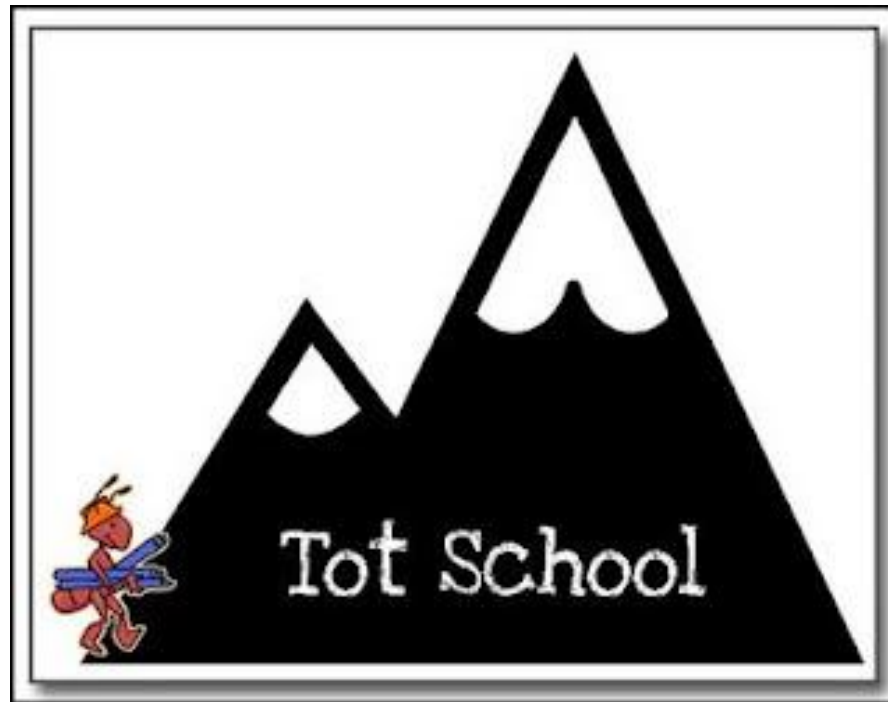
In this eBook, you will find many links to places online that will also help you as you make plans for your home learning. All links will be in [blue](#), just click!

This book uses "him" since the blog post was originally written when Krash was my tot. Obviously think of the word "him" as interchangeable to mean "her."

Tot School is just **purposeful play** with your tot,
it shouldn't be forced, **it should be fun!**

Where Do I Begin with Tot School?

I get this question a lot, the one from a mom trying to do the best for her tot, but **feeling a tad bit overwhelmed** when she stumbles upon my site and others geared towards educating tots at home. Thankful for the info, but still overwhelmed. This particular mom put it nicely...



"I just feel like a **tiny ant** with a **huge mountain** of information and ideas dumped on top of me!"

The mountain IS big, but that doesn't mean you need to climb to the top right now, hanging out at the bottom with **a few good ideas is just fine**...slowly climbing as you feel less overwhelmed.

I too feel overwhelmed sometimes and honestly, when the idea of Tot School first hit me, I overwhelmed myself, trying to put my thoughts all in order. Sure I had the early childhood education and knew the right and wrong ways to teach a young child, but I was still a mom with a tot - trying to do my best for him.

Krash was an active tot and rejected many of my fabulous early learning ideas. He taught me the true meaning of what I believe with all of my heart - **follow the lead of the child!**



A few good ideas is just fine...
slowly climbing as you feel less overwhelmed.

First things first, if you are new to my site or to Tot School, please know that I am not perfect. My long time readers are aware of that fact and have often comforted me through my "I'm such a bad Mommy" times. I am not a bad Mommy, and I am not a perfect Mommy, I am Mommy - just like you. My blog may make it appear that things like Tot School run perfectly in our house, but let me assure you - we have most, if not all of the same stumbling blocks that you do.



Go here and read [Minute by Minute Tot School](#) if you have never seen it. It gives a minute by minute account of a Tot School hour in our house. Krash was 27 months old when I wrote it and as you will see he was screaming in protest within the first 5 minutes!

After you see that, then [download a section of my Tot School eBook](#) to see what I personally believe about educating young children. I am certainly not claiming my way is the right way but it is good for you to know what I believe. These beliefs are what guide my thinking for every Tot School decision I make.

I am not a bad Mommy, and I am not a perfect Mommy,

I am a Mommy – just like you!

Now that you've read both of those, let's talk about what YOU are going to do to get going with Tot School at your house. Here are a few recommendations for you, that can hopefully help you climb that mountain slowly and feel more confident as a teacher-mom.

- **Make a List!** Get a note pad and a pen and go around your house and find every toy that you already own that could be used for exposing early learning skills (this will be most toys if you think hard enough!). What skills you ask? [Go here to this post](#) to see the checklists I provide to give you some ideas. **These are not skills a tot HAS to learn, they are just skills to be exposed-key word-EXPOSED.** Do not feel you need to teach your tot - you really are just playing with a purpose!
- [Now, go here and look through my Tot School Tools Store](#), or [here in my Gift Ideas for Tots](#), and see if you already own any of these and forgot to list them. If there are a few that really stand out to you-write a list of your "I hope to own" tools. You really don't need a lot, many toys can be used in different ways!
- In order to keep things simple, let's stop here. Look at the first list you made and **select 5 toys you think your tot would enjoy playing with - WITH you.** Try to choose things s/he hasn't played with in awhile or ever...to peak his/her interest.

On the next pages I will share a specific toy and the MANY ways you could use it to EXPOSE early learning skills in a fun and laid back way!

These are not skills a tot **HAS** to learn,
they are just skills to be **EXPOSED!**



FOAM BLOCKS

A detailed game plan!

Here's what I would do to purposefully play with my tot...

- Sit on the floor with him.
- Show him the blocks. If he dives right in, let him and just **sit back and watch** him explore without teaching anything or even saying much. (If he doesn't dive right in but just waits for you, begin stacking or lining them up...inviting him to join you.)
- After he has explored on his own for a bit, **join in with him**, by doing whatever it was that he was doing (stacking, scattering, lining them up, etc.) Start using **purposeful language** as you play..." Look at this pretty PURPLE block," "oooh, I see an A on this one," I am putting the RED one on top of the BLUE one." Just your simple phrases are teaching your tot SO much.
- Now try to **show your tot how to do something different** with the blocks. If he was stacking, why don't you try lining. If he is resistant to you, try lining them up next to him while he still stacks. Then just invite him to join you. I never force him to do what I am doing, just offer!
- **Add something else into your play-** maybe a toy car to drive along the line of blocks you made. Maybe get an empty laundry basket and toss the blocks into the basket. Hide some blocks around the room and go find them, announcing the color each time he finds one.
- The opportunities are endless with just this one toy...this is why I said you don't need to go buy new toys-you just need to think deeper and use the ones you already have!
- Here's the kicker to this whole process, especially if your tot is on the younger end, **STOP when he loses interest**. You can try to re-engage with a new addition (like the basket or the little car). But when he's done-he's done. Let him wander off, and be done. **Forcing Tot School** (purposeful play with your tot) **on him isn't going to do either of you any good.**





FOAM BLOCKS

for the visual learner

Sit on the floor together, with the toy.



Let him play and explore independently.



Join in with him, key word- JOIN, don't change what he was doing.

No photo of me sitting on blocks, sorry.

Use purposeful language: color, size, positional words, etc.

"Look at this blue block."

"I have 1-2 blocks, two!"

"Look, I put this block under your leg!"

"These blocks are the same size!"

Show him something different to do with the same toy. Stacking, tossing, lining up, counting, sorting, patterning, etc. If he isn't interested-relax! Try to do it beside him to see if he joins in, but don't force!



Add something else to your play: car, basket, hide and seek, etc.



STOP when he loses interest! Let him play and explore as long as he wants {if you don't have other plans!}.



Remember:

Tot School is just purposeful play with your tot, it shouldn't be forced, it should be fun!

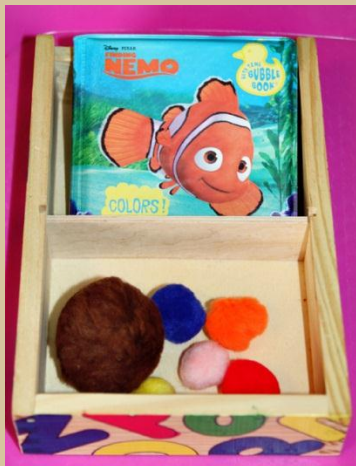
Each day, try to **purposefully play with your tot** using the same toys if s/he really loves them or bring out something different each day.

If something doesn't work, have a back up ready to go. That's why I said to have 5 in mind when you begin.

It is frustrating when your great Tot School ideas are rejected by your tot, but don't let the frustration last for long! Just try another toy and keep playing!

For laughs, here are **a few ideas that Krash completely rejected** back in the day, I remember him refusing each of these and many more of my wonderful ideas!

Matching colored pom poms to the colors in the Nemo book.



Matching letters to the letters on our ABC beanbags



Texture square matching



Setting up your Tot School Area

This is one of the common questions I get and there are no right or wrong answers. You have to do what works for you and the space you have, making it as tot-friendly as possible. This is much more difficult when you are in a smaller space, so you need to get creative! On the next few pages I will share few different ways we have done our set up over the years.



This was one of my first set up methods, back when we were schooling in a smaller room that didn't have good insulation. I needed my trays to be easily transported to whatever area of the house we were Tot Schooling in, so I got these deep trays from the \$1 section at Target. I would fill them and then stack them for storage. When I brought them out for my tot to choose, I would lay them out like this. In this shot, they are just on the kitchen table!

[Here is the post](#) that this set up was featured in.



Setting up your Tot School Area



I would also use the trays from Oriental Trading {they are often out of stock, but just search “plastic trays” to check}, sometimes displaying them in the living room. This set up is on our entertainment center. [Here is the blog post](#) that featured this set up.

Setting up your Tot School Area



When we were in our old schoolroom, Il would use the 9 square shelf from Target to display his options.

I changed out toys about once a week, depending on his interest level.

Setting up your Tot School Area

Later on, we were blessed with a [new and much larger schoolroom](#). This became the set up for Ladybug. The shelf is Trofast from Ikea.

I also keep a basket on top for rotated books. The green bin is a current [sensory bin](#). This photo was taken from [this blog post](#).



Setting up your Tot School Area



When Ladybug was around 32 months, I [began Animal ABCs](#) with her and switched her area around to include a little desk {ours is from Ikea-but they don't carry it any more that I know of}. She could have had a small desk all along, but Krash was using it for preschool until this point!

Now, for a bit more of the Tot School mountain...

I recommend going to my [most recent Tot School Gathering Place](#) posts and glancing through the list of moms linked up. They are all putting the ages of their tot(s) in () now. Find a few blogs that show tots that are within a couple of months of the age of your tot. Visit their blogs and glance through some of their recent Tot School posts. You don't even have to read them, just glance at the photos. I promise you'll be filled with ideas in just a few minutes!

Please remember that **ALL TOTS ARE DIFFERENT**, even if the ages are similar. Not everything that works for one will work for another. Don't let that frustrate you! Please take some time to read my post, [Following the Lead of the Child](#).


If you have your own blog, start recording your Tot School adventures and start linking up to the weekly [Tot School Gathering Place Linky](#).

As you slowly climb the mountain, begin exploring the ideas you find as you feel less overwhelmed. Don't try to do this all at once, your tot just needs YOU. Each new thing you add is just a bonus.



weekly linky hosted by,
www.1plus1plus1equals1.net

If your tot is almost 3 or over 3, you might want to read this-which is my post about [transitioning from Tot School into Pre K.](#)



In summary-in case you now feel even more overwhelmed after reading all of that...here's the basics...

- **make a list** of tot school tools you already own
- **choose 5** to purposefully play with along with your tot
- **sit and play** with your tot, exposing early learning skills
- **find other moms online** who have tots the same age as yours
- **expand slowly** to include more ideas into your Tot School
- remember that your tot needs YOU, not stuff...**give your tot purposeful play time with you each day**...that's Tot School!

Have fun!

On the following pages I offer a few ideas of activities for different age groups. Keep in mind, not all tots will fall into these “categories” and your tot may be ready for some of these ideas earlier or later than I have shown. Always use your mommy instinct!

The activities link to the blog post where I featured my child doing that activity {or to Amazon for some of the toys}. Obviously this is not an exhaustive list, just a simple place to get started!



A few ideas for 9-12 months

Note: All ideas are presented with the understanding that you are playing WITH your baby, these are not independent activities as some of the items are choking hazards. Please only use ideas that you feel comfortable with and feel you can ensure your tot's safety.

BELLS

[Bell play on my blog here.](#)



PING PONG BALLS

[Ping Pong Ball play on my blog here.](#)



COTTON BALLS

[Cotton Ball play on my blog here.](#)



SPOOLS

[Spool play on my blog here.](#)



TUBES

[Tubes on my blog here.](#)



HOMEMADE SHAKERS

[Shakers on my blog here.](#)



STRING

[String on my blog here.](#)



PLASTIC EGGS

[Eggs on my blog here.](#)



A few ideas for 12-18 months

Note: All ideas are presented with the understanding that you are playing WITH your baby, these are not independent activities as some of the items are choking hazards. Please only use ideas that you feel comfortable with and feel you can ensure your tot's safety.

Wooden Stacking Toy



Bumpy Beads & Containers



Piggy Bank



Pom Poms and Containers



Magnets



Stirring Fun



Sticks & Containers



Wedgits



A few ideas for 12-18 months

Note: All ideas are presented with the understanding that you are playing WITH your baby, these are not independent activities as some of the items are choking hazards. Please only use ideas that you feel comfortable with and feel you can ensure your tot's safety.

[Water Table](#)



[Stacking Cups](#)



[Magneatos](#)



[Simple Shape
Puzzles](#)



[Easel](#)



[Foam Blocks](#)



[Sticks &
Containers](#)
{with smaller holes}



[Play Dough](#)



A few ideas for 18-24 months

Note: All ideas are presented with the understanding that you are playing WITH your baby, these are not independent activities as some of the items are choking hazards. Please only use ideas that you feel comfortable with and feel you can ensure your tot's safety.

[Wooden Cutting Food](#)



[Chunky Puzzles](#)



[Pasta into holes in cereal box](#)



[Hammering Noodles Too](#)

[Busy gears](#)



[Sticks or straws into small spaces](#)



[Balls](#)



[Shape Sorters](#)



[Baby Signing Time DVDs](#)



A few ideas for 24-30 months

Note: All ideas are presented with the understanding that you are playing WITH your child, these are not independent activities as some of the items are choking hazards. Please only use ideas that you feel comfortable with and feel you can ensure your tot's safety.

[Tot Books/Packs](#)



[Themed Sensory Bins](#)



[Transferring](#)



[Dot Paint](#)



[Laurie Berkner Band DVD](#)



[Pom Pom Magnets & Cookie Sheet](#)



[Stacking Pegs](#)



[Nesting Blocks](#)



A few ideas for 30-36 months

Note: All ideas are presented with the understanding that you are playing WITH your child, these are not independent activities as some of the items are choking hazards. Please only use ideas that you feel comfortable with and feel you can ensure your tot's safety.

Hammering Letters



Magnetic Pattern Blocks



Shaving Cream Play



Stuff & Play Dough



Automoblox



Water Beads



Matching Shapes



Bean Bag Monster



A few ideas for 3-4 years

Note: All ideas are presented with the understanding that you are playing WITH your child, these are not independent activities as some of the items are choking hazards. Please only use ideas that you feel comfortable with and feel you can ensure your tot's safety.

Zoos



Bottle Top Names



Marble Painting



Pom Pom Numbers



Baking Soda, Vinegar, Food Coloring



Letter Construction Kit



Who Lives Where?



Starfall.com



What about Printable Programs?

I have developed 2 printable programs for tots, [Tot School Printables A-Z](#) and [Animal ABCs](#). Both programs start with a base of the printables and theme, but allow for expansion through many hands on ideas.

Many tots will love these programs, however just as many will totally reject them! Moms tend to prefer something more organized like a printable program, but unfortunately many tots do not prefer this style of learning. **I recommend reading this post: [Following the Lead of the Child](#), before you make any decisions** regarding adding the use of one of these programs into your Tot School.

Krash would not have enjoyed this type of learning, so please don't be discouraged if your tot isn't fond of these "programs." Ladybug loved these and was the inspiration for both programs.





My daughter began [Tot School Printables](#) around age 23 months. These units were developed because of her intense love of seated work. She loved sitting at a table and “doing school” at this age, so I developed this program as a way to have something new for her each week!



Each unit has a focus letter, an object representing the sound, and a vocabulary development theme built around the object. Example: [Letter C: Cat, theme: pets](#). I chose a variety of themes to expand on, so you could explore many different things with your tot during the program.



Learn more about [Tot School Printables here!](#)



My daughter began [Animal ABCs](#) around 32 months, after she completed Tot School Printables. I chose an animal for each letter, emphasizing the most common phonetic sound for that letter. Real photographs are used in each unit.



With the start of each new letter/animal I set up her little Tot School area. The set up and display is a BIG deal to her, she always oohs and ahhs. It really seems to draw her into the theme and the work for the coming unit.

I always get out any miniature or stuffed versions of the animals, as well as books to go along.



Learn more about [Animal ABCs here!](#)

I truly hope this helped you, and gave you inspiration. I pray that you don't feel even more overwhelmed now, that certainly is the exact opposite of my goal with this! Please remember, **keep it simple!** A final word about keeping it simple ~ I did none of this with my oldest son and he is just fine! We did tons of stuff because early childhood is a passion of mine, but I planned almost *nothing* for him as a tot. "Tot School" is more for us moms who need some type of plan and routine! Please don't think you *need* some elaborate plan for your tot, it is only if you want to have an elaborate plan!

A few helpful Tot School Links

- [Tot School Webpage](#)
- [Tot School Ideas Pinterest Board](#)
- [Tot Books and Packs](#) {and other theme printables}
- [Tot Trays](#)
- [Totally Tots Blog](#) {a group blog I started in 2009}
- [Tot School Printables A-Z](#)
- [Animal ABCs](#)



Want to share this eBook?

THANK YOU for wanting to share, I am honored!

Please do not...

- forward your copy on, it is for your personal use only.

Please do...

- Send a [link to my blog](#) via email, Facebook, Pinterest, etc., so your friends can subscribe to my newsletter and download their own copy.

Thanks again for subscribing and being a part of my online community!
Feel free to join me online in other areas...



Written by, Carisa from $1 + 1 + 1 = 1$

© www.1plus1plus1equals1.net 2013