

The Laundry Sorting Machine

Your child becomes a machine that sorts laundry by a rule. Then the odd items arrive: a striped sock, a glove, a sock with no partner. A first look at what happens when a rule meets something it was never built for.

AGE BAND Ages 4–8	DURATION 15 minutes	GROUP SIZE One adult, one or more children	CONCEPT Classification
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What your child practises

Your child can explain that a sorting rule works well on the things it was made for, and that someone has to decide what happens to the things that do not fit.

What you need

- A pile of clean laundry, mixed: socks, tops, a few odd items
- No laundry to hand? Any mixed pile works: spoons, toys, buttons
- Three spaces to sort into, such as two baskets and a towel

Why it works

Sorting is one of the main jobs AI systems do: this email is spam, that photo is a cat, this application goes to the next round. A sorting rule feels perfect until something arrives that it was never designed for. Children see this instantly with laundry, and the question they end up asking (“where does this one go?”) is the same question people ask about real systems.

How to play

1. Give the machine a simple rule: “Blue things in this basket, everything else in that one.”
2. Hand your child items one at a time. They sort quickly, like a machine.
3. Slip in an awkward one: a blue and white striped sock, a purple top, a glove.
4. When your child hesitates, ask: “What does the rule say?” Let them decide.
5. Make a third pile together called “Not sure.” Talk about who should check that pile, and how.

Make it easier, make it harder

- **Easier:** sort by one obvious thing, like “socks” and “not socks.”
- **Harder:** let your child invent a rule, then you try to find an item that breaks it.

Talk about it

- Which item was hardest to sort? What made it hard?
- Was the “Not sure” pile a good idea? Who should decide about those?
- If a machine sorted people instead of socks, what would be in the “Not sure” pile?

If your child asks

“Do machines have a ‘not sure’ pile?” Some do. A well-built system can say how confident it is and pass the hard cases to a person. Not every system is built that way. Some just put every item in a basket, even when the rule does not really fit.