

Early Childhood Parents[®] *make the difference!*

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Playtime builds your child's skills and promotes learning

Studies show that preschoolers learn a lot through play. But have you ever wondered just what your child is learning during playtime? Consider that:

- **Making art inspires** creativity and boosts fine motor skills. Supervise while your child cuts, colors, glues and tapes—and marvel at the finished masterpieces.
- **Pretending strengthens** imagination. Dolls, props and costumes help set the scene. Prompt your child to wonder, “How would someone feel in this situation?” “What might they do or say?”
- **Building things encourages** young children to plan, count and figure things out. Give your child a variety

of blocks, boxes and puzzle pieces to work with.

- **Making music boosts** listening, movement and rhythm. Practice singing, playing instruments and moving to the beat with your child.
- **Playing board games teaches** patience and cooperation. You can also use games to teach your child letters, numbers and words.
- **Playing outside promotes** curiosity, creativity and thinking. It also builds gross motor skills. Go outside with your child. Research shows spending time in nature improves learning outcomes.

Source: M. Yogman and others, “The Power of Play: A Pediatric Role in Enhancing Development in Young Children,” *Pediatrics*, American Academy of Pediatrics.

Help your child learn letters in creative ways



Recognizing letters is an important step toward reading and writing readiness. And learning to do

it can also be fun!

To teach your child about letters in engaging ways:

- **Make them out of food.** Give your child kid-friendly, tasty supplies to create letters, such as circle-shaped crackers and small, straight pretzels. Allow your child to break up foods to form letters, too.
- **Light them up.** In a dark room, use the light beam from a flashlight to draw letters on a ceiling or wall. Can your child follow the beam and figure out the letters you're writing?
- **Start with parts.** Draw a shape or line, such as a circle or diagonal line. Then, ask your child to add to it, eventually making a letter, such as T or N. Offer hints as needed. Then, switch roles.
- **Play letter match.** Write letters in uppercase and lowercase on a sheet of paper. Have your child draw lines from each lowercase letter to its uppercase match.

Encourage your preschooler to talk about ideas and actions



An ability to communicate helps preschoolers express themselves and their feelings. Communication skills can also make

learning and exchanging information with others easier. These interactions boost children's social IQs by helping them build healthy relationships with other people.

To help your preschooler strengthen these valuable communication skills:

- **Get the story behind your child's drawings.** Ask about them, and write descriptions underneath.
- **Discuss your plans for the day.** Say more than, "We're going out to run errands." Instead, try, "We are going to take lunch to Aunt Susan this afternoon. What else should we bring? How about one of your drawings?"

- **Help your child tell a story in sequence.** This reinforces that one event follows another. For example, ask your child, "What are some of the things you do *after* dinner and *before* bed?"
- **Ask for details.** If your child tells you it was fun playing with a friend, ask "What did you talk about? Did you play any fun games?"

Source: N. Gardner-Neblett and K.C. Gallagher, *More Than Baby Talk: 10 Ways to Promote the Language and Communication Skills of Infants and Toddlers*, The University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, FPG Child Development Institute.

"Communication—the human connection—is the key to personal and career success."

—Paul J. Meyer

Use jigsaw puzzles to increase your child's attention span



Preschoolers don't need too many toys, but jigsaw puzzles are worth having. Putting together puzzles builds

fine motor skills and helps young children think logically and visually. Puzzles are also among the best toys for helping children extend their attention spans.

Working on a puzzle can teach your preschooler to:

- **Concentrate quietly on a project.** Once in kindergarten, the teacher will expect your child to be able to sit and work independently for short periods of time.
- **Recognize progress.** Your child will see progress as the puzzle picture

develops. Moving from a simple puzzle to a more difficult puzzle will also show progress.

Start your child with puzzles of about eight pieces. Move up once these become easy. Some older preschoolers can do 50-piece puzzles.

- **Return to a project.** Attention is not just about how much a child can learn and do in one sitting. Some tasks just can't be done all at once, but they still need to be completed!

Doing part of a puzzle one day, then returning the next day to work on it again, is great practice that will help your child study and work on long-term projects in elementary school.

Are you building your preschooler's vocabulary skills?



The years between three and five are critical for your child's language development. Are you doing the kinds of things

that will develop your preschooler's vocabulary? Answer *yes* or *no* to the questions below to find out:

- ___ **1. Do you use specific words** to name things in your environment when talking with your child?
- ___ **2. Do you build on words** your child already knows by using *synonyms*—different words that mean the same thing—and descriptive words? For example, if your child says "big bird," you could say "large green parrot."
- ___ **3. Do you read aloud** and look at pictures with your child? Do you explain words and images?
- ___ **4. Do you play word games**, such as pointing to an object and having your child name it?
- ___ **5. Do you help your child learn** and use words for different kinds of feelings?

How well are you doing?

Each *yes* answer means you're enhancing your child's vocabulary. For *no* answers, try those ideas from the quiz.

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Turn family screen time into a positive learning activity



Recent statistics show that children between two and four years old spend an average of two hours and 30 minutes on screen activities each day. That's a lot!

The quality of your child's screen time makes a difference. All activities are not alike. But you can make screen time more productive. Research shows that children whose parents watch programs with them (it's called "co-viewing") are not only more focused on the program—they also get more out of it.

This may be because kids feel a program must be more "important" if Mom or Dad is watching, too. Or, it might simply be that kids enjoy the company.

To help your child get the most out of co-viewing:

- **Choose quality programs.** Since you know your child is watching closely, pick something age-appropriate and educational. Nature shows and documentaries are great, but cartoons that teach values are a good option, too!
- **Interact with your child.** If you are looking at your phone instead of watching the program, your child will notice! Pay attention and talk to your child about what you see.
- **Don't use screens** as babysitters. Resist the urge to leave the room and do other things the moment your child turns on a show.

Remember: The American Academy of Pediatrics still recommends that families limit recreational screen time and encourage active alternatives.

Source: Texas Tech University, "Parents' presence when TV viewing with child affects learning ability," *ScienceDaily*.

Q: My preschooler loves to sit and play for hours, but isn't very physically active. How can I add exercise into our daily routines?

Questions & Answers

A: Regular exercise helps young children build strong muscles and bones, develop motor skills and boost self-esteem. It's never too early to start integrating exercise into your child's daily life.

To promote physical activity:

- **Schedule regular times** for exercise and stick to them. Think about when your child is likely to have the most energy.
- **Take turns choosing** the activity. If your child likes soccer, for example, agree to play at least once a week.
- **Plan activities** that make your preschooler feel successful. Don't play physical games that require too much agility or are too difficult.
- **Keep an activity log.** It's fun to look through it and see how committed your whole family is to physical health.
- **Drive less and walk more.** Brainstorm with your family about places you can walk to instead of taking a car or bus.
- **Think of creative ways** you and your child can exercise. You could play a game of tag or have a sit-up contest. On rainy days, you might build an indoor obstacle course or make up a dance.
- **Use exercise** rather than food as a reward. For example, "After you pick up your toys, we can go on a family walk."
- **Limit passive screen time.** Watching videos and playing computer games doesn't require much physical or mental energy.

Discipline works best when adults use effective praise



Studies show that praise is a key part of discipline success. In fact, approval and praise are the most powerful motivators for positive behavior.

Parenting expert Alan Kazdin, Ph.D., explains that in order for praise to be effective, it should be:

- **Upbeat.** When you praise your child, sound excited.
- **Specific.** Describe exactly what your child did right. "You picked up your toys. That was so helpful. Thank you."
- **Physical.** Reinforce your message with something like a gentle hug, smile or thumbs-up.
- **Instant.** Make sure your praise is given as soon as you are aware of your child's positive behavior.

- **Earned.** Use praise only when it's meaningful—otherwise it will quickly lose its value.
- **Frequent.** You should praise your child more often than you criticize. Parents sometimes mistakenly add criticism to praise. For example, "I asked you to put on your pajamas, and look! Hooray! You got them on!" (There's the praise.) "Too bad you didn't do that last night." (There's the criticism.)

Instead, remain focused on your child's positive behavior and praise it enthusiastically. Kazdin says, "Enthusiastic praise, however insincere you may feel it to be, is always much more effective than sincere punishment, which is the usual alternative."

Source: A. Kazdin, Ph.D., *The Everyday Parenting Toolkit*, Mariner Books.

The Kindergarten Experience

Attendance is critical for your kindergartner!



Attendance rates for kindergartners are lower than for students in later school grades.

Yet attendance in kindergarten is essential. Consistent attendance in the early years improves the chance of academic success later on.

To help your child develop the habit of regular attendance:

- **Say that you expect** your child to go to school every day. When children know school attendance is important to their families, it will be important to them, too.
- **Remain calm** if your child doesn't want to go to school. This is normal for kindergartners. Don't discuss it or raise your voice. Just explain that your child must go.
- **Follow school guidelines** for keeping children home. If your child is sick—especially with a fever or something contagious, stay home. Simply being tired, however, is not a valid reason to miss school.
- **Don't make staying home** seem like a treat. A sick child should be resting, not playing on a digital device or watching television.
- **Schedule medical appointments** outside of school hours.
- **Schedule family vacations** during school breaks.

It's also important to help your child develop the habit of getting to school on time. When students arrive late, they might miss something important. Late arrival also disrupts the whole class. So be sure your child gets to school before the bell rings.

Preparation leads to successful parent-teacher conferences

Among the many *firsts* in kindergarten is one for families—the first parent-teacher conference. Whether your meeting is in person or online, it's natural to feel anxious. But a little preparation will go a long way toward easing your butterflies and ensuring a positive experience.

To prepare:

- **Review schoolwork.** In the days leading up to the conference, pay extra attention to the work your child brings home. Does your child seem to be struggling or excelling in certain areas? How does your kindergartner feel about school?
- **Make a list.** What do you want the teacher to know? Include any changes in your child's life. Also ask questions, such as, "How are my child's reading skills developing?"
- **Be on time.** Conferences can be short, so don't waste a minute!



- **Keep an open mind.** All students have areas in which they can improve. Sometimes this is hard for families to hear. Focus on solutions and remember your shared goal: helping your child succeed!

Encourage your kindergartner to develop a love of learning



The early school years are a critical time to build a love of learning. To help your child feel excited about school:

- **Talk about it every day.** Discuss what your child likes best about school.
- **Ask about learning.** Can your child teach you something the class has learned?
- **Create a brag wall.** There's no better way to celebrate success than to display your child's work.

- **Talk positively** about teachers and school staff. Emphasize how much teachers care about their students.
- **Encourage friendships** with classmates. Arrange a short play date with one or two friends. You could meet at the park or the local library.
- **Read together every day.** Children who love books and are comfortable with reading are less likely to be overwhelmed by reading tasks in kindergarten.