EARLY CHILDHOOD

# Helping Children Learn®

*Tips Families Can Use to Help Children Do Better in School*

*February 2022*

## Input from you helps your child's growing brain become smarter



Research shows that intelligence isn't fixed at birth. It continues to develop throughout childhood and adolescence. Parents play a critical role in children's intelligence—not only by passing on genes, but also by providing experiences that foster and encourage learning. Keep in mind that:

- **The brain grows** significantly during the preschool years. But this is not the time to overwhelm your child with a deep dive into one subject. Rather, it's the time to expose her to a wide variety of skills and ideas that she can build on throughout life. Talk to your child and take her places with you. Read together and encourage creative play.
- **Learning by doing is critical.** To you, sorting clean forks and spoons into a drawer may be a boring chore. But when your child does it, she is learning to compare and classify. Setting the table helps her recognize patterns. Feeding a pet fish boosts fine motor skills and a feeling of satisfaction in accomplishing a necessary task.
- **Relationships matter.** Demonstrate your love for your child with words and actions. Give her one-on-one attention and listen attentively when she talks. This will help her feel secure and develop the self-confidence she needs to take on learning challenges.

Source: R. Sriram, "Why Ages 2-7 Matter So Much for Brain Development," Edutopia.

## Bribes backfire as motivation tools

Have you ever made a deal with your preschooler? "If you put on your shoes and your jacket quickly, I'll give you a cookie." Deals like these may seem like effective motivators for kids. But think again.

When you present a request to your child in this way, you are offering a bribe—not motivation. A bribe doesn't teach your child respect or responsibility. Instead, it teaches him that "If I do what Mom or Dad wants, I will get something for it."

To avoid falling into the bribe trap:

- **Choose different words.** Use the word *when* instead of *if*. "When you have ..., I will ... ."
- **Explain why** the action is helpful or valuable. "When you get dressed quickly to go out, we don't waste time. Then we will have enough time to read an extra story when we get back."

This emphasizes that you expect your child to do the task, rather than allowing him a choice.

Source: J.J. Pawel, *The Parent's Toolshop: The Universal Blueprint for Building a Healthy Family*, Ambris.

## Introduce math concepts

When you help your child learn about shapes, patterns and positions, you are introducing her to geometry. Together:

- **Search for shapes.** Look around your home and name the shapes you see: square napkin, round plate, etc.



- **Look for lines.** Talk about *horizontal* lines, which run from side to side, and *vertical* lines, which run from top to bottom. How many can your child find?
- **Practice positional words** like *above*, *below*, *beside*, *in front of*, and *behind*.

## Enjoy the game, win or lose

Many children begin playing sports in early childhood. Being a good sport is also important in school, so help your child learn to win and lose gracefully. Encourage him to say "Good game!" to teammates and opponents. Teach him that games and sports are for learning, having fun and getting exercise. If he does that, he's a winner.



## Read and write as a family

Preschoolers want to do things they see the people they admire and care about doing. Boost your child's desire to read and write by making them family activities. You can:

- **Establish a regular time** for family reading. Let your child look at a favorite book while everyone else reads something they enjoy. After 10 minutes or so, ask your child to tell you about her book.
- **Exchange notes.** Your child can tell you what she wants to say, then draw a picture and (if she can) sign her name. Family members can respond in writing.

Source: K. Cherry, "How Observational Learning Affects Behavior," Verywellmind.

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## Q&A How should I discipline so my preschooler will behave?

**Q: I've been told that it's better to use consequences than punishment in response to misbehavior. How exactly are they different?**



**A:** The purpose of discipline is to teach, rather than to impose a penalty. Punishment focuses on penalties. It is often:

- **Given out in anger.** "You drew on the wall. Go to your room!"
- **A reaction to multiple offenses.** "You spilled the milk and left your blocks out—and now this! You have to learn not to be so naughty."
- **Not connected to the misbehavior.** How does being sent to a bedroom relate to drawing on the wall?

To apply consequences instead, stay calm and:

- **Acknowledge your child's feelings.** "I know you feel bad about making art where you weren't supposed to."
- **Address only the incident at hand.** Don't bring up past mistakes.
- **Relate the consequence to the misbehavior.** "Now I can't take you to the park because we need to fix the wall. Help me wash it so I can repaint it."
- **Help your child learn** from his mistake. "If I draw on the wall, it will have to be fixed. That takes time, and I miss doing something fun."

## Parent Quiz Do you prepare your child for transitions?

When she gets to elementary school, your child will have to move from one activity to another—often according to a schedule, rather than her whim. Are you helping her learn to handle transitions? Answer *yes* or *no* below:

___**1. Do you give** your child notice before a change occurs? "In five minutes, we're going to leave."

___**2. Do you tell** your child what will happen before and after events? "We'll get ready and go to the store. When we come back, we'll read a book."

___**3. Do you offer** your child a role in transitions? "We're leaving now. Will you please turn off the light?"

___**4. Do you use** objects to ease transitions? "Let's take this book home to show Daddy."

___**5. Do you follow** goodbye rituals? "Wave to Grandma. Then we'll go."

### How well are you doing?

*More* yes *answers mean you are making transitions easier for your child. For each* no, *try that idea.*

"Honor the space between no longer and not yet."
—Nancy Levin

## These valentines let your child get a feel for caring

Here's a valentine project that promotes caring and teaches your child about textures at the same time. Tape a scrap of textured cloth to a table. Lace works well. Put a sheet of thin white paper on top. Give your child a red crayon and have her rub on the white paper so that the texture of the fabric underneath appears. Then help her cut the paper into a heart shape and glue it to the front of a card for a friend, relative or teacher.

## Teach your child to classify

Classifying is an important skill in math and science. To help your child learn to classify:

1. **Name an object** your child can see. Tell her a category it fits into: "Look at that tree. Trees are plants. Can you think of other plants?"
2. **Point out two items** that both fit into a group. "We're having chicken and peas for dinner. They look very different, but they are both foods."
3. **Point out two items** that go together and one that doesn't. "Here are your shirt and pants. They are both clothes. But your teddy bear is not. Teddy is a toy." As your child gets familiar with classifying, ask her to say which item doesn't belong.

## Learn what the nose knows

Seeing and hearing are not the only ways children learn. Your child's sense of smell is another important source of information. To help your preschooler discover what his nose can tell him:



- **Have him close** his eyes and try to identify foods by how they smell.
- **Keep track of** things you and your child smell for a day, such as spices, play dough and soap. Help him think of words that describe what he smells.

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