

Early Childhood Parents®

March 2023
Vol. 27, No. 7

Atkinson County Schools
Family Engagement

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Outdoor play with friends boosts preschoolers' skills

As the weather turns towards spring, preschoolers will be able to spend more time playing outdoors. And that's great news for their brain and social development, as well as muscle growth.

According to experts, playing outside with friends is an effective way to encourage the pretend play that is so vital between the ages of three and five. It helps children learn:

- **Creativity.** Calling out, "Let's pretend we are riding horses!" is an example of *thinking* creatively. Then, when your child and friends collect sticks to "ride" and start galloping around the yard, they are *playing* creatively.
- **Problem solving.** What happens when there are four children but

only three sticks? Kids often figure out ways to cope. You may see them take turns with the sticks or look for another prop to use as a horse.

- **Social skills.** Children learn how to approach others and join in a group that is already playing. A child may use a startup cue, such as, "Giddy up ... I'm riding a horse, too." The kids already in the group learn how to accommodate and include others that decide to join them as they play.

It is always important to supervise children as they play outside with friends. But give them the freedom to be creative, interact socially and solve problems for themselves.

Source: V. Ulset and others, "Time spent outdoors during preschool: Links with children's cognitive and behavioral development," *Journal of Environmental Psychology*.

Introduce your preschooler to journaling



Having preschoolers keep journals when they haven't learned how to write yet may sound odd. However, preschoolers don't have to know how to write to benefit from this activity.

To introduce journaling:

1. **Give your child** a piece of paper.
2. **Ask your child** to tell you about something that happened today. Offer prompts as needed: "You went on the playground at preschool. What did you do there?"
3. **Have your child** draw a picture of the activity.
4. **Ask your child** to tell you about the drawing. Under the drawing, write a sentence or two to capture your child's words. Explain that the words tell about the picture.
5. **Have your child** "write" something, as well—even if it's just a few scribbles. Over time, you will likely see letters and real words emerge from scribbles.

Repeat this process often. Save the pages and staple them into a book.

Instill a love of reading in your preschooler with these strategies



As children grow, so does their ability to enjoy reading. Babies love cuddling, looking at pictures in books and hearing parents' voices. Preschoolers are learning how to think, question and engage with stories—which helps them enjoy reading even more.

To foster a love a reading:

- **Choose a relaxed time** to read together. Many parents read to their children at night. But if your child seems more excited about reading in the morning, read together then.
- **Allow your child** to choose which book you will read. Preschoolers love repetition, so don't worry if your child chooses the same book day after day.
- **Let your child** "read" to you. Have your preschooler turn the pages

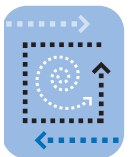
and tell you the story, using the illustrations as cues.

- **Be creative.** Try using different voices for each character. Use sound effects, such as animal sounds or crashing noises.
- **Take time to answer** your child's questions, even if they interrupt the story. And if your child wants to stop reading or skip a few pages, that's OK, too. Enjoying reading time is more important than finishing the book.

"There are many little ways to enlarge your child's world. Love of books is the best of all."

—Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis

Shadow play is a fun way to explore science with your child



Most preschoolers have fun making shadows—and have no idea that they are learning about measurement, time and space while they are doing it!

All you need is a sunny day, a piece of chalk and a sidewalk or driveway. Then, try a few of these ideas:

- **Draw an X on the sidewalk** or driveway. Have your child come back several times throughout the day and stand on the X. Each time, draw an outline of your child's shadow. How does it change? Ask your child to share observations.
- **Take a few objects**, such as a ball, a block and a crayon, and move them in different ways. Discuss the shadow shapes that are formed as you turn the objects.

- **Have your child hold a crayon** and then crouch down. What does the crayon's shadow look like? Now have your child stand on tippy toes and hold the crayon up high. What does the crayon's shadow look like now? Ask your child to tell you about the ways the shadow has changed.

Follow up your fun by reading a few books about shadows:

- *My Shadow* by Robert Louis Stevenson.
- *The Dark, Dark Night* by M. Christina Butler.
- *What Makes a Shadow?* by Clyde Robert Bulla.
- *Goodnight Shadow* by Kimberly Muller.

Source: A. Koester, "Preschool Shadow Science," Association for Library Service to Children.

Are you building your preschooler's independence?



Parents are naturally protective. But it's also important to let young children explore the world and develop a sense of independence. This prepares them for school and other responsibilities.

Answer *yes* or *no* to the questions below to see if you're balancing your child's safety and freedom:

___ **1. Do you supervise** your child's playtime with friends without hovering over them?

___ **2. Do you offer your child** simple choices, such as "Would you like to wear your blue sweater or the red one?"

___ **3. Do you give your child** a chance to solve minor problems before you step in to help?

___ **4. Do you show interest** in your child's opinions and respect them, even if you disagree?

___ **5. Do you play** with your child but also encourage independent play?

How well are you doing?

If most of your answers were *yes*, you are encouraging independence. For each *no* answer, try that idea from the quiz.

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Published monthly September through May.
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a division of PaperClip Media, Inc., an
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Publisher: Doris McLaughlin.
Publisher Emeritus: John H. Wherry, Ed.D.
Editor: Rebecca Hasty Miyares.

Four daily habits help lengthen children's attention spans



Paying attention is mental work. But your child's body supports the effort. That's why it's helpful to promote a lifestyle at home that strengthens your preschooler's attention span.

Attention-friendly habits include:

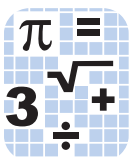
- 1. Getting enough sleep.** Lack of adequate sleep is attention's biggest enemy. Some children who appear to have Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) are actually sleep-deprived. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that children ages three to five get at least 10 hours of sleep every night.
- 2. Engaging in physical activity.** Studies have shown that regular, vigorous exercise stimulates brain

cells—which improves memory and attention. Head outside with your child for a walk or to bounce a ball.

- 3. Eating a healthy diet.** Nutritious foods help the brain do its best work, including paying attention. Ask your child's pediatrician for food recommendations and try to avoid foods with high levels of sugar and saturated fats.
- 4. Limiting recreational screen time.** Watching shows and playing games online causes many children to tune out. Instead, engage your preschooler's mind by filling the day with plenty of reading and creative play.

Source: M.H. Popkin, Ph.D. and others, *Helping Your Child Succeed in School: A Guide for Parents of 4 to 14 Year Olds*, Active Parenting Publishers.

Recognizing patterns adds to your preschooler's math smarts



If someone asked you what math was about, you might say *numbers*. While that's true, math is also about *patterns*.

It is the sequence in which those numbers occur and repeat that makes them meaningful.

When preschoolers can line up a red crayon, then a blue one, then a red one and then a blue one, they are actually practicing an essential math skill.

To reinforce the concept of patterns, have your child:

- **Look at the calendar.** Point out how every month begins with the number 1.
- **Read a rhyming book.** Rhymes are actually patterns of words.
- **Look for patterns** at home. Can your child recognize patterns on clothing? How about on other fabrics?
- **Look at books** in the library. Explain that the way books are arranged is part of a pattern. This helps people find them.
- **Learn a simple sequence**, such as *clap, clap* (clap twice), *slap, slap* (slap thighs twice). Add other motions as this gets easy, but always repeat them in the same order.
- **Sing songs** with repeating phrases, such as "B-I-N-G-O" and "Head, Shoulders, Knees and Toes."
- **Make patterns.** Your child can arrange blocks by color, objects according to size, or string beads.
- **Read a book** about patterns, such as *A-B-A-B-A: A Book of Pattern Play* by B.P. Cleary.

Q: My preschooler is very shy and has a difficult time making friends. I'm worried that this will negatively affect my child in school. What can I do?

Questions & Answers

A: Some children have lots of self-confidence and others do not. While you can't change your child's personality, you can foster more confidence when speaking and working with others.

To improve social skills:

- **Role-play together.** Shy children don't always know what to say to another child. Say, "Let's pretend you're at the playground and kids are playing a fun game that you'd like to join. What could you say?" At first, you might have your child pretend to be one of the other children. You can pretend to be your child. But then change roles.
- **Read books about friends.** Talk about what good friends do—and don't do. Thinking about what makes a good friend may help your child identify someone in preschool who could be a friend.
- **Schedule a playdate** with a classmate or neighbor. Some children feel more comfortable with just one other person than they do in a crowd.
- **Focus on your child's strengths.** Use these as a way for your preschooler to meet other children with like interests. Does your child like art? Try an art class at a community center. Is your child athletic? Consider signing up for a youth sports team.
When children practice the skills that they enjoy, they develop self-confidence—which can also help them make friends!

The Kindergarten Experience

Restock books with weekly trips to the library



It is wonderful to have a home library stocked for your kindergartner, but many families have neither the money nor

the space for dozens of books. But with a weekly visit to the library, your child can have a fresh supply of free books.

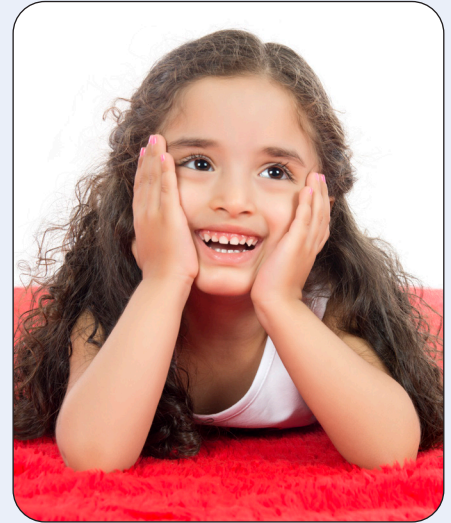
Here are some tips to help you make the most of library trips:

- **Review library rules.** Remind your child, “We use quiet voices so we don’t disturb others who are reading.”
- **Bring a tote bag** from home so your child can carry books to the check-out desk and then home independently.
- **Help your child** get a library card. Getting a card will give your child a sense of pride and increase excitement about checking out books.
- **Decide ahead of time** how many books your child can take home. This will eliminate power struggles at the check-out desk.
- **Talk with the children’s librarian.** Encourage your child to ask a question, such as, “Do you have books about animals?”
- **Find a spot in the library** to sit and review the materials your child has selected. Let your child look through them and make final selections.
- **Establish a special place** at home to keep library books. Talk about the importance of taking care of books and returning them on time so that other children can enjoy them, too.

Use role models to introduce positive character traits

Although you are the primary role model in your kindergartner’s life, you don’t have to be the only one. Here’s how to use other role models to instill positive character traits:

- **Talk about relatives,** friends or celebrities who show respect, responsibility, compassion or other desirable traits. Say how much you admire them and why.
- **Share your heroes** with your child. Talk about people such as Anne Frank, Martin Luther King, Jr., Abraham Lincoln and Dolores Huerta. Discuss the traits you admire in them.
- **Together, find or draw pictures** of people your child admires. Ask why your child thinks highly of them. Heroes can be fictional—from books or movies—or people



in your family, such as an uncle who helps build houses for people in need or a grandmother who worked to put a child through college.

Improve your child’s behavior with teacher-tested strategies



Can’t get your kindergartner to focus? Pay attention? Respond to requests? Why not get help from those who get not just one child—but 20 or more children—to do what’s expected?

Here’s what some teachers suggest:

- **Explain what you want** your child to do. Focus on the tasks you want to be routine—like picking up toys after playing with them.
- **Avoid abrupt transitions.** Let your kindergartner know how many minutes are left before it’s time to switch gears and do something else.
- **Post a schedule with pictures.** Your child will know what to do and when to do it—and will feel more independent.
- **Make ordinary tasks fun.** Challenge your child to clean up a mess in rhythm to music.
- **Use silent signals.** A gentle touch on the shoulder should get your child’s attention. Flick the lights off and on to give a five-minute warning before bedtime.
- **Assign your child** meaningful tasks that benefit the family.