

# Helping Children Learn<sup>®</sup>

EARLY CHILDHOOD

Tips Families Can Use to Help Children Do Better in School

Family and School Partnerships

Fairfax County Public Schools



May 2024

## Maintain your child's motivation to learn all summer long

When your child *wants* to learn, every experience becomes a source of knowledge. Nurturing this inner motivation will ensure that your child keeps learning and building valuable skills for kindergarten and beyond.

To encourage interest in learning over the summer:

- **Choose activities** that offer a little challenge along with the fun. Children try hardest when an activity holds their attention. When practicing counting, for example, have your child try counting something that moves, like ants on the sidewalk or bubbles as you blow them. Just remember that tasks should not be so hard that your child wants to give up. Progress and success are what motivate kids to keep trying.
- **Allow some freedom** to learn independently. Give your child lots of opportunities to solve problems. Provide simple toys, such as blocks, dress-up clothes and action figures, that encourage your child to create different ways to play.
- **Develop your child's confidence.** Help your child recognize accomplishments and feel capable. Sometimes, instead of praising, ask, "How do you think you did?" Then, agree with your child's positive assessment.



## Fill your child's summer with reading

Surrounding your child with interesting things to read and making reading activities part of every day is an important way to support reading readiness. To keep your child reading in engaging ways this summer:

- **Change it up.** Add variety by reading at different times in different places. Read outside in pajamas on a warm evening, or over breakfast on a Saturday morning.
- **Teach your child new words.** "Let's build a *spacious* sofa-cushion fort with room for both of us." "Wasn't that joke *hilarious*?"
- **Hunt for words** on the go. Can your child find a sign that says *exit*?
- **Refresh your reading supply.** Make regular trips to the library. Save and read colorful ads and junk mail: "Look, this says strawberries are on sale." Help your child make books by dictating stories to you and drawing pictures.
- **Write to school friends.** Help your child send messages and read replies. Sending and getting mail is a fun way to build reading skills.

## Offer healthy food choices

Research shows that a balanced diet supports alertness and concentration, memory, better behavior, higher test scores and academic achievement. Young children are more likely to eat healthy foods if their families:

- **Provide options.** "Would you like carrots or pepper slices for snack?"
- **Make it fun.** Cut food into shapes or arrange it into smiley faces.
- **Let them help.** Kids are more excited about eating foods they helped make.



Check the USDA's Summer Meals Site Finder at [www.fns.usda.gov/meals4kids](http://www.fns.usda.gov/meals4kids) to find out about meal assistance during the summer.

Source: "Winning the War: How to persuade children to eat more veggies," K-State News, Kansas State University.

## Take learning on the road

Will you be traveling with your child this summer? Consider bringing:

- **A cookie sheet** for use as a lap desk for arranging magnetic letters or coloring.
- **A bag** of colored cereal pieces. Your child can count them, sort them and then enjoy them for a snack.

## Savor preschool successes

Your preschooler has learned a lot this year. Take time to talk about it together. Discuss:

- **Things that went well.** What did your child enjoy most about preschool? What was fun to learn?
- **School habits.** Talk about school behaviors and routines. What has your child learned about being a good student?
- **Learning goals.** What does your child want to accomplish next year?



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## How can I get my child to take 'no' for an answer?

**Q:** My four-year-old loves to test me. When I say "no," my preschooler yells, "Yes!" How can I get this child to behave?

**A:** Often when children test adults, it's their way of asking, "Do you really mean what you say?" This is a natural thing for kids to wonder—and it's important for you to answer wisely.

Here are three keys to success:

- 1. Be fair.** Before you make a rule or request, think about it. Is it appropriate for your child? Are you expecting too much or too little? It's best to set a few major guidelines instead of many little limits. Then, explain them clearly. "We don't eat treats before dinner because we wouldn't have room in our tummies for the healthy foods our bodies and brains need."
- 2. Be firm.** Once you've chosen a rule, stick to it despite your child's complaints. If it's tempting to give in, consider the message you would send: "When I say *no*, what I really mean is, 'If you beg, I'll change my mind.'" Alter rules only in response to your child's maturity, not bold protests.
- 3. Be consistent.** Repetition is comforting to children. They realize, "I can count on things going a certain way." If you never give out treats before dinner, your preschooler will learn, "Nothing is going to change Mom's mind. I might as well eat dinner, and maybe I'll get a treat later."



## Is learning on the menu at mealtime?

Family mealtimes offer lots of chances to teach children in enjoyable ways. Are you serving your preschooler more than food at mealtime? Answer *yes* or *no* to the questions below:

- 1. Do you involve** your child in preparing the meal, including measuring, pouring and mixing?
- 2. Do you assign** your child mealtime responsibilities, such as counting napkins and putting them on the table?
- 3. Do you discuss** topics at the table that your child can contribute to? Do you ask your child specific questions?
- 4. Do you expect** family members to use table manners, such as saying *please* and chewing with mouths closed?

- 5. Do you reinforce** things your child is learning in preschool? "This napkin is a square."

### How well are you doing?

*More yes answers mean you are enriching family mealtimes with learning opportunities. For each no, try that idea.*

*"Family is the first school for young children, and parents are powerful models."*  
—Alice Sterling Honig

## Keep summer learning safe

Children learn so much by exploring and testing new skills. As you encourage this exploration this summer, ensure safety by practicing accident prevention, especially:

- **Around water.** Never turn your back when your child is in or near water.
- **In the sun.** Have your child wear a hat, sunglasses and sunscreen outdoors.
- **At the playground.** Check equipment for safety. Ideally, ground-level surfaces should be soft, not concrete.
- **Near tools.** Keep your child far away from sharp or dangerous equipment, such as lawn mowers and grills.

## Think about art together

Making art is a thinking activity for your child. To enhance it:



- **Ask questions.** If your child wants to draw a cat but isn't sure how, say, "What's the biggest part of a cat? How many legs does a cat have?"
- **Let your child make decisions.** Offer choices of supplies, colors and activities.
- **Talk about your child's creations.** "How did you make this?" "How does it make you feel?"

## Plan for screen-free time

More than one hour per day of screen time is linked to a higher rate of behavior problems and poor vocabulary growth in young children. To avoid excessive screen use, create a schedule and stick to it. Then, make it easy to choose screen-free activities. For example, bring books everywhere you go. If you are stuck waiting, hand your child a book instead of a digital device.

Source: S.K. Mupalla and others, "Effects of Excessive Screen Time on Child Development: An Updated Review and Strategies for Management," *Cureus*, Springer Nature.

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