

Helping Children Learn[®]

Tips Families Can Use to Help Children Do Better in School



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Give your child's attention span a boost by extending fun activities

Being able to concentrate on a lesson or activity for the whole time it lasts will help your child succeed in school. Kindergarten teachers don't expect young children to focus for hours without a break, but developing your child's attention span will help ensure that your student will make the most of learning time.



Children pay more attention to things they like. So choose an activity your preschooler enjoys, then look for ways to extend your child's focus on it for longer periods of time. You can:

- **Lengthen story time.** Read a longer story instead of looking at a short picture book. Or, try reading a beginning reader's chapter book over a period of several nights. Each night, remind your child of where you left off. When story time is over, explain that tomorrow you and your child are going to read on and find out what happens to the characters.
- **Tackle larger jigsaw puzzles together.** Try one with about 25 pieces. Remember, there is no need to finish a puzzle in one sitting! Attention span also involves coming back to a project after putting it aside.
- **Help your child do a multi-step art project.** For example, you might help your child shape an animal out of clay. Next, allow the clay to dry and harden. On another day, have your child paint the animal. After the paint dries, help your child apply eyes or fur using glue and yarn.



Decision-making takes practice to learn

You probably make most big decisions for your preschooler, but it is also vital to give your child plenty of practice making little ones. That's because in school, the choices students make can affect their education and future.

To start teaching your child to make wise decisions:

- **Provide choices.** Would your child like cereal or an egg for breakfast? Just make sure that both options are OK with you. Then, let your child live with the choice.
- **Ask your preschooler** to make choices for you. You might say, "Listen to these two radio stations. Which should I listen to today?"

- **Plan together.** If a preschool classmate will be coming over, help your child decide what activities they could do. Brainstorm a list of acceptable ideas and let your child choose what to offer.
- **Explain why** if you have to overrule one of your preschooler's decisions. Focus on the consequences.

Source: J. Roehlkepartain and N. Leffert, Ph.D., *What Young Children Need to Succeed*, Free Spirit Publishing.

Share a New Year's tradition

New Year's resolutions are ideal for showing your child that everyone can take action to improve themselves and situations around them. Explain that resolutions are promises, then suggest that your child resolve to:

- **Be nice to classmates** who look sad.
- **Wash hands regularly** and let you help with teeth brushing twice a day.
- **Always hold** a grown-up's hand when crossing the street.

Source: L. Falusi, MD, "Healthy New Year's Resolutions for Children & Teens," healthychildren.org.

Talk together about time

A new calendar year means it's time for a new calendar!

2025

Get or make a paper calendar to hang on your child's wall.

Then, look at it together and use it to teach your child

time-related words: "Today is *Monday*. Let's put a sticker

on *tomorrow*." "Manny came over *yesterday*." "We see Grandma every *week* on *Sunday*."



Count on math for fun

Making math seem like fun instead of work will help your child see it as an enjoyable activity. Have fun together playing these math games:

- **Put the Car in the Garage.** Label toy cars with numbers. Then, make garages out of small boxes and label them with the same numbers. Ask your child to drive each car into the garage with the matching number.



- **Number Feet.** Trace your child's footprint on paper and cut out 10 footprints. Label each with a number from 1-10 and spread them on the floor. Have your child say the numbers while stepping on each footprint.



What can families do to teach children self-control?

Q: My four-year-old will be going to kindergarten in the fall. The preschool teacher has suggested that working on self-control in the months to come will be good preparation. But how do I do that?

A: Children have an easier time in kindergarten if they are comfortable doing things like waiting their turn, following directions and expressing their emotions in appropriate ways. These behaviors all involve self-control. To help your child develop it:



- **Encourage waiting.** At this age, children should not expect adults to immediately take care of their every desire. For example, don't stop what you are doing mid-task or end a conversation with someone else just because your child asks for a snack or a drink. Say, "Unless you are hurt or something bad is happening (such as a fire), you need to wait until I finish what I'm doing. Thank you."
- **Teach that work comes before play.** This is generally true, in life as well as kindergarten. Give your child simple responsibilities to fulfill before playtime. For example, you could ask your preschooler to dress, eat breakfast and brush teeth before playing in the morning.
- **Talk about feelings.** When you see your child getting upset, name the feelings and demonstrate how to talk about them in an acceptable way, rather than physically lashing out.



Are you sharing the pleasures of books?

Your preschooler does not need to be able to read to discover that books are sources of relaxation and fun. This enjoyment makes learning to read appealing. Are you encouraging a love of books? Answer *yes* or *no* below:

- ___ **1. Do you read** books together at times of day when your child can enjoy them?
- ___ **2. Do you let** your child pick things you'll read—even if you have read them many times?
- ___ **3. Do you add** life to reading by using different voices for each character?
- ___ **4. Do you encourage** your child to ask questions, point out pictures and retell familiar parts of stories?
- ___ **5. Do you read** aloud in interesting places, such as a cozy,

pillow-filled corner or a "fort" under the table?

How well are you doing?

More yes answers mean you are nurturing your child's love of books and reading. For each no, try that idea.

"Reading for me is spending time with a friend."

—Gary Paulsen

Have lots of conversations

The more back-and-forth conversations you have with your child, the more your preschooler builds brain connections which improve learning ability. And the more turns each of you takes to keep the conversation going, the better. Try these strategies:

- **Discuss everything** you do with your child throughout the day.
- **Notice what your child** is interested in, and ask an open-ended question about it. "Where do you think that truck is going?" Give your child time to answer.
- **Offer a follow-up idea** of your own, then ask another related question.

Source: R.R. Romeo and others, "Neuroplasticity associated with changes in conversational turn-taking following a family-based intervention," *Developmental Cognitive Neuroscience*, Elsevier.

Improve social interactions

Many preschool children need a little help to develop their social skills. One way to help is to talk with your child about experiences that didn't go so well. If your child says, "Jamie wouldn't play dinosaurs with me," you could ask, "Did you and Jamie want to play with the same dino?" If so, talk about taking turns. If Jamie wanted to play something different, talk with your child about first playing what Jamie wants to play, and then suggesting something else to play.



Get ready for writing

Copying shapes can help your child develop pre-writing skills. Three- and four-year-olds can start by copying circles. When your child has mastered circles, move on to plus signs—a vertical line crossed by a horizontal line. Next, have your child copy squares or stick figures. Then, it's on to letters!

Source: T.L. Liddle, *Why Motor Skills Matter*, McGraw-Hill.

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