Early Childhood Parents®
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Strengthen early math skills with finger learning activities

When preschoolers count on their fingers, they aren't cheating—they're being smart! Research shows that using fingers helps young children understand numbers more easily. This habit acts as a "bridge," helping your child move from just thinking about numbers to actually visualizing them.

In fact, children who are encouraged to use their fingers to represent numbers—like holding up two fingers to show the number 2—often grasp basic math concepts faster than those who don't.

Try these "finger learning" activities with your preschooler:

- **Tracing.** Have your child trace single digit numbers in sand or on paper. After tracing a number, such as 4, ask your child to show you four fingers. This will reinforce the connection between the written symbol and the quantity it represents.
- **Make a puzzle.** Take an old jigsaw puzzle and write a number on the back of each piece. As you work together to reassemble the puzzle, have your child look at the number on the back of a piece. Before snapping it into place, ask your child to show you that number of fingers.
- **Dominos.** This classic game is perfect for making math connections. After matching two tiles, ask your child to show the number of dots on each piece using fingers. Your child can hold up two fingers on each hand when they find a match for a two-dot tile.

Source: T. Jay and J. Betenson, "Mathematics at Your Fingertips: Testing a Finger Training Intervention to Improve Quantitative Skills," *Frontiers in Education*.

Sleep is crucial for your child's brain growth

You already know sleep is essential for your child's growing body, but did you know it's just as vital for a developing brain? Quality sleep recharges the mind, helping your child regulate emotions, sharpen focus and retain memories.

To help your child establish healthy sleep habits:

- **Develop a sleep schedule.** Have your child go to bed and wake up about the same time each day. Aim for 10 to 13 hours of sleep every 24 hours.
- **Enjoy active outdoor play.** Studies show that exercise and fresh air help kids sleep better.
- **Follow a bedtime routine.** Help your child take a bath, put on pajamas and brush teeth. Read a bedtime story aloud. Talk about something positive. Then, lights out.
- **Ease bedtime fears.** Put a night light in the bedroom if your child wants one, and offer a favorite stuffed animal for company.

Source: D. Thompson, "Poor Sleep in Preschool Years Could Mean Behavior Troubles Later," HealthDay.

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Encourage your preschooler to talk about ideas and actions

An ability to communicate helps children express their thoughts and feelings. Communication skills can also make learning and exchanging information with others easier.

To help your child practice effective communication:

- **Get the story** behind your child's drawings. Ask about them, and write descriptions underneath.
- **Discuss plans in detail**. Instead of saying, "We're going to run errands," try, "We are going to take lunch to your uncle this afternoon. What else should we bring? What do you think he might like?"
- **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*

Try two strategies to help your child navigate big feelings

Can you be too supportive when your preschooler feels upset? Experts say *yes*. Families who always jump in to validate their child's negative feelings often think their children are socially skilled. However, teachers often see those same children as having a harder time getting along with others.

Why is there a difference? When families give too much attention to every bad mood, children may never learn to look at the situation from another point of view.

This does not mean you should ignore your child's feelings. But instead of agreeing every time your child feels upset, try staying neutral and doing these two things:

1. **Ask for details.** If your child says a friend was mean, learn more. Say, "Tell me what happened." This helps your child talk about feelings without you automatically framing your child as a victim.
2. **Challenge your child.** Your child may be upset about losing a game. Was the game really unfair? Ask, "Why do you think it was unfair?" If the truth is that your child just made a few mistakes, kindly point that out. Your child wasn't mistreated; your child just made a few mistakes—and that's OK. It is a tough but important lesson for preschoolers to learn.

Source: V.L. Castro and others, "Changing tides: Mothers' supportive emotion socialization relates negatively to third-grade children's social adjustment in school," *Social Development,* John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Are you building your preschooler's vocabulary?

The years between three and five are vital for your preschooler's language development. Are you providing your preschooler with opportunities to learn new words? Answer *yes* or *no* to the questions below to find out:

1. **Do you use specific words** to name things around you when talking with your child?
2. **Do you build on words** your child already knows by using *synonyms* (different words with similar meanings) and descriptive words? If your child says "big bird," you could say "enormous 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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Practical Ideas for Parents to Help Their Children.

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The Parent Institute, 1-800-756-5525,
P.O. Box 7474, Fairfax Station, VA 22039-7474.
Fax: 1-800-216-3667.
Or visit: www.parent-institute.com.

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Simple games can help you enhance your child's memory

When preschoolers can remember what they see and hear, they do much better in school. Play these fun games together to help improve your child's ability to remember information:

- **Read nursery rhymes** and rhyming stories. Rhymes are great because they follow patterns. Your child will learn to recognize these patterns, and then be able to remember what comes next.
- **Play a hiding game.** Hide a few objects as your child watches. Then, ask your preschooler to find them. To make it harder, hide more items, or wait a few minutes before letting your child look.
- **Play "I'm going on a trip."** Say, "I'm going on a trip and I'm packing pajamas." Your child must repeat your item and add a new one: "I'm going on a trip and I'm packing pajamas and a toothbrush." At first your child may be able to remember only one or two items. Expand the game as recall improves.
- **Let your child be the teacher.** After you demonstrate a new skill, such as sorting toys by color, ask your child to teach it back to you. Explaining the steps helps the information stick in your preschooler's brain.
- **Clap out a rhythm.** Clap a simple beat and ask your child to copy it. You can start with just two or three claps and make the patterns longer or faster as your child gets better at it.

Boost engagement during your family read-aloud time

Experts agree that reading with children is the best way to prepare them for school success. And it's something that you and your child can do every day.

To encourage your preschooler to participate in read-alouds:

- **Take a moment** before you start reading to look at the book. Ask what your child thinks the book might be about. Does the title on the cover offer any clues?
- **Read a few pages** and then pause to ask your child a question or two. One question to ask is: "What do you think will happen next in this story?" This encourages your child to stop, think about the story and make a prediction. Predicting is an important skill for reading comprehension.
- **Hold your child's interest.** Try using a different voice for each character. Ask your child, "What do you think this character sounds like? Can you make your voice do the character's voice?" Encourage your child to act out some of the characters' movements, too.
- **Let your child "read" to you.** Most preschoolers don't know how to read just yet. However, they can still hold the book, turn the pages and talk about what's happening in the illustrations. Or they can simply retell the story from memory.
- **Create anticipation.** With a longer book, stop at an exciting place so your child will look forward to reading again the next day.

Source: "Make the Most of Reading Aloud," ReadWriteThink, International Literacy Association.

Questions & Answers

Q: My child started attending a new preschool this month. Every morning drop-off starts with a burst of tears. It's been a few weeks, and things haven't gotten better. Is there anything I can do to make drop-off less stressful for both of us?

A: It's always difficult for families to watch their children fall apart when it's time to say goodbye. But what's going on is common for children of preschool age. Your child is still very dependent on you and being apart can create feelings of insecurity.

Make it clear that your child will be safe and cared for at preschool and you will always come back. Here's how:

- **Show your child** you trust the teacher. Say, "If you need help, I want you to ask Ms. Casey. She will take wonderful care of you."
- **Reassure your child** about your return. Draw a picture of a clock that shows the time you'll arrive. Say, "When the clock on the wall looks like this, I'll be here to pick you up." Give your child something of yours to keep until then, such as a scarf or a photo.
- **Follow a short goodbye routine** with your child. For example, walk to the front door and do a special handshake. Then you can give a hug and kiss, say you'll be back soon, and go. Tears may still fall for a few more weeks, but eventually the routine will be comforting to your child.
- **Stay in touch** with the teacher about how your child does after you leave. Ask about the activities your child seems to like best at preschool and be sure to talk about them at home.

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The Kindergarten Experience

Prioritize your child's school attendance!

Attendance rates for kindergartners are lower than for students in later school grades. Yet attendance in kindergarten is essential because 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 becomes important to them, too.
- **Schedule** medical appointments outside of school hours and family vacations during school breaks when possible.
- **Prioritize on-time arrival.** Plan mornings so your child arrives before the bell rings. Being late can cause your child to miss important information. It can also disrupt the entire class.
- **Follow school guidelines** for sick days. 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.
- **Ensure your child** rests when staying home from school, and focuses on quiet recovery activities rather than screen entertainment.
- **Remain calm** if your child doesn't want to go to school. This is common for kindergartners. Don't discuss it or raise your voice. Just explain that your child must go.

Preparation leads to successful parent-teacher conferences

Your child's first kindergarten parent-teacher conference is a major milestone for your family. It is completely natural to feel nervous; however, a little preparation will build your confidence and set the stage for a productive meeting.

Follow these steps to get ready:

- **Review schoolwork.** Look closely at the papers your child brings home. Notice if your child seems to be struggling or excelling in certain areas. Ask your child, "How do you feel about school?
- **Make a list** of things you want the teacher to know. Include any changes in your child's life. Also, prepare questions, such as, "How are my child's reading skills developing?" or "What can we work on together?"
- **Be on time.** Conferences are usually very short, so arrive on time to make every minute count.

- **Keep an open mind.** The teacher might mention areas where your child needs to grow. This can be tough to hear, but stay focused on solutions. Remember, you and the teacher are on the same team with one shared goal: helping your child succeed!

Why do some teachers assign homework in kindergarten?

Kindergarten assignments are generally brief, enjoyable tasks that reinforce classroom learning and help your child develop the positive study habits needed for future school years.

To help your child succeed, establish a quiet, distraction-free space for schoolwork. Having a dedicated "work area" often gives kindergartners a wonderful sense of pride and ownership in their learning!

Here are a few examples of the types of activities your child may be asked to complete at home:

- **Practice** saying name, age and home address.
- **Watch** a teacher-made video.
- **Draw** a picture of family.
- **Count** the items on a table.
- **Locate** three things that begin with a certain letter of the alphabet.
- **Go** on a nature walk to find two different kinds of leaves.
- **Find** three shapes and tell a family member what they are.