Early Childhood
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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 encourages the pretend play that is so vital between the ages of three and five. Outdoor pretend play 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 as your child plays outside with friends. But give the children 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*, Elsevier Ltd. All.

Help your child develop a strong sense of humor

Kidding around teaches your child that humor can relieve frustration—and can even make challenges fun! Studies have shown that having a good sense of humor also boosts children's health, optimism, self-esteem and resilience.

So, if your family gets stuck in the rain, don't complain. Instead, try a little humor. "This is like a shower! Too bad we don't have shampoo!" Then, pretend to wash your hair and laugh together.

To foster a sense of humor:

- **Read books together** that have amusing rhymes. Use silly voices while reading and giggle at the illustrations.
- **Make up silly songs** together.
- **Laugh at yourself** when you make a mistake.
- **Take turns** stringing funny words or sounds together.
- **Tell each other jokes.** Find age-appropriate jokes online or at the library.
- **Laugh** when your child tries to be funny. You are your child's most important audience!

Source: L. Frey, "A Child's Strong Sense of Humor is Nothing to Laugh at," Akron Children's Hospital.

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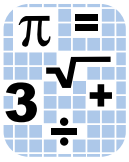
Try counting games to build your preschooler's math skills



Playtime is the perfect opportunity for young children to build basic math skills. Preschool math lessons don't have to be formal— the best ones are just a fun, natural part of your child's day!

Try these simple counting activities together:

- **Count with stickers.** Label index cards with numbers and supply a sheet of small stickers. Ask your child to put three stickers on the card with number 3, and so on. As always, supervise your child when playing with small objects.
- **Make number trees.** Cut out trees from brown and green construction paper. Then, cut out some "apples" from red construction paper. Label the trunks of the trees with numbers and ask your child to put the correct number of apples in each tree.
- **Count with cars.** Label toy cars with numbers. Make garages out of small boxes and label those with the same numbers. Then, ask your child to put each car into the garage with the matching number.

> **"Too often we give our children answers to remember rather than problems to solve."**
>
> *—Roger Lewin*

Use everyday opportunities to teach your preschooler respect

Respect and kindness are key ingredients for a happy and successful student. Children who master these traits have smoother interactions with peers and tend to see better outcomes in school.

To teach respectful behavior:

- **Explain that the world** is full of unique people, each with their own thoughts, feelings and needs.
- **Model respect** in daily interactions. Your preschooler learns best by watching you.
- **Provide perspective.** It's important for children to understand they aren't the center of the universe. Other people's wants and needs matter, too.
- **Practice kindness.** Help your child recognize how others might be feeling. For example, you might say, "Jessie is sitting alone and frowning. What is something supportive you could do as a friend?"
- **Role-play scenarios.** Help your child rehearse how to act before events. Practice how to behave appropriately at a birthday party, or how to politely ask a teacher a question.
- **Teach patience and waiting.** If your child interrupts a conversation, offer a firm but kind reminder: "Please wait. I'm on the phone now."
- **Practice sharing and taking turns,** whether it's during a game or in a conversation.
- **Rehearse how to say *no*.** Practice gentle ways your child can decline an invitation or request from a playmate.
- **Notice and praise good behavior.** When your child is considerate of others' feelings, point it out and offer sincere praise.

Are you helping your child handle activity shifts?

Transitioning from one activity to another is a regular part of school. However, many young children have a difficult time doing this smoothly.

Are you making it easier for your child to shift activities? Answer *yes* or *no* to the questions 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. After that, we'll read a book."
3. **Do you offer** your child a role in transitions? "We're leaving now. Will you please shut the door?"
4. **Do you use** objects to help your child move from one activity to another? "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?

If most of your answers are *yes*, you are helping your child navigate changes smoothly. For *no* answers, try those ideas.

Early Childhood Parents make the difference!

Practical Ideas for Parents to Help Their Children.

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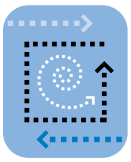
Shadow play is a fun way to explore science with your child



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

On a sunny day, take a piece of chalk to a sidewalk or driveway. Then, try a few of these ideas:

- **Draw an X on the pavement**. 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 turn them in the sunlight. 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.

Help your child learn valuable lessons while creating art

When preschoolers create art, they get practing making decisions, such as which colors to use when creating a picture. They learn about cause and effect when they move a crayon on paper to make a mark. And they discover many new ways to express themselves.

To help your preschooler get the most from making art:

- **Ask questions** to help your child get started. If your child wants to draw a kitten, ask, "What shape is a kitten's head?" "What are the different parts of a kitten?"
- **Resist the urge** to tell your child what to create. The process of creating is more important than your child's final product.
- **Provide a variety of art supplies.** Look for things around the house—glue, fabric scraps, coffee filters, egg cartons, catalogs, paper towel tubes, string and yarn.
- **Be patient.** Some young children don't like to get their hands dirty or sticky, for example. That's OK. Introduce your child to new art materials slowly.
- **Ask questions about the artwork.** How did your child make it? How does your child feel about it?
- **Offer specific feedback.** Describe what you see. Talk about the colors and materials your child used. Note what you like most. Don't just say, "That's pretty."
- **Proudly display artwork.** Put it on the wall or refrigerator. Send it to relatives.

Questions & Answers

Q: My preschooler speaks well enough to communicate wants and needs. However, kindergarten begins next fall, and I'd like to help my child build language skills even further. What are some things I can do?

A: Strong language skills are directly connected to learning to read and write well. The more you talk with your child, the stronger your child's skills will become.

Here's what you can do:

- **Establish a time** every day when your child knows you are available to talk. Many families use a mealtime or the few minutes right before bed.
- **Ask your child** to pick something to talk about, and then discuss it together.
- **Encourage your preschooler** to ask questions. Give age-appropriate answers.
- **Talk to your child** about your day, and ask about your child's day.
- **Let your child finish** speaking. Ask some questions about what was said.
- **Talk about things** your family is going to do in the next few days, or things you'd like to do as a family.
- **Use new words** your child may not have heard before. Synonyms are useful here. Try saying *rapid* or *quick* instead of fast.
- **Provide clues** so your child can infer the meaning of new words. For example, "We haven't eaten in hours! I'm *famished*, aren't you? I think I can hear your stomach growling!" From this, your child can learn that *famished* means hungry.

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The Kindergarten Experience

Take five steps to address clownish misbehavior

It's wonderful to have a good sense of humor. But it's no laughing matter when a student constantly disrupts class with jokes and rude body sounds.

If your child is clowning around in school, take these steps:

1. **Look for the cause** of the behavior. Sometimes children need attention or want to impress their classmates. Often, they try to use humor to cover up academic shortcomings.
2. **Work with the teacher.** Together, try to identify when the problem behavior occurs and what might trigger it. Acting up after recess, for example, may mean that your child needs help settling down. The teacher might give your child a transition task like handing out worksheets.
3. **Talk about it.** Your child might not understand when it's OK to be silly and when it's not. Explain that there are times when being funny and "clever" is actually being disrespectful.
4. **Establish clear guidelines.** With the teacher's help, explain to your child what type of behavior you both expect.
5. **Set consequences** that you and the teacher will enforce if your child breaks the rules.

By following these five steps, you and the teacher should be able to get your child's behavior back on track!

Source: K. Levine, What To Do ... When Your Child Has Trouble at School, Reader's Digest Books.

Teach your kindergartner how to win and lose gracefully

Many kids begin participating in organized sports in kindergarten. But whether or not your child plays a sport, learning sportsmanship pays off in the classroom.

To get the lesson across:

- **Focus on fun.** Young children should participate in games and sports to learn, have fun and get exercise. When they do this, they are winners, no matter what the score.
- **Practice good manners.** Even when adults focus on fun, kids are aware of who does "well" and who does not. Teach your child to say "good game" or "good job" to teammates and opponents—win or lose.
- **Let your child know** that it is OK to feel frustrated —but that it's never a reason to quit. "Sometimes you catch the ball, and sometimes you don't. It's hard to feel good when you don't catch it, but don't give up! You will improve with practice."

Source: I. Kamber, "The Importance of Sports for Children," Novak Djokovic Foundation.

Preventing school absences fosters kindergarten success

Regular attendance helps create a positive school community for students and teachers. And missing school too often can negatively affect academic success—even in kindergarten.

To keep your child from missing school:

- **Enforce routines.** Stick to a regular bedtime and wake-up time that gives your child plenty of sleep. Get ready for school the night before—selecting out outfits, packing lunches, etc.
- **Show pride** when your child gets ready for school on time. To speed up a dawdling child, set a timer and issue a "beat the clock" challenge.
- **Avoid taking family vacations** while school is in session. Even if students complete schoolwork while absent, they still miss classdiscussions, group activities and other kinds of learning.
- **Schedule appointments** for after school and on weekends. These slots fill up quickly, so consider requesting them far in advance.

When absences are unavoidable, remember to talk with the teacher to find out what you can do at home to help your child catch up.