Early Childhood
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Four daily habits can boost your child's attention span

Paying attention to adults and to instructions is vital for children's success in school and in life. 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 between 10 and 13 hours of sleep every 24 hours.
2. **Engaging in physical activity.** Studies have shown that regular, vigorous exercise stimulates brain cells—which improves memory and attention. Bundle up and head outside for a walk or to bounce a ball.
3. **Eating a nutritious diet.** Fruits, vegetables, whole grains and lean protein help the brain do its best work, including paying attention. Healthy foods should make up most of your child's diet.
4. **Limiting screen time.** Watching TV and playing online games causes many children to tune out. Instead, engage your child's mind by filling his 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.

Introduce your preschooler to journal writing

Having your child keep a journal when she can hardly write her name may sound odd. However, preschoolers don't have to know how to write to get involved in this activity.

To help your child get started with journal writing:

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

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

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Maintain routines and discipline during breaks from preschool

Winter break is around the corner for many preschool students. Unfortunately, this break often disturbs routines—and many children struggle to readjust when school resumes.

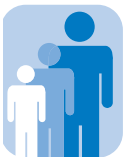
Here are ways to keep things more or less on track so everyone in your family will have an easier time next month:

- **Adhere to routines** when possible. There will be days when your child eats or sleeps at unusual times, but these are usually part of an event that you can plan for. The rest of the time, enforce a consistent eating and sleeping schedule.
- **Stick to your rules!** Does your child stay up until all hours of the night all year long? Then he shouldn't do it during the holiday season either. The holidays are not a time to forget discipline and respect. In fact, the many changes that take place this season are even more of a reason to keep discipline unchanged.
- **Remind your child** about preschool. Some kids think the school year has also come to an end when they hear adults talking about the calendar year ending. So say things like, "Won't it be fun to tell your teacher about your trip to Grandma's when you go back to preschool?"

"Treat a child as though he is already the person he is becoming."

—Haim G. Ginott

The holidays are a wonderful time to promote kindness



Kindness is a valuable character trait to instill in your preschooler. Children who are caring and think of others are more likely to get along with their teachers and classmates—which contributes to a positive learning environment.

To promote kindness:

- **Be a good role model.** Let your child see you being kind to others. You could offer to help carry someone else's groceries, or let someone in a hurry get ahead of you in line.
- **Encourage your child** to make presents for friends and family members. She can give a piece of art she made in school, coupons for hugs, promises to make a sister's bed or take out the trash for Dad.
- **Have your child** go through her closet and select items to donate to a child in need. Together, take bags of clothes or toys to a charitable organization.
- **Bake cookies together** and take them to a nursing home, your local police department or a homeless shelter.
- **Help your child express** her thanks. Remind her to say *thank you* and have her write thank-you notes for gifts.
- **Notice when your child** performs a good deed or says something nice. Say, "That was so kind of you," or "Thank you for being so polite."

Are you teaching your preschooler to love books?

Long before children are able to read all by themselves, they learn that books are sources of relaxation and fun. This is a critical step toward reading.

Answer *yes* or *no* to the questions below to see if you're making books enjoyable:

___**1. Do you spend** time reading with your child every day, such as during bath time and at bedtime?

___**2. Do you choose** books you know your child likes, even if it means reading the same books over and over?

___**3. Do you read** with enthusiasm, using different voices for characters and situations?

___**4. Do you talk** about what you read, encourage your child to ask questions, point out pictures and recite familiar parts?

___**5. Do you visit** the library with your child regularly to browse and check out new books?

How well are you doing?

More *yes* answers mean you are fostering a sense of enjoyment about reading. For each *no* answer, try that idea from the quiz.

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Take advantage of the winter months with learning activities

December ushers in the first official day of winter. Here are a few activities you can do with your preschooler to help him learn about colors, numbers, science, nature and more.

Together:

- **Enjoy a winter picnic.** Bundle up and head outdoors with hot chocolate and graham crackers. Talk with your child about what he sees in nature in the winter. Or, spread a blanket inside and serve his favorite lunch on it. You can even turn your picnic into a reading party!
- **Have fun with cookie cutters.** Ask your child to trace around each cookie cutter with a pencil. Look at the shapes they make. Then place the cutters in a paper bag and see if your child, using his sense of touch, can bring out the cookie cutter that matches each shape.
- **Listen to the sounds of winter.** Take a walk and talk about what you hear. Perhaps you hear boots crunching on snow, rain splashing or wind whistling.
- **Be winter detectives.** Help your child identify the signs of winter in a cold climate, such as freezing weather, less daylight, bare trees, people wearing warm clothing and smoke rising from chimneys.
- **Count pairs.** Gather several pairs of mittens or gloves. Or, cut pairs of mittens out of different colors of paper. Mix them up. Have your child sort them back into pairs.

Music can be a valuable tool for teaching your preschooler

There is almost no limit to what your child can learn from music. And with the holiday season approaching, music is just about everywhere!

Music can help your preschooler:

- **Identify emotions.** Some songs sound happy, others sad, still others calm and relaxed.
- **Strengthen language skills.** Learning lyrics introduces your child to new vocabulary.
- **Identify patterns** as he learns to recognize when the chorus will appear in the song.

To help your child get the most benefit from music:

- **Have at least one time** of the day when your child can expect to hear music. It could be on the car ride to preschool, during playtime or just before bed.
- **Give your child opportunities** to move to music. This is even more fun for preschoolers if they have something to wave as they move. Long strips of fabric or scarves work perfectly.
- **Blend music** with other creative activities. For example, let your child listen to music while she paints or draws.
- **Expose your child** to rhythm. Show her how to clap her hands in time to the beat of some of her favorite songs.

Source: J.R. Bradford-Vernon, *How to Be Your Child's First Teacher: Insights for Parent Involvement,* Instructional Fair, TS Denison.

Q: My daughter is in her last year of preschool and will be starting kindergarten next September. Her teacher has suggested we spend the rest of this school year working on her self-control. How can we do that?

Questions & Answers

A: Kindergarten teachers are used to dealing with five-year-olds and do not expect perfect behavior. But your child will have an easier time at school if she can do things like wait her turn, follow directions and express her feelings in appropriate ways.

To help your daughter develop self-control, encourage her to:

- **Wait for what she wants.** At this age, your child should not expect you to immediately take care of her every desire. For example, don't end a phone call just because she wants a snack and a drink. Say, "Unless you are hurt or something bad is happening (such as a fire), you need to wait until Mommy is off the phone."
- **Work before she plays.** Almost always, people must work before they play. This will also be the case when your child gets to school. Give her simple responsibilities to fulfill before she gets to play. For example, she should dress, eat breakfast and brush her teeth before she starts playing each morning.
- **Use words to express feelings.** When you see your child begin to get upset, gently stop her. Ask her to tell you how she feels *before* she gets out of control. Help her express her feelings in an acceptable way, such as by drawing a picture.

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The Kindergarten Experience

Be mindful when you are speaking about your child

As a parent, you are probably careful about the words you say *to* your child so you don't damage his self-image.

Unfortunately, some parents forget that they need to be just as careful when they are talking *about* their child. A parent might say to a kindergarten teacher, for example, "Jackson isn't great at math," while Jackson is sitting nearby. Ouch.

To avoid damaging your child's self-esteem and motivation to learn:

- **Realize your child is listening**—even when you think he isn't. Your kindergartner may not hear everything you say, but he picks up on a lot, even if he doesn't show it. He may also misinterpret some things he overhears because of his age.
- **Respect your child's feelings.** It's unlikely that you would complain about a friend while he is standing right there. You shouldn't gripe about your child in his presence, either.
- **Choose your words carefully.** Imagine how your words could make your child feel—or how you'd feel if you heard someone say them about you. Put a positive spin on things: "Subtraction is challenging for Jackson, but he never gives up. How can we support him?"
- **Let your child overhear** you saying nice things about him. "Jackson helped his brother pick up his room. He's such a caring big brother."

Strategies may help distracted kindergartners regain focus

Your kindergartner has been in school for several months now. What should you do if the teacher calls and says your child is having a difficult time paying attention in class? First, stay calm!

Sometimes, a few simple strategies can improve your child's focus:

- **Change seats.** Ask the teacher if your child can be seated close to her and away from the windows and doors. Sights and sounds from outside may distract your child.
- **Talk about the school day.** Ask the teacher for the class schedule and review it with your child each morning. Anticipating activities may help her concentrate on what is going on in class.
- **Work with the teacher.** Ask if there are specific times your child tends to be distracted. Does she tune out during long lists of spoken instructions, for example? By sharing information and working together, you will be able to help your child.

Support school attendance by focusing on your child's health

Winter is the season when many children contract colds, flu, strep throat and a host of other ailments. Of course, this results in missed days of school and learning.

While it is impossible to keep your child from *ever* getting sick, you can take steps to give him the best chance of staying healthy—and attending school. Here's how:

- **Keep your child** up to date on medical visits.
- **Make sure your child** wears proper protective clothing in cold weather. A lot of body heat escapes through the head, so wearing a hat is a great idea on a cold day.
- **Have your child** wash his hands as soon as he walks in the door from school. This can prevent the spread of many diseases.
- **Avoid exposing your child** to people who are already sick. Sick family members should avoid sharing drinks, and limit contact.