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Everyday play builds important skills and promotes learning

Studies show that preschoolers learn a lot through play. But have you ever wondered just what your child is learning during playtime? Here's how different activities help your preschooler grow:

- **Making art inspires** creativity and builds fine motor skills. Watch closely as your child cuts, colors, glues and tapes—and be sure to celebrate the finished masterpieces.
- **Pretending strengthens** the imagination. Using toy cars, props and costumes helps set the scene. Ask your child questions like, "How would someone feel in this situation?" or "What might they do or say?"
- **Building things encourages** young children to plan, count and solve problems. Give your child a variety of blocks, boxes and puzzle pieces to work with.
- **Making music improves** listening, movement and rhythm. Try singing, playing instruments and moving to the beat with your child.
- **Playing board games teaches** patience and how to work with others. You can also use games to teach your child letters, numbers and new words.
- **Playing outside promotes** curiosity, creativity and thinking. It also helps build large muscle skills. Go outside and explore with your child. Research shows that spending time in nature helps children learn better.

Source: M. Yogman and others, "The Power of Play: A Pediatric Role in Enhancing Development in Young Children," *Pediatrics*, American Academy of Pediatrics.

Help your child learn letters in creative ways

Recognizing letters is a key step toward reading and writing. Luckily, learning them can be a lot of fun for your preschooler!

To teach your child about letters in engaging ways:

- **Make them out of food.** Give your child tasty, kid-friendly supplies to create letters. Try using round crackers or thin, straight pretzels. Allow your child to break pieces of food to form different shapes.
- **Light them up.** In a dark room, use the light beam from a flashlight to draw letters on a ceiling or wall. Can your child follow the beam and figure out the letters you're drawing?
- **Start with parts.** Draw a simple shape or line, such as a circle or diagonal line. Ask your child to add to it to turn it into a letter, such as T or N. Offer hints as needed. Then, switch roles.
- **Play letter match.** Write uppercase and lowercase letters on a sheet of paper. Have your child draw lines to connect each lowercase letter to its matching uppercase letter.

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Making predictions builds your preschooler's thinking skills

Making predictions involves looking at clues and spotting patterns. Even young children can make smart guesses using what they already know.

To help your child practice predicting, try talking about:

- **Books.** Guessing what comes next helps your child understand the story. Before turning a page, ask, "Where do you think they will sail next in that boat?"
- **Everyday events.** "What will we pass on our way to Grandma's house?" "Do you think we will find a parking spot close to the store?"
- **Daily routines.** "I have my uniform on and my keys out. Where am I going?" "What do we do right after we finish eating dinner?" "What toys will float in your bath?"
- **Weather and seasons.** "Look at those dark, heavy clouds. What do you think is about to fall from the sky?" "What will happen to the leaves when it gets cold?"

Make sure to talk about what actually happens, too! "You guessed we would see a horse farm on the way to Grandma's. There it is! I see one black horse and three brown ones."

> **"The child supplies the power but the parents have to do the steering."**
>
> *—Benjamin Spock*

Share family meals to boost your child's vocabulary & learning

Sharing family meals with your preschooler is a great way to enhance learning. Experts say children who regularly eat at least one meal a day with their families are healthier and have better grades.

It turns out that family mealtime is just as important as playtime and story time for helping children learn new words. Try these mealtime tips:

- **Plan meals together.** Have your child help you make menus for the week and write the grocery list.
- **Let your child help prepare food** by measuring ingredients and stirring. Show your preschooler how to set and clear the table.
- **Teach manners**. Practice putting napkins in laps, chewing with mouths closed, and saying *please* and *thank you*.
- **Add a fun twist.** Have an indoor picnic by spreading a blanket on the floor. Or, create a story by starting with "Once upon a time …" and having everyone add a sentence.
- **Keep talk positive.** Ask each family member to share one good thing about their day.
- **Start fun traditions.** You could make pancakes on Saturday mornings, have taco night on Tuesdays, or enjoy soup and sandwiches on Sunday nights.
- **Be creative.** If you cannot eat dinner together, try sharing breakfast instead. You can even plan a virtual meal with family members using a video chat.

For more tips and information on the importance of family meals, visit The Family Dinner Project website online.

Are you teaching your child to be a strong listener?

Listening is an essential skill for school success—and it can be fun to practice! Are you finding creative ways to help your child develop listening skills? Answer *yes* or *no* to the questions below to find out:

1. **Do you play games** with your child that require careful listening, such as Simon Says?
2. **Do you take turns** telling a story with your child? You make up a sentence, then your child makes up the next sentence.
3. **Do you send your child** on short missions to bring you things? Each round, you can add more items.
4. **Do you clap a rhythm** and ask your child to clap it back to you?
5. **Do you play Guess the Sound?** You make a sound when your child's eyes are shut—jingling keys, crumpling paper, pouring water, etc. Your child has to guess the sound. Then, switch places.

How well are you doing?

Each *yes* answer means you are helping your child have fun while strengthening listening skills. For *no* answers, try those ideas.

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Practical Ideas for Parents to Help Their Children.

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Use jigsaw puzzles to increase your child's attention span

Jigsaw puzzles are a fantastic tool to help strengthen your child's ability to focus on a task. Putting pieces together builds important fine motor skills and helps young children learn to think both logically and visually.

More importantly, puzzles are one of the best ways to help children learn to engage with a project for longer periods of time.

Working on a puzzle can teach your preschooler to:

- **Concentrate quietly on a project.** In kindergarten, the teacher will expect your child to be able to sit and work independently for short periods of time. Putting puzzles together provides a calm, structured way to practice this skill now.
- **Recognize progress.** Your child will see progress as the puzzle picture develops. Start with simple, eight-piece puzzles, and as those become easy, move up to more challenging ones. Some older preschoolers can even master 50-piece puzzles!
- **Return to a project.** Attention is not just about finishing a task in one sitting. Some projects are too big to finish all at once. Practicing how to stop, save a puzzle and return to finish it the next day is great preparation for the projects your child will face in elementary school.
- **Solve problems.** Puzzles encourage children to look at shapes, colors and patterns, and to test different ideas when a piece does not fit right away.

Praising young children for being smart can backfire

It is wonderful to offer praise when your child learns something new; however, the way you offer that praise matters.

Researchers believe that when children hear "You're so smart" all the time, they can feel pressured to prove they're intelligent. That means they might be more willing than others to cheat at games and other activities.

This does not mean you should stop cheering for your child. It just means families should be thoughtful about *what* they choose to praise.

When praising your child:

- **Avoid using labels.** Resist the urge to call your child *the smart one* or *the athletic one*. When kids feel their identity is tied to a label, they may feel they have to act that way at all costs.
- **Focus on effort and progress** instead of talent. Did your child work hard on an art project? Compliment actions by saying, "You really colored carefully!"
- **Highlight the effort** behind the result. Instead of saying, "You are naturally good at this," try saying, "I can see how much practice you put into that." This shows that *effort*, not just talent, is how people get better.
- **Encourage the learning journey.** Praise each step your child takes to solve a problem rather than just the final result. This helps your child stay motivated even when things get difficult.

Source: L. Zhao and others, "Praising Young Children for Being Smart Promotes Cheating," *Psychological Science*, SAGE Publications

Questions & Answers

Q: My preschooler loves to sit and play for hours but isn't very physically active. How can I add exercise into our daily routines?

A: Regular exercise helps young children build strong muscles and bones, develop motor skills and boost self-esteem. It's never too early to start integrating exercise into your child's daily life.

To promote physical activity:

- **Schedule regular times** for exercise and stick to them. Think about when your child is likely to have the most energy.
- **Take turns choosing** the activity. If your child likes soccer, for example, agree to kick a ball around often.
- **Plan activities** that make your preschooler feel successful. Avoid physical games that require too much agility or are too difficult.
- **Keep an activity log.** It's fun to look through it and see how committed your whole family is to physical health.
- **Drive less and walk more.** Brainstorm with your family about places you can walk to instead of taking a car or bus.
- **Think of creative ways** you and your child can exercise. You could play a game of tag or have a sit-up contest. On rainy days, you might build an indoor obstacle course or make up a dance.
- **Use exercise rather than food** as a reward. For example, "After you pick up your toys, we can go on a family walk."
- **Limit passive screen time.** Watching videos and playing computer games doesn't require much physical or mental energy.

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The Kindergarten Experience

Do all kids learn how to read in kindergarten?

One of the most common questions families ask is, "When will my child learn to read?" The truth is, there isn't a one-size-fits-all answer. Some children are reading books by the end of kindergarten, while others are still working on it—and that is perfectly OK! Every child learns at an individual pace.

To help your kindergartner develop reading skills:

- **Establish a daily reading time.** Sit down for at least 15 minutes to read together. Let your child "help" as you read. When you reach a simple or familiar word, pause and let your child fill it in. For example, "Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What do you ... ?" This builds reading confidence.
- **Go beyond books.** Look for words everywhere—in board games, on signs and more. Run your finger from left to right under the words as you read them aloud. Ask questions like, "Which word starts with the letter B?" "Can you find the word *it*?"
- **Keep reading fun.** Learning to read is hard work! If you notice your child getting frustrated, it is OK to take a break and try again later.
- **Build independence.** When your child practices reading, it's tempting to jump in and help right away. Instead, let your child take the lead and try to sound out words. If your child is really stuck on a word, just supply it and let your child continue reading.

Encourage your kindergartner to develop a love of learning

The early school years are the perfect time to build a lifelong love of learning. To help your child feel excited about school:

- **Talk about it every day.** Discuss what your child likes best about school.
- **Ask about learning.** Can your child teach you something the class has learned?
- **Create a brag wall.** There's no better way to celebrate success than to display your child's schoolwork.
- **Speak positively** about school staff. Always talk kindly about your child's teachers. Emphasize how much teachers care about their students.
- **Encourage new friendships** with classmates. Arrange a short playdate at the park or the local library for them to spend time together.
- **Read together every day.** Children who love books and feel comfortable with reading are less likely to be overwhelmed by reading tasks in kindergarten.

Your child's vision plays a big role in academic success

When kindergartners have vision problems that aren't treated, they often struggle more than their classmates. Unfortunately, many children do not realize they aren't seeing clearly. Instead of speaking up, they might just rub their eyes, squint or try their best to keep up.

Support healthy vision by getting your child's eyes examined regularly. In addition, you can:

- **Choose reading areas** that are well-lit so your child won't need to strain when looking at books.
- **Give your child's eyes a break** from screens to prevent blurry vision and trouble focusing.
- **Provide sunglasses** to protect your child's eyes from bright sunlight.
- **Serve healthy foods.** From leafy greens to fortified milk, nutritious foods are proven to support strong minds, bodies and eyes.
- **Watch for warning signs,** such as your child sitting too close to the TV or complaining of headaches.

Source: S.L.J. White and others, "Vision screening outcomes of Grade 3 children in Australia: Differences in academic achievement," International Journal of Educational Research.