Early Childhood
Parents
make the difference!
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Promote brain growth with back-and-forth conversations

Preschoolers who engage in frequent conversations with family members not only have better language skills, they also develop the brain power needed for school success.

That's the finding of one study on language exposure in early childhood. Scientists concluded that back-and-forth conversations build brain pathways—which, in turn, boost children's ability to think and learn.

To strengthen your preschooler's brain power:

- **Discuss everything** you do together throughout the day. Describe your actions and feelings. Encourage your child to do the same.
- **Follow your child's lead.** Talk and play together as long as your child shows interest. Focus on the words and objects that your child is focusing on at the moment.
- **Ask open-ended questions**, such as, "Why do you like playing with your stuffed animals?" Give your child plenty of time to respond.
- **Be an active listener.** When your child speaks to you, stop what you're doing and pay attention.
- **Speak clearly** and use correct grammar. Avoid using baby talk.
- **Seek guidance.** If you have any concerns or questions about your child's language development, talk to your pediatrician.

Source: R.R. Romeo and others, "Beyond the 30-Million-Word Gap: Children's Conversational Exposure Is Associated With Language-Related Brain Function," *Psychological Science*, Association for Psychological Science.

New Year's resolutions are for kids, too!



Should preschoolers make some New Year's resolutions of their own? The American Academy of Pediatrics says *yes*.

This group of doctors for babies, children and teens has specific ideas to offer, too. Your preschooler could resolve to:

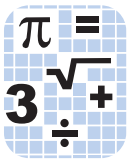
- **Spend more time** looking at books and less time on digital devices.
- **Wash hands** regularly—especially after using the bathroom and before eating.
- **Pick up toys** after playing.
- **Be kind to animals,** including any family pets.
- **Be active** three times a week or more. Make a list of enjoyable activities, such as playing tag, jumping rope or riding a big wheel.
- **Brush teeth** twice a day.
- **Be nice to classmates** who need a friend or look sad or lonely.
- **Talk with a trusted adult** when feeling scared or in need of help.

Source: "Healthy New Year's Resolutions for Children & Teens," American Academy of Pediatrics.

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Try counting games to build your preschooler's math skills



Preschoolers have many opportunities to build math skills during playtime. The key thing to remember is that math activities should not be difficult. They should simply be part of your child's everyday fun.

Foster that fun with these simple counting activities:

- **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

Show your preschooler how to investigate using five senses



Does your preschooler know about the five senses—*sight, hearing, touch, smell* and *taste?* Children will learn more about these concepts when they are in kindergarten, but now is a great time to introduce them.

Tell your child how people can use their senses to investigate new things. For example, give your child a piece of fruit, such as an apple. Then, ask five questions:

1. **What do you see?** Have your child look at the apple and describe it in words. For example, "It's red and shiny."
2. **What do you hear?** Have your child tap it with a spoon or finger. What does it sound like?
3. **What do you feel?** Have your child touch the apple and describe how it feels. Is it soft or hard?
4. **What do you smell?** Have your child smell the apple and describe its scent. Does it smell sweet?
5. **What do you taste?** Have your child take a bite and describe the taste.

Challenge your child to connect the senses, too. If the apple smelled sweet, did it taste sweet, too? What sound did the apple make when biting into it?

Have your child investigate a carrot using this same method. While this activity works well with food, it's important to remind young children *never* to put anything into their mouths without asking!

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 builds their interest in learning to read. 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.

Early Childhood Parents make the difference!

Practical Ideas for Parents to Help Their Children.

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Focus on your preschooler's interests to build attention span



The ability to focus on an activity is an important skill for school success. Children find it easier to pay attention to activities that interest them, so choose an activity your child enjoys. Then look for ways to keep your child focused on it for increasing periods of time.

Here are some ideas:

- **Extend your story time.** Instead of looking at a short picture book, try reading a longer story or a beginning reader's chapter book over a period of several nights. Each night, remind your child of where you are in the story. Then explain that tomorrow night, you are going to read on to find out what happens to the characters.
- **Work together on a jigsaw puzzle.** 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 you have put it aside. Move on to more complicated puzzles once your child masters these.
- **Try a multi-step art project.** For example, help your child shape an animal out of clay. Allow the clay to dry and harden. On another day, let your child paint the animal. After the paint dries, help your child apply fur or eyes using glue and yarn or bits of paper.

Making good decisions requires lots of patience and practice



Success in school (and life) hinges on the ability to make good decisions. Your child will have to make lots of decisions in school, such as whether or not to observe classroom rules, whether or not to finish assignments, etc. Those choices will affect your child's education and future.

To get your child started on the path to good decision-making:

- **Offer choices.** Would your child like to have yogurt or an egg for breakfast? Should your family go to the park or to the library on Saturday?
- **Ask for advice.** Children feel empowered when they are asked to decide something for others. You might ask your child to listen to music from two different radio stations and decide which you should listen to. Then, listen to the station your child selects.
- **Involve your child in planning.** For example, if you are hosting a playdate, help your child plan what the children could do together. Offer a list of acceptable activities to choose from.
- **Provide explanations.** Making good choices takes lots of practice, and sometimes you will have to overrule your preschooler's decisions. When you do, be sure to take the time to explain *why*. Focus on the consequences of a choice. "I know you'd like to watch that movie, but it's scary and it would upset you. When you're older, we can think about it again."

Source: J. Roehlkepartain and N. Leffert, Ph.D., *What Young Children Need to Succeed: Working Together to Build Assets from Birth to Age 11*, Free Spirit Publishing.

Q: My child is in the last year of preschool and will be starting kindergarten next September. The teacher has suggested we spend the rest of this school year working on 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 children will have an easier time at school if they learn how to wait their turn, follow directions and express their feelings in appropriate ways.

To develop self-control, encourage your child to:

- **Wait.** At this age, children should not expect adults to immediately take care of every desire. For example, don't end a phone call just because your child asks for 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. Thank you."
- **Work before play.** Almost always, people must work before they play. This will be the case in kindergarten, too. 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.
- **Use words to express feelings.** When you see your child begin to get upset, name the feelings and demonstrate how to talk about them in an acceptable way. Your child could also draw a picture or take deep breaths to cool down.

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The Kindergarten Experience

Show your child the benefits of volunteering



Volunteering together is an effective way to help your kindergartner develop empathy and concern for others.

To raise a kind and caring child:

- **Talk about helping.** Discuss how your child's efforts can make a difference. This will make your kindergartner feel powerful and motivated to contribute.
- **Look for books and stories** about kind and caring people. Ask your librarian for some suggestions. Read them with your child and talk about how helping others also makes the helper feel good.
- **Select one or two** community service activities in your area to do with your child. You could collect canned goods for a food pantry. You could visit an elderly neighbor. Your example of service is a powerful way to teach your child about your values.
- **Have fun.** If your child loves animals, see if you can donate old blankets to an animal shelter. If your child loves the outdoors, perhaps you could pitch in at a park.
- **Make giving a tradition.** Instead of always asking what your child *wants*, ask what your child *wants to give*. Are there any gently used books or toys in your home that could be donated to a hospital or a homeless shelter?
- **Introduce your child** to people who help others for a living. Talk to police officers, fire fighters or emergency paramedics. Ask them to tell your child how they serve the people in your community.

Motivate your kindergartner without resorting to bribes

Adults sometimes make deals with children. "If you put all of your books away, I'll take you to the library." "If you share with your sister, I'll give you a cookie." Deals like these may seem like effective motivators for kids. Unfortunately, they're not.

When adults present ideas to young children in this way, they are offering a *bribe*—not motivation. A bribe doesn't teach respect or responsibility. Instead, it teaches kids "If I do what this person wants, I will get something for it."

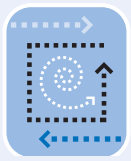
To avoid falling into the bribe trap:

- **Change the way** you say things. For example, use the word *when* instead of *if*. This puts the emphasis on what you expect your child to do, rather than allowing a choice.
- **Explain why the action** is helpful or valuable. "When you put your books away, they don't get stepped on or lost. Then we won't waste time looking for your library books and we will have time to read an extra story."



Source: J. Pawel, *The Parent's Toolshop: The Universal Blueprint for Building a Healthy Family,* Ambris Publishing.

Teach your kindergartner about time with hands-on activities



Time is a difficult concept for young children to master. It is abstract—your child can't see it, hear it or touch it. Truly understanding time requires higher-order thinking skills.

Here are two activities to help your kindergartner learn the concept of a "day." (Learning smaller amounts of time, such as hours and minutes, comes later.)

1. **Give your child a calendar**, or make one together. Each morning, ask your child to cross off the day before. This shows that the preceding day is over, and you have begun a new one.
2. **Make a paper chain** to help your child count down to a special event, and hang it in a noticeable spot. Each night, have your child tear off one link. Explain that just as the chain is growing shorter, so is the amount of time until the special event. Each time you tear a link, the event is one day closer!