

Helping Children Learn[®]

Tips Families Can Use to Help Children Do Better in School



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Onalaska Elementary School

Add fun activities that boost math skills into your child's day

Studies have long shown that doing math activities at home improves preschoolers' math outcomes when they get to school. Recent research is identifying specific kinds of activities that make a difference.

You don't always need to make math activities into formal lessons. Here are some ways to build your child's skills while spending carefree time together:

- **Sort.** Putting objects into categories helps your child grasp basic math concepts. To make it exciting, turn it into a challenge. "How fast can you find six red things in the kitchen?"
- **Cook and bake.** Every time your child scoops a half-cup of flour or hands you two eggs, she's exposed to mathematical concepts like fractions and quantity. It's educational, but she'll just think it's yummy.
- **Handle money.** Go on a pretend shopping trip in your kitchen. "This gallon of milk costs \$3.50. That means we need to give the cashier three one-dollar bills and two quarters."
- **Play board games.** Rolling dice and moving pieces around a board offer hands-on lessons in counting. As a bonus, board games teach your child how to be a humble winner or a gracious loser.



Source: B. Mutaf-Yildiz and others, "Frequency of Home Numeracy Activities Is Differentially Related to Basic Number Processing and Calculation Skills in Kindergartners," *Frontiers in Psychology*, niscw.com/num.



Doing tasks 'for real' beats pretending

Many preschoolers enjoy fantasy play—pretending to be a superhero or that stuffed animals can talk. But research shows that when it comes to real life, children would rather actually do a task than pretend to do it.

Of course, you shouldn't swap your child's plastic lawn mower for the real thing. Consider these three kid-friendly swaps that will make his "play" feel meaningful and real:

1. **Cutting up food.** You would never hand your child a sharp knife. But what if you let him use a plastic knife to cut banana slices?
2. **Making music.** Your child may have a bin of plastic instruments.

But he may get a greater thrill from banging on a full-size tambourine than a tiny toy one.

3. **Gardening.** If his kid-sized shovel doesn't do much, give your preschooler a hand spade instead when he helps you dig in the garden. He will take pride in doing a real job.

Source: N. Dymoke, "Children prefer reality-based playtime to fantasy," *Big Think*, niscw.com/playreal.

Help your child feel capable

Kids who feel they can accomplish things are more likely to have a can-do attitude about learning. To foster this feeling:

- **Listen** to your child.
- **Emphasize** cooperation. Have fun together, but also share work with her.
- **Praise** effort and progress. "You've almost got it!"

Art builds school smarts

Preschoolers' art can be charming—or a jumbly mess. The final result isn't what matters, however. It's the creative process that teaches your child about planning, problem-solving, spatial reasoning and so much more. To support his creativity:

- **Let your child** lead. Provide supplies and let him decide how to use them.
- **Encourage him** to experiment. You don't need to have a planned project.
- **Ask him** to talk about what he's doing.



Source: K. Rymanowicz, "The art of creating: Why art is important for early childhood development," Michigan State University Extension, niscw.com/create.

Add to concentration time

It's normal for a preschooler's attention span to vary according to the situation. To maximize your child's attention span for learning:

- **Expand** on interests. If she loves kittens, for example, count them, read about them, move like them, etc.
- **Plan** "me too" activities that relate to what an older sibling is doing.
- **Watch** your timing. If your child is tired or hungry, it's probably better to wait to introduce a challenging activity.





How should I set limits for my preschooler?

Q: I know it is important for children to have consistent limits. Many days I feel I am too lenient. Other days it seems as if I am always yelling. Can you give me some guidelines on setting limits for my preschooler?

A: Setting consistent limits for your child helps him learn how to control his behavior, stay safe and get along with others, among other lessons. It isn't always easy, but if you stick to the same approach most of the time, it will soon become second nature.

To create a consistent environment:

- **Stick to just a few age-appropriate rules.** A preschooler simply can't remember a long list of rules. So decide what is most important to you. Examples: "No hitting." "No clothes on the floor." Your child should be able to accomplish living within these limits most of the time.
- **Enforce your rules all the time.** If the rule is that your child must pick up his toys before turning on TV, then he does so always—even if it's time for his favorite show.
- **Use natural and logical consequences** to help him learn from mistakes. If he leaves a toy outside, for instance, it may get lost or damaged.
- **Reinforce good behavior with praise.** Your child will soon realize he gets more of your attention for behaving than misbehaving.



Make thinking connections

To develop your child's thinking skills, help him consider the relationships between things. Introduce him to:

- **Similarities and differences.** Give him two items, such as a spoon and a fork. Ask him to tell you how they are different and how they are the same.
- **Cause and effect.** Discuss how one thing happens as the result of another. Then encourage your child to make predictions: "I'm putting popcorn kernels in the microwave. What do you think will happen to them?"



Convey a sense of order

Understanding the order of events—called *sequencing*—is a necessary skill for reading. You can use humor to help your child realize the importance of order. Tell her you are going to read a story. Then flip to the back of her favorite book and say, "The End! All finished!" She will probably protest. Then say, "Oh, I goofed! What's the first thing we do when we read?" Have her show you the beginning, middle and end of the story.

Offer many ways to write

It takes practice for little fingers to learn to write with control. It's OK if your child's writing looks like scribbles. Just give him lots of chances to enjoy doing it. You can:

- **Write letters.** Make a cardboard mailbox and "mail" each other letters. He can scribble his and "read" them to you.
- **Make lists.** If you're writing a grocery list, have him add a few words or pictures of items you need.
- **Caption pictures.** Show your child a picture and have him dictate a caption. Let him "write" under your writing.



Do you make coping with changes easier?

Changes can be challenging for preschoolers. They like to do the same things the same ways. But changes are also a fact of life. Are you helping your child learn to adapt to change? Answer *yes* or *no* to the questions below:

- ___ **1. Do you use** routines to give your child an overall sense of security?
- ___ **2. Do you try** to anticipate changes, and recognize that even a small change may seem like a big deal to your child?
- ___ **3. Do you discuss** upcoming changes with your child ahead of time?
- ___ **4. Do you point out** some of the positive sides to changes?
- ___ **5. Do you prepare** your child for transitions—such as by giving a five-minute warning

that it will be time to stop playing and wash for dinner?

How well are you doing?

More yes answers mean that you are helping your child learn to handle the big and small changes in her life. For each no, try that idea.

"To exist is to change, to change is to mature, to mature is to go on creating oneself endlessly."

—Henri Bergson

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