



Getting Your Preschooler Ready for Kindergarten

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General Learning Skills

On a warm morning in late summer, a group of adults clusters nervously together, waiting for the bell to ring. Filled with anticipation and anxiety, they watch as their “hopes and dreams” line up and file into the classroom. It’s the first day of kindergarten! It’s the beginning of a new adventure! And it’s also report card day for every parent. Starting today, Mom and Dad will be graded on how well they prepared their child for school. Each family has made educational decisions (knowingly and unknowingly) during the preschool years that either set in place healthy learning patterns or will result in something short of acceptable. How do parents prepare for the former, for the higher standard? The acceptable rather than the reproachable? Can healthy learning patterns be served up like a plate of broccoli to assure academic fortitude? Or is readiness for school achieved through flash card training twenty minutes a day or listening to language tapes? If only it were that easy!

The first step in a balanced approach to preschooler training is to develop a daily plan. The plan should include a combination of independent activities and activities with a parent, usually the child’s mother. These activities will help develop general learning skills, specific learning skills, and necessary social skills needed for the child to be well prepared for attending school. The next step is to implement your plan. Here is what you need to know.

What kind of general learning skills does a child need to possess in order to be ready for school? The two bedrock skills necessary to build a firm foundation for learning include a strong attention span and the ability to focus. Each of these skills can be strengthened or weakened depending on how your preschooler spends his time during the day. The child whose parents provide structured learning is more mentally stimulated than the child who is given freedom of choice during his waking hours. This point is better understood in our next paragraph.

Attention Span

Jason says, “Candy Land.” Mom says, “Okay.” Jason says, “Find me!” Mom says, “Where is he?” Jason says, “Build blocks with me.” Mom says, “What shall we build?” Jason says, “I don’t want to build.” So Mom, now confused, asks, “What DO you want to do?” Poor Jason...he really doesn’t know!

If only Mom knew that a child’s attention span develops best in a structured environment. This means a thoughtful parent determines the activities of the day, including the starting and stopping time of each activity, directed by Mom not Jason. Left to choose for himself, a preschooler will generally spend too much time flitting from one activity to another, or following Mom around expecting her to entertain him. Flitting and following generally lead to whining and discontent. Soon the child, like Jason, will be characterized as having a very short attention span.

As you develop a daily routine for your child, decide how long each activity will last. As your child grows and matures, work on increasing the length of time he spends happily engaged in each activity. This will increase your child’s attention span.

Focusing Skills

Focusing is the ability to concentrate on an object or activity without being distracted by surrounding sights and sounds. Your child needs this ability in school so that he can complete an assignment in

the face of distractions. In a school setting, these distractions can occur from the children around him, the decorations in the classroom, or noise from the playground. The ability to focus is developed in children by giving them time to play by themselves.

It is important for you to have a clear understanding of independent playtime in order for it to be an effective part of your child's daily routine. Let me explain what independent playtime is *not*. It is not time when your child chooses where to play, what to play with, and how long to play. As we discussed, a preschooler is not capable of making these decisions wisely. He will flit and follow and soon have a very short attention span.

Independent playtime begins early. By the time a child is between eighteen to twenty-four months of age, he should have developed the skill of learning how to spend forty-five minutes to one hour of uninterrupted time playing. Concentration and creativity are developed during independent play. The most important aspect of this time is that your child is learning to focus on what he can do with the things he has. This might involve playing with toys, puzzles, or books at an assigned time in an assigned place. To facilitate this goal, be sure that he is by himself, with no artificial forms of stimulation—meaning no computer games, Gameboys, or videos. Nor should he be in a place where he is easily distracted by watching you work or by listening to the vacuum cleaner or your conversation on the phone.

Keep his toys developmentally stimulating and challenging. One way this might be achieved is to rotate his toys. Children easily become bored when there is nothing new to play with. Put some toys away for a few weeks or months, and then reintroduce them back into his play world. They will seem better than new because they are familiar old friends.

Specific Skills

Flopping down a thirty-piece puzzle in front of your preschooler for the first time could be overwhelming for both of you. The question for him might well become, "How many of these knobby cardboard thingies can I smush in the cracks of my bedroom air vent?" Mom can do everyone a favor by spending time integrating each new skill at the various levels. Most specific learning skills will begin with this teaching time between parent and child. As the child learns the skill being taught, it can become an independent activity for him. Some specific examples are book time, puzzle time, and tape time. Each of these can become a twenty- to thirty-minute block of time in your child's daily routine. Let's examine the specific skills you should teach during the preschool years.

Getting Ready for Reading

It might be the wispy artistry of the illustrations, or the glossy bold cover design, or the weaving of the imaginary tale, or the oh-so-funny way the talking bear solves his problem. Whatever the reason, who doesn't remember that first magical moment when a book became something more than a book? It was truly a friend, the start of something new, or an opening to another time and place. Developing a love for books is foundational to becoming a good reader. To enhance this love, read to your child from the start. Books such as *Goodnight, Moon* and *The Runaway Bunny* are perennial favorites that preschool-age children enjoy listening to while being cuddled by Mom or Dad. On the question of book selection, it is all about variety. This could include heavy cardboard books for playtime or fun and silly stories for reading aloud. You also might read alphabet and rhyming books to develop phonemic awareness (sound/symbol relationships). As you build your child's library, be sure to include books about nature and the world around him. Most important are books that teach good character. Former Secretary of Education Dr. Bill Bennett compiled an excellent resource for character training. His *Book of Virtues* should be part of your personal library, and the stories contained within should find residence in the heart and mind of your child.

Puzzles aids reading. Puzzles develop a child's ability to see how one part fits into the whole picture. This is not just fun and games, but a life skill perspective. Puzzles come in all different sizes, ranging from several pieces to several thousand pieces. They generally begin as a parent and child activity,

but should quickly become part of your child's independent play. As a child's collection of puzzles grows, the pieces from two puzzles can be mixed. A sorting activity then takes place before the puzzles can be put together. Keep the puzzles challenging, but not so challenging that the child becomes overwhelmed.

Sequencing cards help children develop a sense of the beginning, middle, and end of a story. These cards can be purchased at an educational supply store. They typically range from three-card sequences to six-card sequences. Introducing children to the alphabet can begin with some kind of three-dimensional letters or alphabet cards. These can be made of plastic, sponge, or wood. Choose a "letter of the week," and point out all the things in your child's world that start with that letter. Initially you just want to help your child hear the beginning sound of a word. For example, you might say, "Yes, popcorn and peanuts both start with *P*." An alphabet book is very helpful. Choose one with lots of different pictures for each letter.

Getting Ready for Math

In the beginning, it's all about patterns. The child on the kitchen floor with the plastic stacking rings is learning the pattern large to small. For the preschooler, patterning activities include but are not limited to bead stringing, pegboards, and pattern blocks. When purchasing any of these items, be sure to include a set of patterns to be followed. These activities generally require plenty of parent involvement since preschoolers usually want to just play with the objects. With patience and repetition, children eventually learn to follow or reproduce the pattern, and the activity becomes much more rewarding than just free play.

Calendar activities are another good way to develop math awareness. A perpetual calendar works best—one in which the month, date, and day of the week are removable pieces. These can be found in craft stores, educational supply stores, or better yet, you can create your own. A very enjoyable morning routine develops when your child gets to place the pieces into the calendar and reviews the month, date, and day of the week. When the child is ready, it is easy to teach the concept of before and after. Let your child guess what the date is by looking at the number before and after the place for the current day's number.

Make counting a part of everyday life. Counting objects can take place anytime. Count fingers, toes, blocks, Cheerios, spoons, or just about anything. Counting out loud is a great activity for car rides.

Getting Ready for Penmanship

Getting ready to write is generally an activity for the child older than three years of age. In the beginning, writing and coloring have virtually nothing to do with lines and everything to do with grip. Because the thumb and pointer finger are uniquely wired to the brain, your child needs to learn to grip the pencil between the thumb and pointer finger, letting the pencil rest on the middle finger. The same grip should be used with crayons. It is very difficult for a classroom teacher to constantly check on each student's pencil grip. Therefore this skill is best taught at home.

Help your child use relaxed rather than cramped movements as he learns to color and write. Later you will teach the importance of staying in the lines or on the line. But in the beginning, correct grip and relaxed movement should be encouraged and praised. Tracing offers your child many different opportunities to practice correct pencil grip and to strengthen the muscles of the hand. The easiest stencils to trace are the frame type, where the child traces around the inside of the shape. Later your child can progress to shaped stencils, which must be held in the center while tracing around them. Placing tracing paper over simple coloring book pictures offers another opportunity to practice good pencil grip. Children love the great pictures they can "draw" by tracing.

Cutting also helps develop the muscles of the hand. We use the same fingers for gripping the pencil and holding the scissors. Parents can teach cutting skills by using one-inch by six-inch strips of construction paper. With a felt pen, draw vertical lines about one inch apart on the strip of construction paper. Give the paper to your child to cut. When he can hold the scissors properly and

successfully cut on the lines, draw diagonal lines for your child to cut. Then progress to curved lines. Repeat this process with two-inch and three-inch strips of paper.

Getting Ready for Art

You can call it craft time, cut and paste time, fun time with Mommy, or making a prize for Daddy. No matter what you call it, know that time spent introducing your child to various types of art media impacts his attitude about art. Preparing your child to enjoy art involves both art skills and art appreciation. Art appreciation in this context does not involve visiting a museum or evaluating paintings, wondering what an artist was attempting to communicate. We are using the term here in a generic and practical sense, with an emphasis on learning shapes, sizes, colors, and patterns. Beginning art skills include cutting, coloring, and learning to draw simple geometric shapes, such as circles, squares, and triangles. These activities require a certain amount of fine motor development that is not usually present until about three years of age. However, art appreciation can be taught as soon as the child can match like items and put together simple puzzles. Parents can purchase or easily make color cards to teach children to match like colors. This activity becomes more difficult when varying shades of each color are introduced.

A wonderful way for parents to teach children to recognize and appreciate great works of art is to make puzzles out of copies of the artwork. After the copy has been laminated, cut it into five or six pieces for your child to reassemble. As the child grows, the picture can be cut into smaller pieces to increase the difficulty. Museum bookstores have poster-sized art reproductions that can make great floor puzzles. It helps if you also purchase a postcard of the artwork for your child to look at as he puts the puzzle together. Keep an eye out for used books that contain pictures of great masterpieces.

Getting Ready for Music

Children should be introduced to music ASAB (as soon as birth!) or sooner. Keep a small CD or tape player handy in your child's room. Classical music is a good place to begin. You may be thinking, *I don't really know classical music, and I'm not sure I will like it.* In reality, you are probably familiar with classical music more than you are aware. Familiar themes are used quite often in movies and advertising. Find several CDs or tapes you like, and play them as background music during your child's playtime. Classical music is unlike other forms of music. It provides excellent auditory stimulation for the brain as it has definite, orderly, mathematical patterns.

Your preschooler's music library should grow to have lots of variety. You can include tapes of patriotic songs recorded especially for children to help develop appreciation for our country and pride in being an American. Folk songs are an easy way to begin learning about different people and times in our country's history. You may choose to use Sunday school songs that will teach your child about good character and the love of God. Your educational supply store or local bookstore will carry these tapes and CDs and may also have some that use music to teach other academic concepts. Stock up, because music is such an enjoyable way to learn, and it is good for the soul.

Encourage your child to sing along with the tapes. Your child's listening skills will grow if you teach him to sing on pitch. For some children, learning to sing on pitch is difficult and takes time. Always be positive and encouraging. Otherwise your child may decide that singing is hard and clam up. Make sure singing is always fun.

Rhythm clapping is an excellent way to develop listening skills (in this case, auditory sequential memory). Here is how this works. Clap a simple rhythm pattern and have your child mimic it. As your child's listening skills grow, the patterns can become more difficult. This activity can be enjoyed just about anywhere, although sometimes you may need to clap quietly.

Getting Ready for History

If it didn't really happen, let your child know. That makes the events that really, *really* did occur mean all that much more. Did Jackie Robinson really get jeered by the crowd? How did he respond? Did Helen Keller's ears and eyes not work at all? How was she able to overcome those odds? Children thrive on these lessons of life. Stories like these encourage your child to enjoy history and take an interest in it. Give your child plenty of opportunities to listen to stories about the lives of real people. They can be read from books or listened to on tape or CD. Be on the lookout for short, simple picture books and audiotapes that tell the story of historical characters. Story tapes are a good quiet time activity and are useful in the car. Topics for beginning history books include the story of the Pilgrims and the first Thanksgiving, or the charity of the Patron Saint Nicholas and the Christmas story. There are also some excellent videos and DVDs that should be used in addition to, but not in place of, books and audio products.

Getting Ready for Science

Take the morning after a rain, a quiet street, and motionless worms scattered upon it, and you've got the makings for science. Yucky? Yes, and all the better! Why are they here? Where are they going? What do they feel like? How do they move? Preschool science can be summed up in three words: observation, conversation, and exploration. Science is all around us, so teach your child to be an observer. Observe the growing process in your own backyard. You may even want to plant some seeds, water them, and watch them grow. Observe insects, animals, the weather—whatever science is going on around you. This observation should naturally lead to conversation.

Talk to your child about the world in which he lives. These conversations will give him needed information and increase his vocabulary. You can use very simple words to explain what happens when we plant a seed in soil, water it, and expose it to sunlight. Do not become obsessive and feel that you must explain everything to your child. However, do not miss natural opportunities to talk to him about his environment.

The observation and conversation can be greatly enhanced by exploration into simple books, videos, and games about science. A basic video discussing the process of how the body heals a cut can have your preschooler expounding on white blood cells, platelets, and fibrins in no time at all. This is good not just for impressing your mother-in-law; your child may actually come to understand some complex workings of the human body. At the very least, he comes away with a greater appreciation for the workings of living things.

Libraries and bookstores have beautifully illustrated picture books about animals, the seashore, the woods, and many other science topics. Most libraries also have videos of nature and animals available as well. Educational supply stores and catalogues carry colorful puzzles and simple matching games about animals and ocean life. The key is to keep it simple and on your child's level. Remember, you are just laying the foundation.

Getting Ready for the Teacher

For a number of years I taught a kindergarten class for four-year-old children. I expected to spend the first week of school teaching the children classroom habits and procedures. The transition to school was easiest for the children whose parents had already taught them appropriate school behavior. Certainly a good teacher will explain all of this to the students, but children will feel so much more confident if they know what to expect and what will be expected of them. An experienced teacher always appreciates the child who just seems to know what to do, and the inexperienced teacher finds the prepared child to be a godsend. Some of the behaviors you will want to teach include:

- Standing and walking in line
- Raising your hand and waiting to be called on
- Listening to the teacher and following directions
- Not talking or whispering to other students while the teacher is talking

- Not talking or whispering to other students while children are working quietly at their desks

You can easily teach your child these behaviors by explaining the correct behavior and following up with a fun time of practicing the behavior. For instance, you can teach that when the signal is given to get in a line, you should walk to the designated spot and stand behind anyone who is already in line. Stand with your face forward and your hands at your side. Keeping your face forward while walking in line is important. If you turn around and look behind you, you will not know when the line stops moving until you run into the person in front of you.

Next you can give your child an opportunity to practice lining up. You can have fun laughing together as you demonstrate what not to do. This could include pushing into the middle of the line or insisting on being first when others are already in line. Assure your child that while he will not always get to be first, he will eventually get a turn to go first.

Explain to your child that one of the problems in a classroom is what to do when several people want to talk at the same time. This problem is solved when a child raises his hand and waits until the teacher calls his name before speaking out.

It is important to teach your child to listen to the teacher when she is talking so that he will know what to do. You could tell him, "We talk to our friends during playtime; we listen carefully when the teacher is talking." Help your child be a good listener by teaching him how to stop talking. Children who never learn this skill are hampered academically, and teachers find them irritating. If your child loves to talk, practice riding in the car with no talking for five minutes. For the talkative child, silence can be quite a challenge. Have your child tell you what he saw out the window during the quiet time. Silence is a valuable self-discipline and usually heightens a child's powers of observation.

As an alternative to talking, you might play the game "What Does Mommy See?" Start with one-minute increments and work your way up to five minutes, or start with half-mile increments and work up to two miles. The purpose is to help your child learn to focus, identify, and retain. You can work with colors, sizes (tall, short, round, or thin), patterns, or almost anything else you think is important. For example, pick several large items on the roadside, such as the big barn, the bridge, the school bus, and the water tower. After a minute, ask your child, "What did Mommy see that was big?" The child's job is to learn to recognize and file away in his memory possible answers. Next move to colors. "Mommy is going to look for the color red." Go a mile and ask your preschooler what he saw that was red. This little game is a wonderful substitute for aimless talking, and it increases your little talker's focusing abilities at the same time.

Getting Ready for Social Interaction

The final element of school readiness is social. A child who comes to school with an understanding of how to behave in a classroom setting is more likely to have a positive first impression of school than the child who is unfamiliar with classroom and playground procedures. With a little bit of explanation and practice beforehand, your child can be ready and even excited about starting school.

Getting ready for school also includes knowing how to make friends. This is not something children automatically know how to do. Good social skills should be taught and practiced over a period of time. Talk about things to say as "icebreakers" and how to show interest in the other person. Introduce the concept of what it means to be a friend and how being a friend leads to having a friend.

When my children were young, I looked for friends I trusted who had children the same age as mine. We would have exchange play days. One week the children would play at my house. The next week they played at the second home and so on. Also stay mindful of the importance of group play and activity versus a twosome activity. Your child needs to experience playing with a peer at some times and with a peer group at other times. (**Find out more about school preparation in *On Becoming Preschoolwise* by Gary Ezzo and Dr. Robert Bucknam**)

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