

Helping Your Child Succeed In School



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Foreword

"Why"

This is the question we parents are always trying to answer. It's good that children ask questions: that's the best way to learn. All children have two wonderful resources for learning--imagination and curiosity. As a parent, you can awaken your children to the joy of learning by encouraging their imagination and curiosity.

Teaching and learning are not mysteries that can only happen in school. They also happen when parents and children do simple things together.

For instance, you and your child can: sort the socks on laundry day--sorting is a major function in math and science; cook a meal together--cooking involves not only math and science but good health as well; tell and read each other stories--storytelling is the basis for reading and writing (and a story about the past is also history); or play a game of hopscotch together--playing physical games will help your child learn to count and start on a road to lifelong fitness.

By doing things together, you will show that learning is fun and important. You will be encouraging your child to study, learn, and stay in school.

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Part 1 - Preparing Your Child For School

Learning Begins Early

The road to success in school begins early. Good health, loving relationships, and opportunities to learn all help preschool children do well later in life. But many parents wonder, "How can I give these things to my child?"

This section is for all of you who have asked this question. It's for parents, grandparents, and others who want to know what to do to help young children get ready for school. Throughout the preschool years, you can do many simple things to help your child grow, develop, and have fun learning. This book:

- * Describes the qualities and skills that youngsters need to get a good start in kindergarten;
- * Tells what to expect from preschoolers each year from birth to age 5;
- * Suggests easy activities that help children grow and develop; and
- * Explains how to encourage enthusiasm toward school and teachers and make it easier for children to adjust to kindergarten.

Special sections in the back of the book tell how to monitor television viewing and find good programs; and explain how to find suitable child care.

Parents and caregivers are busy people. Most of us have many responsibilities: jobs outside the home, laundry to wash, and groceries to buy. When we are tired and under stress, it's often hard to feel we are being the best parents.

But however busy we may be, there are lots of things we

can do to help our children get ready for school--little things that make a big difference. Many of them cost little or nothing and can be done as you go about your daily routines.

Mothers and fathers aren't the only people who help children get ready for school. Entire communities share this job. Businesses, schools, government agencies, and religious and civic organizations help out. So do day care providers, doctors and other health professionals, elected officials, relatives, and neighbors. But no one is more important than parents, because life's most basic lessons are learned early and at home. The first 5 years are when the groundwork for future development is laid.

What Does It Mean To Be Ready for School?

There is no one quality or skill that children need to do well in school, but a combination of things contributes to success. These include good health and physical wellbeing, social and emotional maturity, language skills, an ability to solve problems and think creatively, and general knowledge about the world.

As you go about helping your child develop in each of these areas, remember

- * Children develop at different rates, and
- * Most children are stronger in some areas than in others.

Remember, too, that being ready for school depends partly on what the school expects. One school may think it's very important for children to sit quietly and know the alphabet. Another may believe it's more important for children to get along well with others.

Children who match the school's expectations may be considered better prepared. You may want to visit your child's school to learn what the principal and teachers expect and discuss any areas of disagreement.

While schools may have different priorities, most educators agree that the following areas are important for success.

Good Health and Physical Well-Being

Young children need nutritious food, enough sleep, safe places to play, and regular medical care. These things help children get a good start in life and lessen the chances that they will later have serious health problems or trouble learning.

Good health for children begins before birth with good prenatal care. Visit a doctor or medical clinic throughout your pregnancy. In addition, eat nourishing foods, avoid alcohol, tobacco, and other harmful drugs, and get plenty of rest.

Pregnant women who don't take good care of themselves increase their chances of giving birth to children who

- * Are low in birth weight, making them more likely to have lifelong health and learning problems;
- * Develop asthma;
- * Are mentally retarded;
- * Develop speech and language problems;
- * Have short attention spans; or
- * Become hyperactive.

If your child already has some of these problems, it is a good idea to consult your doctor, your school district, or community agencies as soon as possible. Many communities have free or inexpensive services to help you and your child.

Good health for children continues after birth with a balanced diet. School-aged children can concentrate better in class if they eat nutritionally balanced meals. These should include breads, cereals, and other grain products; fruits; vegetables; meat, poultry, fish and alternatives (such as eggs and dried beans and peas); and milk, cheese, and yogurt. Avoid too many fats and sweets.

Children aged 2-5 generally can eat the same foods as adults but in smaller portions. Your child's doctor or clinic can provide advice on feeding babies and toddlers under the age of 2.

Federal, state, and local aid is available for parents who need food in order to make sure their children get a balanced diet. The federal nutrition program, called the Special Supplemental Food Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), distributes food to more than 5.4 million low-income

women and their children through about 8,200 service centers across the country. Food stamps also are available for many families with children. For information and to find out if you are eligible, contact your local or state health department.

Preschoolers require regular medical and dental checkups and immunizations. It's important to find a doctor or a clinic where children can receive routine health care as well as special treatment if they are sick or injured.

Children need immunizations beginning around the age of 2 months to prevent nine diseases: measles, mumps, German measles (rubella), diphtheria, tetanus, whooping cough, Hib (Haemophilus influenzae type b), polio, and tuberculosis. These diseases can have serious effects on physical and mental development. Regular dental checkups should begin at the latest by the age of 3.

Preschoolers need opportunities to exercise and develop physical coordination. To learn to control large muscles, children need to throw balls, run, jump, climb, and dance to music. To learn to control small muscles, particularly in the hands and fingers, they need to color with crayons, put together puzzles, use blunt-tipped scissors, and zip jackets. In kindergarten, they will build upon these skills.

Parents of youngsters with disabilities should see a doctor as soon as a problem is suspected. Early intervention can help these children develop to their full potential.

Social and Emotional Preparation

Young children are often very excited about entering school. But when they do, they can face an environment that's different from what they are used to at home or even in preschool. In kindergarten, they will need to work well in large groups and get along with new adults and other children. They will have to share the teacher's attention with other youngsters. The classroom routines may also be different.

Most 5-year-olds do not start school with good social skills or much emotional maturity. These take time and practice to learn. However, children improve their chances for success in kindergarten if they have had opportunities to begin

developing these qualities:

Confidence. Children must learn to feel good about themselves and believe they can succeed. Confident children are more willing to attempt new tasks--and try again if they don't succeed the first time.

Independence. Children need to learn to do things for themselves.

Motivation. Children must want to learn.

Curiosity. Children are naturally curious and must remain so in order to get the most out of learning opportunities.

Persistence. Children must learn to finish what they start.

Cooperation. Children must be able to get along with others and learn to share and take turns.

Self-control. Preschoolers must understand that some behaviors, such as hitting and biting, are inappropriate. They need to learn that there are good and bad ways to express anger.

Empathy. Children must learn to have an interest in others and understand how others feel.

Parents, even more than child care centers and good schools, help children develop these skills. Here are some ways you can help your child acquire these positive qualities:

Youngsters must believe that, no matter what, someone will look out for them. Show that you care about your children. They thrive when they have parents or other caregivers who are loving and dependable. Small children need attention, encouragement, hugs, and plenty of lap time. Children who feel loved are more likely to be confident.

Set a good example. Children imitate what they see others do and what they hear others say. When parents exercise and eat nourishing food, children are more likely to do so. When parents treat others with respect, their children probably

will, too. If parents share things, their children will learn to be thoughtful of others' feelings.

Have a positive attitude toward learning and toward school. Children come into this world with a powerful need to discover and to explore. Parents need to encourage this curiosity if children are to keep it. Enthusiasm for what children do ("You've drawn a great picture!") helps to make them proud of their achievements.

Children also become excited about school when their parents show excitement. As your child approaches kindergarten, talk to him about school. Talk about the exciting activities in kindergarten, such as going on field trips and making fun art projects. Be enthusiastic as you describe what he will learn in school--how to read and measure and weigh things, for example.

Provide opportunities for repetition. It takes practice to crawl, pronounce new words, or drink from a cup. Children don't get bored when they repeat things. Instead, repeating things until they are learned helps youngsters build the confidence needed to try something new.

Use appropriate discipline. All children need to have limits set for them. Children whose parents give firm but loving discipline are generally more skilled socially and do better in school than children whose parents set too few or too many limits. Here are some tips.

- * Direct children's activities, but don't make unnecessary restrictions or try to dominate.
- * Offer reasons when asking your child to do something (For example, say, "Please move the toy truck off the stairs so no one falls over it"--not, "Do it because I said so.").
- * Listen to your children to find out how they feel and whether they need any special support.
- * Show love and respect when you are angry. Criticize a child's behavior but not the child (For example, say, "I love you, but it is not okay for you to draw pictures on the walls. I get angry when you do that.").

- * Help your children make choices and work out problems (You might ask your 4-year-old, "What can we do to keep Kevin from knocking over your blocks?").
- * Be positive and encouraging. Praise your child for a job well done. Smiles and encouragement go much further to shape good behavior than harsh punishment.

Let children do many things by themselves. Young children need to be closely watched. But they learn to be independent and to develop confidence by doing tasks such as dressing themselves and putting their toys away. It's also important to let them make choices, rather than deciding everything for them. Remember to give them a choice only when there really is one.

Encourage your children to play with other children and be with adults who are not family members. Preschoolers need these social opportunities to learn to see the point of view of others. Young children are more likely to get along with teachers and classmates if they already have had experiences with different adults and children.

Language and General Knowledge

Kindergärtners participate in many activities that require them to use language and to solve problems. Children who can't or don't communicate easily may have problems in school. There are many things you can do to help children learn to communicate, solve problems, and develop an understanding of the world. You can

Give your child opportunities to play. Play is how children learn. It is the natural way for them to explore, to become creative, and to develop academic and social skills. Play helps them learn to solve problems--for example, a wagon tips over, and children must figure out how to get it upright again. Children learn about geometry, shapes, and balance when they stack up blocks. Playing with others helps children learn how to negotiate.

Talk to your children, beginning at birth. Babies need to hear your voice. A television or the radio can't take the place

of your voice because it doesn't respond to coos and babbles. The more you talk to your baby, the more he will have to talk about as he gets older. Talking with children broadens their understanding of language and of the world.

Everyday activities, such as eating dinner or taking a bath, provide opportunities to talk, sometimes in detail, about what's happening and respond to your child. "First let's stick the plug in the drain. Now we'll turn on the water. I see you want to put your rubber duck in the bathtub. That's a good idea. Look, it's yellow, just like the rubber duck on 'Sesame Street.'"

Listen to your children. Children have their own special thoughts and feelings, joys and sorrows, hopes and fears. As their language skills develop, encourage them to talk. Listening is the best way to learn what's on their minds and to discover what they know and don't know, and how they think and learn. It also shows children that their feelings and ideas are valuable.

Answer questions and ask questions, particularly ones that require more than a "yes" or "no" response. While walking in a park, for example, most 2- and 3-year-olds will stop to pick up leaves. You might point out how the leaves are the same, and how they are different. With older children you might ask, "What else grows on trees?"

Questions can help children learn to compare and classify things. Answer your children's questions thoughtfully and, whenever possible, encourage them to answer their own questions. If you don't know the answer to a question, say so. Then together with your child try to find the answer.

Read aloud to your children every day. Reading can begin with babies and continue throughout the preschool years. Even though they don't understand the story or the poem, reading together gives children a chance to learn about language, enjoy the sound of your voice, and be close to you. You don't have to be an excellent reader for your child to enjoy this time together. You may also want to take your child to a local library that offers special story hours.

Make reading materials available. Children develop an

interest in language and in reading much sooner if they have books and other reading materials around their homes.

Monitor television viewing. Next to parents, television may be our children's most influential teacher. Good television can introduce children to new worlds and promote learning, but poor or too much TV can be harmful.

Be realistic about your children's abilities and interests. Children usually do best in school when parents estimate their abilities correctly. Parents must set high standards and encourage their preschoolers to try new things. Children who aren't challenged become bored. But ones who are pushed along too quickly, or are asked to do things that don't interest them, can become frustrated and unhappy.

Try to keep your children from being labeled. Labels such as "dumb" or "stupid" have a powerful effect on a child's confidence and school performance. Remember to praise your child for a job well done.

Provide opportunities to do and see things. The more varied the experiences that children have, the more they learn about the world. No matter where you live, your community can provide new experiences. Go for walks in your neighborhood, or go places on the bus. Visit museums, libraries, zoos, and other community resources.

If you live in the city, spend a day in the country (or if you live in the country, spend a day in the city). Let your children hear and make music, dance, and paint. Let them participate in activities that help to develop their imaginations and let them express their ideas and feelings. The following activities can provide your children with these opportunities.

Activities

The activities in this section are simple and are designed to prepare children for school. Most of them grow out of the routine things parents do everyday.

Each section is organized by ages. An age grouping begins with "What to expect"--a list of qualities and behaviors typical of these children. This is followed by "What they need"--a list of things that help these children grow and learn. In a box near the end of each activity are explanations for those who want them. As you go through this section, it is good to remember these points:

Children learn at their own pace. Most move through similar developmental stages, but they have their own timetables. Therefore, the "What to expect" and the "What they need" sections, as well as the ages suggested for the activities, will vary from child to child. An activity listed for a youngster between the ages of 2 and 3 may be fine for one who is younger. Or it may not interest another until he has passed his third birthday.

Some of these activities, while listed under a particular age, are important for all young children. Reading and listening to music, for example, can benefit children from the time they are born. By modifying an activity, you can enable your child to continue to enjoy it as he grows and develops.

The symbols next to the activities can guide you.

for an infant (birth to 1)

for a toddler (ages 2 to 3)

for a preschooler (ages 4 to 5).

Find activities that interest your child. If the one you picked out is too hard, your child may get discouraged. If it's

too easy, he may get bored. Or if your child seems uninterested, try another time. Often children's interests change as they grow and develop. Try to give toddlers and older children a choice of activities so they learn to think for themselves.

The activities are meant to be fun. Be enthusiastic and avoid lecturing to preschoolers on what they are learning. If your child enjoys the activity, his excitement for learning will increase.

Finally, be sure to make safety a top priority. With that caution in mind, flip through the following pages and find some activities that you and your child can enjoy together.

Birth to 1 Year

What to expect

Babies grow and change dramatically during their first year. They begin to

- * Develop some control over their bodies. They learn to hold up their heads; roll over; sit up; crawl; stand up; and, in some cases, walk.
- * Become aware of themselves as separate from others. They learn to look at their hands and toes and play with them. They learn to cry when parents leave, and they recognize their name.
- * Communicate and develop language skills. First babies cry and make throaty noises. Later they babble and say mama and dada. Then they make lots of sounds and begin to name a few close people and objects.
- * Play games. First they play with their hands. Later they show an interest in toys, enjoy "putting in and taking out" games, and eventually carry around or hug dolls or stuffed toys.
- * Relate to others. First they respond to adults more than to other babies. Later they notice other babies but tend to treat them like objects instead of people. Then they pay attention when other babies cry.

What they need

Babies require

- * A loving caregiver who can respond to their cries and gurgles;
- * Someone who gets to know their special qualities;
- * Someone to keep them safe and comfortable;
- * Opportunities to move about and practice new physical skills;
- * Safe objects to look at, bat, grab, bang, pat, roll, and examine;
- * Safe play areas; and
- * Opportunities to hear language and to make sounds.

Developing Trust

Newborn babies need to become attached to at least one person who provides security and love. This first and most basic emotional attachment is the start for all human relationships.

What you'll need

Loving arms

Music

What to do

1. Include happy rituals in your baby's schedule. For example, at bedtime, sing the same song every night, rock her, or rub her tummy.
2. Pick up your crying baby promptly. Try to find out what's wrong. Is she hungry?. Wet? Bored? Too hot? Crying is your baby's way of communicating. By comforting her you send the message that language has a purpose and that someone

wants to understand.

3. Gently move your newborn's arms and legs. Or tickle her lightly under the chin or on the tummy. When she starts to control her head, lie on the floor and put her on your chest. Let her reach for your nose or grab your hair. Talk to her and name each thing she touches.
4. Sing and cuddle with your baby. Hold her snuggled in your arms or lying face up on your lap with her head on your knees. Make sure the head of a newborn is well-supported. Sing a favorite lullaby.

To entertain your baby, sing an active song. For example:

If you're happy and you know it, clap your hands!
If you're happy and you know it, clap your hands!
If you're happy and you know it, and you want the world to
know it,
If you're happy and you know it, clap your hands!

If you don't know lullabies or rhymes for babies, make up your own!

5. Dance with your baby. To soothe her when she's upset, put her head on your shoulder and hum softly or listen to recorded music as you glide around the room. To amuse her when she's cheerful, try a bouncy tune.

Feeling your touch, hearing your voice, and enjoying the comfort of physical closeness all help a baby to develop trust.

Touch and See!

Babies are hard at work whenever they are awake, trying to learn all about the world. To help them learn, they need many different safe things to play with and inspect. Objects you have around your home offer many possibilities.

What you'll need

A splinter-free wooden spoon with a face drawn on the bowl
Different textured fabrics, such as velvet, cotton, corduroy,

terry cloth, satin, burlap, and fake fur
An empty toilet paper or paper towel roll
Pots, pans, and lids
An old purse or basket with things to put in and take out
Measuring cups and spoons
Boxes and plastic containers
Large spoons
Noisemakers (rattles, keys, a can filled with beans)

What to do

1. Put one or two of the items to the left in a safe play area where your baby can reach them (more than two may confuse him).
2. Let your baby look at, touch, and listen to a variety of objects. Ones that are brightly colored, have interesting textures, and make noises are particularly good. Be sure that any item you give your baby will be safe in his mouth, since that's where it probably will end up.
3. Use these items for all age groups. Many of them will continue to interest toddlers and older preschoolers. For example, babies love to inspect a paper towel roll. But with a 4-year-old, it can become a megaphone for talking or singing, a telescope, or a tunnel for a toy car.

Babies begin to understand how the world works when they see, touch, hold, and shake things. Inspecting things also helps them coordinate and strengthen their hand muscles.

1 to 2 Years

What to expect

Children this age are

- * Energetic (walk more steadily, run, push, pull, take apart, carry, and climb on and grab things);
- * Self-centered; and
- * Busy (like to flip light switches, pour things in and out of containers, unwrap packages, and empty drawers).

Between their first and second birthdays, they

- * Like to imitate the sounds and actions of others (by pretending to do housework or yardwork, for example);
- * Want to be independent and do it themselves (and express this by saying "No!");
- * Can be clingy;
- * Can have relatively short attention spans if not involved in an activity;
- * Add variations to their physical skills (by walking backwards or sideways, for example);
- * Begin to see how they are like and unlike other children;
- * Become more sensitive to the moods of others;
- * Play alone or alongside other toddlers; and
- * Increase their vocabularies from about 2 or 3 words to about 250 words and understand more of what people say to them.

What they need

Children this age require

- * A safe environment for exploring;
- * Opportunities to make their own choices ("Do you want the red cup or the blue one?");
- * Clear and reasonable limits;
- * Opportunities to use big muscles (in the arms and legs, for example);
- * Opportunities to manipulate small objects, such as puzzles and stackable toys;

- * Activities that allow them to touch, taste, smell, hear, and see new things;
- * Chances to learn about "cause and effect"--that things they do produce certain results (when a stack of blocks gets too high it will fall over);
- * Opportunities to develop and practice their language skills; and
- * Chances to learn about kindness and caring.

Shop till You Drop

Shopping is just one of many routines that can help your child learn. It is especially good for teaching new words and introducing preschoolers to new people and places.

What you'll need

A short shopping list

Shopping is one of many ways to surround children with meaningful talk. They need to hear a lot of words in order to learn to communicate themselves. It's particularly helpful when you talk about the "here and now"--things that are going on in front of your child.

What to do

1. Pick a time when neither you nor your child is hungry or tired.
2. At the grocery store, put your child in the grocery cart so that he faces you. Take your time as you walk up and down the aisles.
3. Talk about what you are seeing and doing: "First, we're going to buy some cereal. See, it's in a big red and blue box. Listen to the great noise it makes when I shake the box. Can you shake the box? Now we're going to pay for the groceries. We'll put them on the counter while I get out the money. The cashier will tell us how much we have to pay."

4. Let your child feel the items you buy--a cold carton of milk, for example, or the skin of an orange. Talk to your child about the items. "The skin of the orange is rough and bumpy. Can Rochelle feel the skin?"
5. Be sure to name objects you see on a shopping trip.
6. Let your child touch a soft sweater or try on a hat or a mitten. Find a mirror so he can see himself. Talk as you go. "Feel how soft the sweater is. Who's that in the mirror? Is that Andre?"
7. Let your child practice his "hi's" and "bye-byes" on clerks and other shoppers on your outings.
8. Keep talking, keep moving, and let your child "help." "In this store we need to buy some buttons. You can hold the cloth next to the buttons so I can find the right color." Putting your toddler's hands in the right position can help him learn to understand your directions.
9. Leave for home before your child gets grumpy.

Puppet Magic

Puppets can be fascinating. Children know that puppets are not alive. And yet, they move and talk like real living things. Try making one at home.

What you'll need

An old clean sock
Buttons (larger than 1 inch in diameter to prevent swallowing)
Needle and thread
Red fabric
Ribbon
An old glove
Felt-tipped pens
Nontoxic glue
Yarn
What to do

1. Sock puppet. Use an old clean sock. Sew on buttons for

eyes and nose. Paste or sew on a piece of red fabric for the mouth. Put a bow made from ribbon at the neck.

2. Finger puppets. Cut the ends off the fingers of an old glove. Draw faces on the fingers with felt tipped pens. Glue yarn on for hair.
3. Have the puppet talk to your child. "Hello. My name is Tanya. What a great T-shirt you have on! I like the rabbit on the front of your T-shirt." Or have the puppet sing a simple song. Change your voice when the puppet talks or sings.
4. Encourage your child to speak to the puppet.
5. Put finger puppets on your child to give him practice moving his fingers one at a time.
6. The next time you want help cleaning up, have the puppet make the request: "Hello, Maria. Let's put these crayons back in the box and these toys back on the shelves. Can you get me the ball?"

Puppets provide another opportunity to talk to children and encourage them to speak. They also help children learn new words, use their imaginations, and develop their hand and finger coordination. Children will make many mistakes when they learn to talk. Instead of correcting them directly, reply by using the right grammar. For example, if your child says, "Michael done it," reply, "Yes, David, Michael did it." Speak slowly and clearly so that your child can imitate your speech. Use full, but short sentences, and avoid baby talk.

Moving On

Toddlers love to explore spaces and climb over, through, and into things.

What you'll need

Stuffed animal or toy
Large cardboard boxes
Pillows
A large sheet

A soft ball
A large plastic laundry basket
Elastic
Bells

What to do

1. Pillow jump. Give your toddler some pillows to jump into. Toddlers usually figure out how to do this one on their own!
2. Box car. Give your toddler a large box to push around the room. He may want to take his stuffed animal or toy for a ride in it. If the box isn't too high--you'll most likely find your toddler in there, too!
3. Basketball. Sit about 3 feet away from your toddler and hold out a large plastic laundry basket. Let him try throwing a ball into the basket.
4. Table tent. Cover a table with a sheet that's big enough to reach the ground on all sides. This makes a great playhouse that's particularly good for a rainy day. Watch out for bumped heads!
5. Jingle bells. Sew bells onto elastic that will fit comfortably around your child's ankles. Then watch (and listen to) the fun while he moves about or jumps up and down.

These skills help children gain control over their large muscles. They also help children learn important concepts such as up, down, inside, outside, over, and under.

2 to 3 Years

What to expect

Children this age are

- * Becoming more aware of others and their own feelings;
- * Often stubborn and may have temper tantrums;

- * Developing a great interest in other children and enjoy being near them (although they are usually self-centered);
- * Able to jump, hop, roll, and climb;
- * Developing an interest in pretend play--playing at keeping house, for example, or pretending to cook and care for a baby;
- * Expanding their vocabularies (from about 250 to 1,000 words during the year); and
- * Putting together 2, 3, and 4-word sentences.

What they need

Children this age require opportunities to

- * Develop hand coordination (with puzzles or large beads to string or by scribbling, for example);
- * Do more things for themselves, such as putting on clothing;
- * Sing, talk, and develop their language;
- * Play with other children;
- * Try out different ways to move their bodies; and
- * Do things in the community, such as taking walks and visiting libraries, museums, informal restaurants, parks, beaches, and zoos.

Read to Me!

The single most important way for children to develop the knowledge they need to succeed in reading is for you to read aloud to them--beginning early.

What you'll need

Good books

A children's dictionary (preferably a sturdy one)

Paper, pencils, crayons, markers

What to do

1. Read aloud to your child every day. From birth to 6 months your baby probably won't understand what you're reading, but that's okay. You can get her used to the sound of your voice and used to seeing and touching books.
2. To start out, use board books with no words or just a few words. Point to the colors and the pictures and say their names. Simple books can teach children things that will later help them learn to read. For example, they learn about the structure of language--that there are spaces between the words and that the print goes from left to right.
3. Tell stories. Encourage your child to ask questions and talk about the story. Ask her to predict what will come next. Point to things in books that she can relate to in her own life: "Look at the picture of the penguin. Do you remember the penguin we saw at the zoo?"
4. Look for reading programs. If you aren't a good reader, programs in your community like Even Start can provide opportunities for you to improve your own reading and to read with your child. Friends and relatives can also read to your child, and senior citizen volunteers are available in many communities to do the same.
5. Buy a children's dictionary--if possible, one that has pictures next to the words. Then start the "let's look it up" habit.
6. Make writing materials available.
7. Watch educational TV. Programs such as "Sesame Street" and "Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood" help your child learn the alphabet and the sounds they represent.
8. Visit the library often. Begin making weekly trips to the library when your child is very young. See that your child gets a library card as soon as possible. Many libraries issue cards to children as soon as they can print their

names (you'll have to countersign for them).

9. Read yourself. What you do sets an example for your child.

The ability to read and understand makes for better students and leads to better job opportunities and a lifetime of enjoyment.

Music Makers

Music is a way to communicate that all children understand. It's not necessary for them to follow the words to a song. It makes them happy just to hear the comfort in your voice or on the recording or to dance to a peppy tune.

What you'll need

Your voice

Music

Music makers (rattles, a can filled with beans or buttons, empty toilet paper rolls, pots, pans, plastic bowls)

What to do

1. Sing a lullaby to a cranky infant.
2. As children approach their first birthdays, they begin to like making music themselves. Have them try banging a wooden spoon on pots, pans, or plastic bowls; shaking a large rattle or shaking a plastic container filled with beans, buttons, or other noisy items (make sure the container is securely closed); and blowing through empty toilet paper rolls.
3. As toddlers pass their first birthdays, they can actively participate in nursery rhymes, even if they can't recite the words. They can imitate hand movements, clap, or hum along.
4. As preschoolers become more physically coordinated, encourage them to move to the music. They can twirl, spin, jump up and down, tiptoe, or sway.

5. Here are some tips for getting young children to sing:

- * Sing yourself. Sing fairly slowly so children join in and enjoy themselves. Discourage shouting.
- * Start with simple chanting. Pick a simple melody, such as "Mary Had a Little Lamb," and sing "la, la, la." Add the words later.

Introduce music to your children early. Listening to you sing will help them learn to make their voices go up and down--even if you can't carry a tune! Music and dance teach preschoolers to listen, to coordinate hand and finger movements, and to express themselves creatively.

Play Dough

Young children love to play with dough. And no wonder! They can squish and pound it and form it into fascinating shapes. Here's a recipe to make at home.

What you'll need

- 2 cups flour
- 1 cup salt
- 4 teaspoons cream of tartar
- 2 cups water
- 2 tablespoons cooking oil
- Food coloring
- Food extracts (almond, vanilla, lemon, or peppermint)
- 1 medium saucepan
- Things to stick in the dough (popsicle sticks, straws)
- Things to pound with (like a toy mallet)
- Things to make impressions with (jar lids, cookie cutters, or bottle caps)

What to do

1. Add the food coloring to the water. Then mix all of the ingredients together in a pan.
2. Cook over medium heat, stirring until it forms a soft ball.

3. Let the mixture cool. Knead slightly. Add food extracts to different chunks of the dough if you want different smells.
4. Give some to your toddler or preschooler, so he can pound it, stick things in it, make impressions in it, and create all kinds of things.

Play dough is a great way to develop hand muscles and be creative. And cooking together, with all the measuring, is the perfect way to begin learning mathematics. Letting your child handle some dough while it is still slightly warm and some when it has cooled off is a terrific way to teach him about temperatures. Play dough can be made ahead of time and stored in an air-tight bag or container.

3 to 4 Years

What to expect

Children this age

- * Start to play with other children, instead of next to them;
- * Are more likely to take turns and share;
- * Are friendly and giving;
- * Begin to understand that other people have feelings and rights;
- * Like silly humor, riddles, and practical jokes;
- * Like to please and to conform;
- * Generally become more cooperative and enjoy new experiences;
- * Are increasingly self-reliant and probably can dress without help (except for buttons and shoelaces);
- * May develop fears ("Mommy, there's a monster under my bed.") and have imaginary companions,

- * Are more graceful physically than 2-year-olds and love to run, skip, jump with both feet, catch a ball, climb downstairs, and dance to music;
- * Are great talkers, speak in sentences, and continue to add more words to their vocabularies; and
- * Have greater control over hand and arm muscles, which is reflected in their drawings and scribblings.

What they need

Children this age require opportunities to

- * Develop their blooming language abilities through books, games, songs, science, and art activities;
- * Develop more self-help skills--for example, to dress and undress themselves;
- * Draw with crayons, work puzzles, build things, and pretend;
- * Play with other children so they can learn to listen, take turns, and share; and
- * Develop more physical coordination--for example, by hopping on both feet.

Kitchen Cut-Ups

Here are some recipes popular with preschoolers. Things always seem to taste better when you make them yourself!

What you'll need

Knife

For applewiches: 1 apple, cheese slices

For funny-face sandwich: 1 piece of bread; peanut butter, cream cheese, or egg salad; green pepper, celery, radishes, carrot curls; olives; nuts; hard-boiled egg slices; tiny shapes of cheese; apples and raisins

For fruit Popsicles: fruit juice (any kind), an ice cube

tray or small paper cups, yogurt, mashed or crushed fruit,
Popsicle sticks

For bumps on a log: celery, peanut butter, raisins

What to do

1. Choose a safe spot to cook where you won't have to worry about making a mess.
2. Tell your child what the ingredients are. Talk about what you are doing as you go along. Ask and answer questions.
3. Let him smell, taste, and touch as you go. Let him (with your help) pour, stir, measure, and help clean up.
4. Applewiches. Core an apple. Cut the apple crosswise into thick slices. Put cheese slices between the slices. Cheddar cheese is particularly good. Eat like a sandwich.
5. Funny-face sandwich. Cut the bread into a circle. Spread with cream cheese, peanut butter, or egg salad. Decorate using green pepper, celery, radishes, carrot curls, olives, nuts, hard-boiled egg slices, tiny shapes of cheese, apples, or raisins for eyes, ears, nose, and mouth.
6. Fruit Popsicles. Pour the fruit juice into small paper cups or an ice cube tray. Place a Popsicle stick in each cup or compartment before the juice is completely frozen. Return to the freezer until frozen solid. For variations, mix yogurt with the juice before freezing for a creamier Popsicle, or add mashed or crushed fruit such as strawberries, pineapple, or banana.
7. Bumps on a log. Spread peanut butter on the celery stalks. Decorate with raisins. Great snacks!

Cooking helps children learn new words, measuring and number skills, what foods are healthy and what ones aren't, and the importance of completing what they begin. It also teaches about how things change, and it can teach children to reason better. ("If I want a cold fruit juice Popsicle, then I'll have to put it in the freezer.")

Scribble, Paint, and Paste

Young children are natural artists. Here are some activities that introduce preschoolers to scribbling, painting, and pasting.

What you'll need

For scribbling: crayons, water-soluble felt-tipped markers, different kinds of paper (including construction paper, butcher paper), and tape

For fingerpainting: storebought fingerpaint or homemade fingerpaint made with soap flakes, water, food coloring or powdered tempera; an eggbeater or fork; a bowl; a spoon; an apron or smock; newspapers or a large piece of plastic to cover the floor or table; butcher paper; and tape

For collages: paper, paste, blunt-tipped scissors, fabric scraps or objects that can be glued to paper (string, cottonballs, sticks, yarn)

What to do

1. Scribbling. Give your child different kinds of paper and different writing materials to scribble with. Coloring books are not needed. Fat crayons are good to begin with. Water-soluble felt-tipped marking pens are fun because your child doesn't have to use much pressure to get a bright color. Tape a large piece of butcher paper onto a table top and let your preschooler scribble to her heart's content!
2. Fingerpainting. Use store-bought fingerpaint, or make your own by mixing soap flakes (not detergent) in a bowl with a small amount of water. Beat the mixture with a fork or eggbeater. Add powdered tempera paint or food coloring. Spread out newspapers or a large piece of plastic over a table or on the floor and tape a big piece of construction paper or butcher paper on top. Cover your child with a large smock or apron, and let her fingerpaint.
3. Collages. Have your child paste fabric scraps or other

objects such as yarn, string, or cottonballs to the paper (in any pattern). Let her feel the different textures and tell you about them.

Here are a few tips about introducing your preschoolers to art:

- * Supervise carefully. Some children would rather color your walls than the paper. Some also like to chew on crayons and markers or try to drink the paint.
- * Don't tell them what to draw or paint.
- * Don't fix up their pictures. It will take lots of practice before you can recognize their pictures--and that often doesn't happen until after they are in kindergarten.
- * Give them lots of different materials to work with. Parents can demonstrate new types of art materials.
- * Find an art activity that's at the right level for your child, then let him do as much of the project as possible.
- * Ask your preschooler to talk about his picture.
- * Display your child's art prominently in your home.

Art projects can spark young imaginations and help children to express themselves. These projects also help children to develop the eye and hand coordination they will later need to learn to write.

Chores

Any household task can become a good learning game and can be fun.

What you'll need

Jobs around the home that need to get done, such as:

- Doing the laundry
- Washing and drying dishes
- Carrying out the garbage

Setting the dinner table
Dusting

What to do

1. Tell your child about the job you will do together.
Explain why the family needs the job done. Describe how you will do it and how your child can help.
2. Teach your child new words that belong to each job. "Let's put the placemats on the table, along with the napkins."
3. Doing laundry together provides many opportunities to learn. Ask your child to help you remember all the clothes that need to be washed. See how many things he can name. Socks? T-shirts? Pajamas? Have him help you gather all the dirty clothes. Have your child help you make piles of light and dark colors.

Show your child how to measure out the soap, and have him pour the soap into the machine. Let him put the items into the machine, naming them. Keep out one sock. When the washer is filled with water, take out a sock. Let your child hold the wet sock and the one you kept out. Ask him which one feels heavier and which one feels lighter. After the wash is done, have your child sort his own things into piles that are the same (for example, T-shirts, socks).

Home chores can help children learn new words, how to listen and follow directions, how to count, and how to sort. Chores can also help children improve their physical coordination and learn responsibility.

4 to 5 Years

What to expect

Children this age

- * Are active and have lots of energy;
- * May be aggressive in their play;
- * Can show extremes from being loud and adventurous to

acting shy and dependent;

- * Enjoy more group activities because they have longer attention spans;
- * Like making faces and being silly;
- * May form cliques with friends and can be bossy;
- * May change friendships quickly;
- * May brag and engage in name-calling during play;
- * May experiment with swear words and bathroom words;
- * Can be very imaginative and like to exaggerate;
- * Have better control in running, jumping, and hopping but tend to be clumsy;
- * Are great talkers and questioners; and
- * Love to use words in rhymes, nonsense, and jokes.

What they need

Children this age need opportunities to

- * Experiment and discover within limits;
- * Use blunt-tipped scissors, crayons, and put together simple jigsaw puzzles;
- * Practice outdoor play activities;
- * Develop their growing interest in academic things, such as science and mathematics, and activities that involve exploring and investigating;
- * Group items that are similar (for example, by size);
- * Stretch their imaginations and curiosity; and
- * See how reading and writing are useful (for example, by

listening to stories and poems, dictating stories, and by talking with other children and adults).

"Hands-on" Math

Real-life, hands-on activities are the best way to introduce your preschooler to mathematics!

What you'll need

Optional:

Blocks
Dice or dominoes

What to do

1. Talk a lot about numbers and use number concepts in daily routines with your preschooler. For example:
 - * Cooking. "Let's divide the cookie dough into two parts so we can bake some now and put the rest into the freezer."
 - * Home projects. "We're going to hang this picture 6 inches above the bookshelf in your room."
 - * Home chores. "How many plates do we need on the table? One for Mommy, one for Daddy, and one for Jenny."

It's best not to use drills or arithmetic worksheets with young children. These can make children dislike math because they don't fit with the way they learn math naturally.

2. Talk about numbers that matter most to your preschooler--her age, her address, her phone number, her height and weight. Focusing on these personal numbers helps your child learn many important math concepts, including:
 - * Time (hours, days, months, years; older, younger; yesterday, today, tomorrow). To a young child, you might say, "At 2 o'clock we will take a nap." When you plan with

an older preschooler (4 or 5 years old), you could point out, "It's only 3 days until we go to Grandma's house. Let's put an X on the calendar so we'll know the day we're going."

- * Lengths (inches, feet; longer, taller, shorter). "this ribbon is too short to go around the present for Aunt Susan. Let's cut a longer ribbon."
- * Weight (ounces, pounds, grams; heavier, lighter; how to use scales). "You already weigh 30 pounds. I can hardly lift such a big girl."
- * Where you live (addresses, telephone numbers). "These shiny numbers on our apartment door are 2-1-4. We live in apartment number 214." Or "When you go to play at Terry's house, take this note along with you. It's our phone number: 253-6711. Some day soon you will know our phone number so you can call me when you are at your friend's."

3. Provide opportunities for your child to learn math. For example:

- * Blocks can teach children to classify objects by color and shape. Blocks can also help youngsters learn about depth, width, height, and length.
- * Games that have scoring, such as throwing balls into a basket, require children to count. Introduce games such as dominoes or rolling dice. Have your child roll the dice and count the dots. Let her try to roll for matches. Count favorite toys.
- * Books often have number themes or ideas.

Getting Along

Learning to get along with others is very important. Children who are kind, helpful, patient, and loving generally do better in school.

What you'll need

No materials required

What to do

1. Let your child know that you are glad to be his mommy or daddy. Give him personal attention and encouragement. Set aside time when you and your child can do fun things together. Your happy feelings toward your child will help him feel good about himself.
2. Set a good example. Show your preschooler what it means to get along with others and to be respectful. Say "please" and "thank you." Treat people in ways that show you care what happens to them. Ask for things in a friendly way. Be kind to and patient with other people.
3. Help your child find ways to solve conflicts with others. Help your child figure out what will happen if he tries to settle his mad feelings by hitting a playmate: "James, I know that Tiffany took your toy truck. But if you hit Tiffany and you have a big fight, then Tiffany will have to go home, and the two of you won't be able to play any more today. What is another way that you can let Tiffany know you want your truck back?"

James might decide to tell Tiffany that he's mad, and that he wants his truck back. Or he might let Tiffany play with his truck for 5 minutes with the hope that Tiffany will then give it back. Listening to your children's problems will often be all that is needed for them to solve their own problems.

4. Make opportunities to share and to care. Let your child take charge of providing food for hungry birds. When a new family moves into the neighborhood, let your preschooler help make cookies to welcome them.
5. Be physically affectionate. Children need hugs, kisses, an arm over the shoulder, and a pat on the back.
6. Tell your child that you love him. Don't assume that your loving actions will speak for themselves (although those are very important). Teach your child the international hand sign for "I love you." You can "sign" each other love as your child leaves home for the first day of

kindergarten.

Children need good social skills. Teachers and other children will enjoy your youngster's company if he gets along well with others.

My Book

Most 4-year-olds like to talk and have a lot to say. They generally can't write down words themselves, but they enjoy dictating a story to you.

What you'll need

Paper

A paper punch

Blunt-tipped scissors

Pencil, pen, crayons

Yarn, pipe cleaners, or staples

Paste

What to do

1. Make a booklet of five or six pages. Your child can help punch holes close to one edge and thread yarn through the holes to keep the pages together. You can also bind the book with twisted pipe cleaners, or staple the pages together.
2. On the outside cover, write your child's name. Explain to him that this is going to be a book about him.
3. Let your child decide what will go on each page. Write it down. Examples: Other people in my family. My favorite toys. My favorite books. My friends. My pet. My neighborhood. My home (or my bedroom). My own drawings.

Making this book will help your child develop his language skills and give him more practice using the small muscles in his hands. Your 4-year-old will also love having your undivided attention.

What About Kindergarten?

The activities in this book can help your child from birth to age 5 get ready for kindergarten. As the first day of school approaches, however, you may want to do extra things to make the school seem a friendlier place for both you and your child.

Find out as much as you can about the school before your child enters it. You will want to learn

- * The principal's name;
- * The kindergarten teacher's name;
- * When to register for kindergarten and what forms need to be filled out;
- * What immunizations are required for school entry;
- * A description of the kindergarten program;
- * The kindergarten yearly calendar and daily schedule;
- * Transportation procedures;
- * Food service arrangements; and
- * How you can become involved in your child's education and in the school.

Some schools will send you this information. Or they may hold an orientation meeting in the spring for parents who expect to enroll their children in kindergarten the following fall. If they don't, you can call the principal's office to ask or to arrange a visit.

Find out in advance what the school expects from entering kindergarten students. If you know a year or two ahead of time, you will be in a better position to prepare your child.

Sometimes parents and caregivers don't think the expectations are right for their children. If that is the case, you may want to meet with the principal or kindergarten teachers to talk about the expectations and ways to change the kindergarten program.

Visit the school with your child so your child can become familiar with it, and it won't seem scary. Walk up and down the hallways to learn where things are. Observe the other children and the classrooms.

Talk with your child about school. During your visit, make positive comments about the school--your good attitude will rub off! ("Look at all the boys and girls painting in this classroom. Doesn't that look like fun!") Tell your child about what the children do when classes begin.

Talk about the teachers, and how they will help your child learn new things. Encourage your child to look at the teacher as a wise friend toward whom children should be courteous. Explain to your child how important it is to go to class each day.

If possible, consider volunteering to help out in the school. The staff may appreciate having an extra adult to help do everything from passing out paper and pencils in the classrooms to supervising on the playground. Volunteering is a good way to learn more about the school and to meet its staff and other parents.

When the long-awaited first day of kindergarten arrives, go to school with your child (but don't stay too long). And be patient. Many young children are overwhelmed at first because they haven't had much experience in dealing with new situations. They may not immediately like school. Your child may cry or cling to you when you say goodbye each morning, but with support from you and the kindergarten teacher, this can rapidly change.

As your child proceeds through school, you will need to continue your encouragement and involvement. But for now, celebrate all that you have accomplished as a parent. Share your children's enthusiasm. Let them know how proud you are as they leave home for their first day of kindergarten. Let them

know you believe they will succeed.

Good Television Habits

Children in the United States have watched an average of 4,000 hours of television by the time they begin school. Most experts agree that this is too much. But banning television isn't the answer, because good television can spark curiosity and open up new worlds to children. Monitoring how much and what television children watch helps them, starting at an early age, to develop good viewing habits.

Too much television can be harmful because

- * It can expose children to too much sex and violence;
- * Children can be unduly influenced by junkfood and toy commercials;
- * It can give children a poor model for good behavior before they have developed a clear idea of right and wrong;
- * Young children do not have the experience and wisdom to understand complicated plots or scary scenes; and
- * Sitting passively in front of the set for extended periods of time can slow young children's social and intellectual development.

Here are some tips to help children develop good television-viewing habits.

Keep a record of how many hours of TV your children watch, and what they watch. Generally, it's good to limit the amount to 2 hours or less a day, although you can make exceptions for special programs.

Learn about current TV programs and videos and select good ones. As parents, you know your children best. So, select TV programs and videos that are meaningful to your family. Some TV programs you may wish to consider include "Captain Kangaroo,"

Eureeka's Castle," "Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood," Sesame Street," and "Shining Time Station." Many other good children's programs, such as Disney and Nickelodeon, are on public television stations and on cable channels.

If you have a VCR, you may wish to seek out videos made by Linda Ellerbee's Lucky Duck Productions. Of course, videos vary in quality, but versions of classic children's books, such as Babar or Snow White, are a good place to start.

Parents who would like help in finding good TV programs for children can subscribe to Parents' Choice, a quarterly review of children's media which includes television programs and home video materials. Write to Parents' Choice Foundation, Box 185, Newton, MA 02168. A subscription is \$18 a year. A sample copy is \$2.

You can also read about programs in TV columns in newspapers and magazines. Cable subscribers and public broadcasting contributors can check monthly program guides for information.

Plan with your children (starting at age 3) what programs to watch. After selecting programs appropriate for your children, help them decide which ones to watch. Turn the TV on when these shows start, and turn the set off when they are over.

Watch television with your children so you can answer questions and talk about what they see. Pay special attention to how they respond so you can help them understand what they're seeing, if that's needed.

Follow-up TV viewing with activities or games. You might have your child tell you a new word he learned on television that you can look up together in the dictionary. Or you might have him make up his own story about one of his favorite TV characters.

Include the whole family in discussion and activities or games that relate to television programs. Older siblings, aunts, uncles, and grandparents can all contribute.

Make certain that television isn't regularly used as a

babysitter. Instead, try to balance good television with other fun activities for your child.

Choosing Child Care

More and more children are in preschool or other child care settings before they enter kindergarten. Choosing the right child care is important because it can affect how prepared your child is for school. Some tips to guide you:

Think about the kind of care you want for your child. Possibilities include (a) a relative; (b) a family day care provider, usually a woman who takes care of a small group of children in her home; (c) a child care center; and (d) a caregiver who comes into your home.

Figure out what suits your budget and what you can expect to spend in your community. For low-income parents, the federally funded Head Start program (and in some communities Chapter 1 programs) are available. State-subsidized child care programs also are available, although most often more people need the subsidized care than there are spaces available. Many families are entitled to the child care credit on their income tax forms.

Recognize that there are many ways to find good care. Ask friends and neighbors. Look in the Yellow Pages of your telephone book under "Child Care Centers." Look in the classified ads of your local newspaper, or place an ad of your own. Put up notices on your church or synagogue bulletin board, in grocery stores, local community centers, or at the employment office of local colleges or universities. Look for notices that other people have put up.

If you are looking for a family day care provider, a local licensing agency can provide you with local listings. Many communities have resource and referral agencies that help parents identify the options that best meet their needs.

Start looking early, particularly if you have a special program for your child in mind. Some programs have long waiting lists. Some may even require you to get on a waiting list

before your child is born.

Gather information. If you are looking for a family day care provider or for a person to come into your home, interview the person at length and check references. Before you meet with them, develop a list of questions. If you are looking at day care centers, visit them--more than once, if possible. Just because a person or a program worked for someone else doesn't mean it's right for you. With any kind of child care, check references.

No matter what kind of child care you are considering, look for caregivers who

- * Are kind and responsive. Good caregivers are affectionate, enjoy children, are energetic enough to keep up with your preschooler, patient, and mature enough to handle crises and conflicts.
- * Have experience with preschoolers and like them. Find out how long they have worked with preschoolers, why they are in the early child care field, and whether they provide activities that are appropriate for your child's age. Observe the caregivers with children. Do the children seem happy? How do the caregivers respond to them?
- * Recognize the individual needs of your child. Look for caregivers who are considerate of different children's interests and needs and who can provide your child with enough attention.
- * Share a child-rearing philosophy that is similar to yours. Find out what kind of discipline is used and how problems are handled.

Be certain that the child care facility is clean and safe and is filled with things to explore that are appropriate for your child's age.

Ready-for-School Checklist

This checklist, although not exhaustive, can help to guide you in preparing your child for school. It's best to look at the items included as goals toward which to aim. They should be done, as much as possible, through everyday life or by fun activities you've planned with your child. If your child lags behind in some areas, don't worry. Remember that all children are unique. They grow and develop at different rates--and no one thing guarantees that a child is ready for school.

Good Health and Physical Well-Being

My child:

- * Eats a balanced diet.
- * Receives regular medical and dental care and has had all the necessary immunizations. Gets plenty of rest.
- * Runs, jumps, plays outdoors, and does other activities that help develop large muscles and provide exercise.
- * Works puzzles, scribbles, colors, paints, and does other activities that help develop small muscles.

Social and Emotional Preparation

My child:

- * Is learning to be confident enough to explore and try new things.
- * Is learning to work well alone and to do many tasks for himself.
- * Has many opportunities to be with other children and is learning to cooperate with them. Is curious and is motivated to learn.

- * Is learning to finish tasks (for example, picks up own toys).
- * Is learning to use self-control.
- * Can follow simple instructions.
- * Helps with family chores.

Language and General Knowledge

My child:

- * Has many opportunities to play.
- * Is read to every day.
- * Has access to books and other reading materials.
- * Has his television viewing monitored by an adult.
- * Is encouraged to ask questions.
- * Is encouraged to solve problems.
- * Has opportunities to notice similarities and differences.
- * Is encouraged to sort and classify things (for example, by looking for red cars on the highway).
- * Is learning to write his name and address.
- * Is learning to count and plays counting games. Is learning to identify shapes and colors.
- * Has opportunities to draw, listen to and make music, and to dance.
- * Has opportunities to get firsthand experiences to do things in the world--to see and touch objects, hear new sounds, smell and taste foods, and watch things move.

Part 2 - Preparing Your Child For Success In School

Where Our Children Learn

At Home

It's no surprise to anyone that children need time with their parents. And even though most parents are extremely busy, whether they work outside of the home or not, they do find time to spend with their children. But they want that time to count in helping prepare their children for the world they will find outside the home.

What counts most is what we say and do at home, not how rich or poor we are or how many years of school we have finished. When children can count on getting attention at home, they have a greater sense of security and self-worth. This will help them do better not only in school, but also when they grow up.

If you think about it, school, while very important, does not really take up very much time. In the United States, the school year averages 180 days; in other industrialized nations, the school year can extend up to 240 days, and students are often in school more hours per day. So, the hours and days a child is not in school are important for learning, too.

Communicating. This is probably the most important activity we can do in our home, and it doesn't cost anything. Ask questions, listen for answers. These are no-cost, high-value things to do.

Think of conversation as being like a tennis game with talk, instead of a ball, bouncing back and forth. Communication can happen any time, any place--in the car, on a bus, at mealtime, at bedtime.

When our children enter and continue school with good habits of communication, they are in a position to succeed--to

learn all that has to be learned, and to become confident students.

Starting early. Here are some things you can do when your children are young:

- * Let them see you read, and read to them and with them. Visit the library. If they are old enough, make sure they have their own card. Keep books, magazines, and newspapers around the house.
- * Keep pencils and paper, crayons, and washable markers handy for notes, grocery lists, and schoolwork. Writing takes practice, and it starts at home.
- * Teach children to do things for themselves rather than do the work for them. Patience when children are young pays off later.
- * Help children, when needed, to break a job down into small pieces, then do the job one step at a time. This works for everything--getting dressed, a job around the house, or a big homework assignment.
- * Develop, with your child, a reasonable, consistent schedule of jobs around the house. List them on a calendar, day by day.
- * Every home needs consistent rules children can depend on. Put a plan into action, and follow through.
- * Give each child an easy-to-reach place in which to put things away.
- * Set limits on TV viewing so that everyone can get work done with less background noise.
- * Watch TV with your children and talk about what you see.

Handling homework. These are the messages to get across to your children about homework:

- * Education is important. Homework has to be done. Let children know that this is what you value.

- * Try to have a special place where each child can study.
- * Help your children plan how to do all the things they need to do--study, work around the house, play, etc.
- * Let your children know that you have confidence in them. Remind them of specific successes they have had in the past perhaps in swimming, soccer, cooking, or in doing a difficult homework assignment.
- * Don't expect or demand perfection. When children ask you to look at what they've done--from skating a figure 8 to a math assignment--show interest and praise them when they've done something well. If you have criticisms or suggestions, make them in a helpful way.

The time we spend exchanging ideas at home with our children is vitally important in setting the tone, the attitudes, and the behaviors that make the difference in school.

In the Community

In many parts of our nation, the ties among neighbors have been weakened. For the sake of our children, they need to be rebuilt, and you can help. Be sure to introduce your children to your neighbors. You might even try a "child watch" program where adults who are home during the day keep an eye out for children when they walk to and from school and stand at bus stops.

Some schools are helping families connect with the community by, for example, becoming centers for social services as well as for education. Getting to know your child's school can help you, in a very real way, get to know a major part of your community. It can also help you build a network of wider community support for your family.

At School

Parents can become involved with the schools in several different ways, by working with children at home, volunteering, sharing information, and helping to make policy. We need to remember that what works in one community (or for one family)

may not necessarily work in another.

It may no longer be possible for parents to volunteer as often for school activities. However, working with children at home and sharing information with the school are two things all parents can do.

The section after the activities, "Parents and the Schools," has some suggestions on how to get the most out of talking to your child's teacher. Many teachers say they rarely receive information from parents about problems at home. Many parents say they don't know what the school expects of their child. Sharing information is essential, and both teachers and parents are responsible for making it happen.

With our help, our children can become confident students, able to handle the challenges of school. This means:

- * Talking with our children about the value of hard work and about the importance of education;
- * Talking about what's happening in school;
- * Reading report cards and messages that come from school;
- * Going to school and meeting with teachers;
- * Taking part in school events when you can; and
- * Finding out about resources in the community.

What Our Children Learn From Us

Sometimes we think that all our children need to know to be ready to start school are the ABCs and how to count. The reality is that most children can learn these things pretty fast once they get to school. What they do need--and what you can give--is the message that education is valuable: through education, people can shape their own future.

So, talk about learning, share the fun and excitement of new skills. Show your children that you are always learning, too. Read aloud, play games, and talk about events around the block and around the world.

Children tend to follow the examples set for them. When we say one thing and do another, children watch and learn. When we practice what we preach, children watch and learn.

The bottom line is that when we give our children the support and information they need, and expect them to do well, they do better in school and in life.

How Our Children Learn From Us

Children need active, even noisy, learning as well as quiet learning such as reading. Active learning includes asking and answering questions (and trying to get more than just "yes" or "no" answers); solving problems; and discussing a variety of topics.

Active learning can also take place when a child plays sports, spends time with friends, or goes to a museum or zoo. The active learning suggestions in the next section will help you think of even more things for you and your children to do.

Limit TV watching. Watching TV is an example of a quiet activity that children can learn from, but one that is a problem in almost every home. We know that children who watch a lot of TV learn less and get lower grades than students who watch little TV. And in international comparisons, U.S. students rank high in watching TV, but are near the bottom in doing homework. The result is that U.S. students know less than those in other countries.

Encourage active learning. What can we do? We can listen to our children's ideas and respond to them. We can let them jump in with questions and opinions when reading books together. When this type of give-and-take between parent and child happens at home, a child's participation and interest in school increases.

What Messages To Send

Three of the important messages our children need about success in school can be sent by:

1. Sharing our own experiences and goals with our children, because children tend to adopt our ideals. They need to know how we feel about making an effort, working hard, and planning ahead.
2. Establishing realistic, consistent family rules for work around the house so our children can develop schedules and stable routines. Children need limits set even though they will test these limits over and over again. Children need to know what they can depend on--and they need to be able to depend on the rules we make.
3. Encouraging our children to think about the future. Our children need realistic, reasonable expectations, and they need the satisfaction of having some of these expectations met. They need to take part in making decisions (and to learn that sometimes this means sacrificing fun now for benefits later) and they need to find out what happens as a result of decisions they have made.

Throw a stone into a pool and the circles widen and overlap. None of us lives in isolation. The circles of home, community, and school overlap also. For our children to learn and thrive, they need the support and encouragement of all of the circles in which we live. But the circle in the center is the home and that's where it all starts.

Activities

There is no one "right" way of doing these activities. Make changes, shorten or lengthen them to suit your child's attention span, or think up some activities of your own. Above all, enjoy them. And don't worry about what you might not have done in the past. Start where you are now, with the resources you have now.

In a box at the end of each activity is information on why that activity is important to your child's education. The suggested activities all build skills, attitudes, and behaviors children need for good study habits. They are designed to help develop personal maturity, enthusiasm for learning, and the ability to concentrate.

But that does not mean the activities are hard to do and won't be any fun. They are easy to do, cost little or no money, use materials found at home, and don't take much time.

Work out your own schedule for the activities. Don't forget to try them on vacation days or in the summer, too. If you've only used one part of an activity, you can go back to it and find the ideas you haven't tried. Experience indicates that all of the activities, in whole or in part, will be useful. Ability in schoolwork is like ability in sports: it takes practice to gain confidence, to become motivated, and to win.

Age Levels

The activities are arranged by approximate age levels. But, of course, you are the best judge of what your child may be ready to try. Age levels of the activities are indicated by a symbol at the top of each activity:

Ages 5-7

The activities for these early school years focus on helping children get ready for schoolwork and get a head start

on the habits and behaviors important for ongoing success in school.

Ages 7-9

These activities help children become organized and build early study skills and work habits.

Ages 9-11

These projects for children in the upper elementary grades continue to focus on work and study habits, with more emphasis on making personal decisions.

Remember:

- * We can all be great teachers;
- * Every home is a learning place;
- * We don't need a lot of time to do a lot of good; and
- * Everyone's abilities and skills can be improved.

Let's Go

Pick an activity and try it with your children. You will know they are learning when they say, "Let me try it." And you'll know they understand when they shout: "Let me do it! Let me! Let me."

Can You Top This?

Teamwork is important in school. In this game, children practice taking turns and working with others. They also build language skills.

What you'll need

Imagination

What to do

1. Make up a story, with parents and children taking turns,

one sentence at a time.

Decide on a topic. You might begin the first sentence with "Once upon a time a pirate lived in..."

Continue taking turns making up and telling parts of the story until you decide to end it-maybe after 8 or 10 sentences.

2. Take turns beginning and finishing a story. Ask other family members and friends to join in.

By making up stories, children can improve their language skills. They can also start to understand how ideas flow from one to another, and that everyone's ideas are important.

Listen Up

This game helps teach how to listen carefully and follow directions, two things that are important in school.

What you'll need

Any small object you can hide Objects that make noise

What to do

1. Hide a small object. Give directions to find it such as, "Take five steps ahead. Turn right. Keep the lamp to your left. Bend down and look to the right." Take turns doing this.
2. All but one person close their eyes. The person with his or her eyes open makes a sound (such as keys jangling, hands clapping, a bell ringing, a spoon tapping against a glass). Everyone else tries to guess what is making the sound.
3. Clap your hands to tap out a rhythm. Have another player listen and then clap that same rhythm back to you. Do it different ways: slow, fast, loud, soft. Make the rhythms harder as it gets easier to repeat them.
4. When taking a walk, or any place where you can stop for a

few minutes, sit quietly for 30 seconds with your eyes closed, then tell each other what you heard: a baby crying, an airplane, a bird singing.

5. Take a walk. One of you tell the other person what to do--cross the street, turn left, look down. Take turns following each other's directions.

Through practice, children can learn to listen carefully, see and hear details, and follow directions.

Time Marches On

This game will help your children see the difference between "a few seconds" and "a few minutes," and can help them be on time in school.

What you'll need

Paper

Pencil

A timer of some kind (alarm clock, kitchen timer)

Clock or watch with all 12 numerals and a second hand

What to do

1. Ask your children to watch the second hand tick five seconds. Together, count off the seconds.
2. Count off 30 seconds. How many times can your child clap hands during this time? Take turns timing and watching each other.
3. Make guesses about how long ordinary things take:

How long is a traffic light red or green?

How long does it take to eat dinner?

How long does it take to get ready for school?

Test your guesses with the watch or timer. How close did you each come to the right answer?

4. Read a book aloud with your child for 3 minutes. Time yourselves. Then move up to 5 minutes, then to 10, and so on.

Learning that some things take longer than others will help your child understand how long it takes to do a task and how to plan for it. This activity will also help them increase their attention span.

Now You See It, Now You Don't

This activity teaches children to pay close attention by seeing how long it takes different kinds of liquids to freeze and melt.

What you'll need

2 ice cube trays
A clock
Water
Small bowls
Paper
Pencil
Other liquids

What to do

1. Together, fill one ice cube tray to the top with water. Fill the other tray only half full.

Put both trays in the freezer. Check the clock. In 2 hours, look to see if the water has frozen (if not, wait until it has frozen).

How long did it take the water in each tray to freeze?

Did the smaller amount of water freeze faster than the larger amount?

2. Take an ice cube from each of the 2 trays. Put them in separate bowls to melt. Which cube melts faster--the larger one or the smaller one?

3. Put one ice cube in a window and another in the refrigerator (not freezer) and see how long they take to melt.
4. Try to freeze samples of liquids such as fruit juices. Compare their freezing times to that of water.

This activity can help your child understand that things don't happen immediately. It will also introduce the concept of change--liquid to solid to liquid again--and the idea of having to wait to get the result you want.

Start to Finish

Organization has to be learned. This activity lets children practice planning, beginning, and finishing a job--important parts of completing schoolwork.

What you'll need

Pencil

Paper

Items used to do a job around the house, such as watering plants or setting the table

What to do

1. Together, select one job your child usually does around the house, such as watering plants.

Ask your child to write down or tell you the "Plan," "Do," and "Finish" steps needed to do the job well.

Look over these steps together and talk about possible changes.

2. See what happens if one plant isn't watered when it is supposed to be. How long does it take for the leaves to start changing color?
3. List the "plan," "do," and "finish" steps of one or two jobs you do around the house. Ask your child to help you think of ways to improve these steps.

4. When your children have a new task, help them plan the steps so they can do the job well and have a sense of accomplishment.

Sometimes taking time to plan seems like "a waste of time," but it has been shown that those who plan a job are usually more successful and do it in a shorter amount of time.

Seeing the changes from not watering a plant can introduce the idea of "cause and effect."

I'm OK, We're OK

All of us have ways in which we are special. This activity helps children recognize and appreciate how they, and others, are special.

What you'll need

Pen or pencil
Paper

What to do

1. Together, think of and write down at least 2 things you like about yourselves (for example, I have a good sense of humor; I try to be fair).

Write down 2 things you like about the others playing this game.

Now, take turns talking about what others say they like about you.

2. Write down 2 things you would like to improve. When will you start? How long do you think it will take?
3. Think of some jobs around the house that both of you will feel proud of, like fixing special food for the family, teaching the family a new game, or fixing something that's broken.
4. Try to set a time every day, even a few minutes, when you

can talk about things that happened that day.

Find times to listen to each other and to chat. A ride to the grocery store or a wait at the dentist's office can be a good time.

Self-confidence can make a difference in how much success a person has, both at school and later in life.

Talking about what happened during the day lets children work out problems early instead of having them pile up and become overwhelming.

Where Did I Put That?

Children need help getting organized. A special place for school items helps make mornings smoother for parents and children.

What you'll need

Cardboard box
Crayons or markers

What to do

1. Find a sturdy cardboard box or carton large enough to hold notebooks and other school things. Let your child decorate it with pictures, words, or art work, and his or her name. Each child in the family can have a separate box.

Together, find a place to put the box. A spot near the front door or the place where your child does homework would be good.

School things should go in the box as soon as your child comes home from school. Later, all homework and anything else needed for school the next day should go into it.

In the winter, hats and mittens can also go in the box when they are dry.

2. Let your child make a rainy day box and put it in a different place (or make it a different color). Fill it with "treasures"--games, books, a new pencil. Invite other

members of the family to put surprises in the box (no snakes or flogs, please).

Keeping all school items in one place helps teach children how much easier life can be when we are organized and plan ahead.

Show your appreciation when your child keeps things in order.

My Place

This activity gives each child a separate place to study or play.

What you'll need

Space--even a tiny area will do

A small but steady table

1 chair

1 lamp

Small floor covering

What to do

1. Together, find a quiet study area away from the TV and radio for each child (even those not old enough to have homework yet).
2. Cut down an old blanket, rug, or sheet to put on a small area of the floor. Use this to mark off each child's private space. Put the table and chair on the floor covering.

This space does not have to be in the same place all the time. If the table is light weight, the floor cover can be put down any place it is out of the way (such as near the kitchen if a child needs help while dinner is being fixed). It can also be put away when it is not being used.

3. If the study space will always be in the same place, try out different arrangements of the furniture to see what works best. Arrange the lamp so the study area is well lit.

4. Together, label items with the child's name.

Watch for improvement and show pleasure when quality of work improves.

Children tend to argue over the same space (even in a big room). By having an area of the floor marked off, each child has a place that feels like his or her own. A special place also helps children focus on what they are studying.

Well Done!

Children need the experience of doing chores. The following are ideas to help children be more responsible and realize the importance of people doing what they say they will do.

What you'll need

Helping hands

What to do

1. Talk about what happens when people do the things they are responsible for (water the plants or feed pets, for example).

Think about what would happen if people did not do these things--if the bus driver stayed home, or the movie projectionist didn't show up for work. Together, think of more examples.

2. Decide together on jobs for each family member to do. Should people be able to do only the things they like? Talk together about this.
3. Turn a household task into a game. Decide together how long it will take to do the job. Time yourselves against the clock.

Listening to the radio or a record while you do the job makes it more fun. This helps the work get done faster, too.

Children need to learn early how others are affected when chores-are not done. Talk about why it is necessary to do things we don't want to do, and why we should not expect others to do our work.

This activity also gives children an early lesson in how to make good decisions.

How Time Flies

"I don't have time to do all I need time to do." Sound familiar? Planning our time is one of the most useful things we can learn. Knowing how long something will take can save time and tempers.

What you'll need

Paper
Pencil
Clock
Calendar

What to do

1. Together, write down your estimates of how long it takes to do certain tasks (such as getting ready for school or work in the morning; fixing a meal).

Use a clock to time at least one of these tasks. Then take turns timing each other. (But be realistic--it's not necessarily a race.)

2. See what part of a job can be done ahead of time, such as deciding at bedtime what to wear the next day.
3. Talk about at least 2 places you and your children go where you must be on time. What do you do to make sure you are on time?
4. Put a monthly calendar with large spaces where everyone can see it. Each member of the family can use a different colored marker to list appointments and social activities.

Being on time, or not being on time, affects other people.

It is important for children to understand their responsibility for being on time--it's not just for grown-ups.

Homework Made Easy(!)

Homework without nagging is much to be desired. Have your child try a homework chart.

What you'll need

Paper
Marker, pen, or pencil
Clock

What to do

1. Have (or help) your child do the following: Create a homework chart out of a sturdy, large-sized piece of paper.

Attach a colored marker or pen so that it is always handy.

Each day after school, put a check mark in each box in which there is a homework assignment. Circle the check when the homework is completed.

2. Make a new chart for each week. Depending on how many subjects you have, you may be able to put 3 or 4 weeks on each piece of paper.
3. Try to figure out how long it will take to complete homework assignments so you know when you need to start working.

A homework chart can show exactly what needs to be done when, and gives a feeling of accomplishment when an assignment is crossed off.

Talk to your child about homework. Does your child need or want more time or help? Does your child want to devote more

time to learning about a certain subject?

Divide It Up

Just about anything is easier to do if it's divided into smaller pieces. As assignments get longer and more complicated, more organizing and planning skills are needed.

What you'll need

Homework assignments
Jobs in and around the house
Paper
Pencil

What to do

1. Choose a big assignment to talk about, such as a geography project. Decide together, and have your child write down, what he or she needs to complete the job. For example:

Reference materials (books, maps)

Can you complete the assignment just using your textbook?
If not, do you need to go to the library?. If so, can you check out books, or will you have to allow time to stay there and use reference books?

Notes

Do you have a notebook? Pencils? Will you need note cards?

Illustrations

If you need pictures, where will you get them?

Finished project

Will it be a stapled report? A poster? A folded brochure?
What will you need to complete the job?

2. Decide the order in which the parts of the job need to be done. Number the steps.

Try to estimate how long each step will take. Work

backwards from the date the paper is due in order to see when each part needs to be started. Put start and finish dates next to these steps, then put the assignment on a calendar or homework chart.

3. Together, think about a household job, such as gardening or cleaning. Divide it up into smaller parts.
4. Talk about how adults divide work on their jobs or at home.

This trick of dividing big jobs into small pieces helps make all jobs easier and can save a lot of wear and tear on everyone when it's time to hand in a school assignment.

Help Wanted

Older students are interested in life beyond school. You can help them have a realistic sense of what's out there.

What you'll need

Pen or pencil
Paper
Newspaper "help wanted" ads
Friends and neighbors

What to do

1. Talk with your child: "What job do you think you would like to do when you get out of school? What training do you think you will need to get this job?"
2. Suggest that your child pick two adults he or she knows, such as neighbors or relatives, to interview briefly about their jobs.

Help your child think of at least 3 questions to write down, leaving space for the answers. Sample questions: What is your job? How long have you held it? What kind of special training did you need?

Have your child do the interviews. (You may want to help him or her get started.)

After the interview, talk about what your child learned. Now your child will be more comfortable doing the next step.

3. Read a page of the newspaper help wanted ads together. Have your child find ads for three jobs that he or she might want in the future. Talk together about the training needed for each job: Can some of it be learned on the job? How much schooling is necessary?.
4. Have your child find people who already have these jobs and interview them.

Remember that there will be many new kinds of jobs in the future. What children--and adults, too--need to do is be flexible and keep on learning.

How Can I Get Help?

We need to think about more than our own interests and ask "How can I help others?"

What you'll need

Newspaper and magazine articles

What to do

1. Together, find newspaper articles about people who get involved. Look for ways to help other people that involve your child's interests.
2. What are some everyday good deeds? Ask your children to think back and remember a time when they helped another person. Think big and think small.
3. Discuss community food drives and volunteer tutoring programs. Suggest that your children check with a local religious group, community or recreation center, school, or library.
4. Explore the possibility of joining a young people's group

that does community service.

5. Ask your children to name at least two things they could do today or tomorrow to help others. What will it take?

Encourage your children to make a commitment.

Taking part in community activity can not only help others, but can also help your child make new friends and learn new skills.

TV Time

Decide how you are going to use TV. Watching television can be educational or something we do in our spare time.

What you'll need

TV set
TV schedule
Pen or pencil

What to do

1. Decide together how much TV your family will watch. Read the TV schedule. Have each family member decide what he or she would like to watch. Put initials next to everyone's choices.

Decide what you will watch each day or week. Circle your choices. If 2 people want to watch different programs at the same time, try to compromise: take turns.

Your child's teacher may assign a TV program as homework: make allowances if this happens.

2. Try to find time to watch TV with your child. Be sure they understand what's real and what isn't.
3. Have board games, books, or projects handy so children can do other things when TV time is used up.
4. If your children watch too much TV, try cutting down a little at a time. Avoid leaving a TV set on all day.

Parents and the Schools

Q: When should I talk with my child's teacher?

Early and often. Contact the teacher at the beginning of the year or as soon as you can. Get acquainted and show your interest.

Let teachers know what they need to know about your child. If your child has special needs, make these known right from the beginning.

If you notice a big change in your child's behavior or attitude, contact the teacher immediately.

The teacher should tell you before the end of a grading period if your child is having trouble; keeping parents informed is an important function of the school.

Remember, parents and teachers work together to help children want to learn and to help them gain self-confidence and self-discipline.

Q: How do I get the most out of parent-teacher conferences?

Be prepared to listen as well as to talk. It helps to write out questions before you leave home. Also jot down what you want to tell the teacher. Be prepared to take notes during the conference and ask for an explanation if you don't understand something.

In conferences, the teacher should offer specific details about your child's work and progress. If your child has already received some grades, ask what went into them. Ask how your child is being evaluated.

Discuss your child's talents, skills, hobbies, study habits, and any special sensitivities such as concern about weight or speech difficulties.

Tell the teacher if you think your child needs special help. Tell the teacher about any special family situation, such as a new baby, an illness, or a recent or upcoming move. It is important to tell the teacher about things in your children's lives that might affect their ability to learn.

Ask about specific ways to help your child at home. Try to have an open mind.

At home, think about what the teacher has said and then follow up. If the teacher has told you your child needs to improve in certain areas, check back in a few weeks to see how things are going.

Parents and teachers are partners in helping children.

Q: What if I don't have time to volunteer as much as I would like?

Even if you can't volunteer to do work at the school building, you can help your child learn when you are at home. The key question is, "What can every parent do at home, easily and in a few minutes a day, to reinforce and extend what the school is doing?" This is the involvement every family can and must provide.

The schools also need to take steps so parents feel good about what they're doing at home and know they are helping.

What we as parents need to care about is involving ourselves in our children's education outside of school.

Remember, you can encourage your child to work hard. You can give your child the power to succeed in school.