

Getting Ready for SCHOOL

When you are busy taking care of an infant, or chasing a toddler around the house, it seems like preschool days are a long way off. But what you are doing right now, from birth to age 3, plays a big role in how ready children will be when they enter kindergarten, and how well they do in school and the years beyond it. The skills children learn as infants and toddlers are the foundation for everything else in their life, so it's important to spend time now encouraging learning and brain development.



THE MOST IMPORTANT YEARS

What's so important about these first three years? This is the time that your child's brain is geared for growth and your child is ready to learn. When your baby is born, the brain still has a lot of growing to do, so it will spend the next few years making trillions of connections between brain cells. These connections will help your child learn speech and communicate, develop thinking and problem-solving skills, and learn social and emotional skills. It's also the time when children develop a close relationship with their parents, other family members and caregivers. Over the next three years, there are everyday things you can do to help that will make a big difference as they grow.



Growing Speech and Communication Skills

Your little one's ability to communicate with others through words, sounds and expressions is one of the most important skills they will develop in their early years. These communication skills will help develop understanding and language, so they become better readers and have more success in school. Good communication skills will help the ability to talk about feelings and thoughts, and to have better relationships with others.



BIRTH TO 12 MONTHS

For the first 12 months, some of the best ways to develop speech and communication skills is to talk and sing to your child, and set time aside every day for sharing books and stories together. Talk about what you are doing as you go through daily life. Point out objects and say the words for them so they learn how sounds can represent things. As they begin to coo and babble, encourage them by responding and helping fill out sounds with real words. As your baby babbles "da da da da," fill in with "daddy" so he can hear what the whole words sounds like and can build the connection in his brain.



12 MONTHS AND BEYOND

As children grow with language use, they'll start to say one or two words, and, eventually, short three-to-five word sentences. Ask them questions and give them time to respond before you give more clues or fill in the words. This way, they'll learn the patterns of speech and understand the tone difference between statements and questions. As their sentences grow longer and more expressive, help them understand how to use words to share their feelings, "You are angry that we had to leave the park." Children who learn how to use words in this way are better able to manage their emotions and stay in control, which makes them more prepared for school.



Developing Thinking Skills

Thinking and problem-solving skills are also important things for children to learn during their first three years. They need to be able to figure out how things work, like cause and effect, sizes and shapes, and how to solve problems. The way children learn how the world works is by playing and exploring. Through play, babies and toddlers test out concepts of gravity, time and space, and important math and science concepts. Gaining these skills will help them be prepared for school, and far beyond.



BIRTH TO 12 MONTHS

Help babies gain thinking skills by encouraging them to play and explore. For the earliest months, give them toys that they can shake or rattle, and they'll learn that when they move the toy, it will make noise. Let them bang a spoon on the high chair and hear the noise it makes and feel the impact as it hits the tray. They can stack cups or blocks and see how shapes relate to each other and fit together, also called spatial relations. You don't need to buy special toys for this exploration. Your baby will have fun with plastic cups, pots and pans, and other household items. They will learn about object permanence, the idea that things still exist even when you can't see them, by playing peek-a-boo, or by hiding toys behind your back or under the table, and then revealing them. Show them.

12 MONTHS AND BEYOND

Continue helping young toddlers explore by giving them chances to play with an expanding variety of objects. Bath time is something many toddlers love and it gives them an opportunity to learn the difference between wet and dry, learn about floating and sinking, see bubbles foam up and disappear, and pour water from one container to another. They will learn how things can take different shapes, how water has volume. As water flows from one container to another, they learn empty and full. Help them by saying what you see and then asking questions, like "The towel was dry and now it's wet. What do you think happened?" Let them try out the same things with sand or cereal, and the ideas of shifting shapes, volume and flow will be experienced in a different way, cementing them in memory. These everyday learning experiences are also fun ways to bond and create a close relationship with your little one. Keep it fun by letting children take the lead and allow them to explore whatever captures their interest and imagination.





Emotional Development

Over the first 3 years, the emotional skills children develop give them the ability to manage feelings and actions in acceptable ways. They also learn to wait their turn, share toys, and work out problems with friends, all things related to developing good social skills. These skills are so important for success in school and personal relationships but they can be very hard for children to learn.



BIRTH TO 12 MONTHS

Babies are born with very little ability to control their actions and reactions. They cry to attract your attention when hungry or in need of a diaper change. But as they get older, they can learn to control their cries and get your attention by talking or gestures. Helping babies feel safe and calm will help them learn how to control themselves and their emotions. See what helps soothe them, like the feeling of being swaddled, or wrapped snugly in a blanket, or sucking on a thumb or pacifier. They might like to be rocked, or put down in a crib for a minute, or have a favorite blanket or toy to snuggle. When they get upset, ask if they'd like their blanket, or need a hug, so they can see that when losing control, there is a way to comfort themselves. Helping babies feel safe and staying calm yourself will help them learn to control their responses.

12 MONTHS AND BEYOND

Toddlers want to do so many things, yet are still unable to do them. They want to put on their own shirt, but struggle to get an arm in the right sleeve hole. They want to cut their food but can't manage a knife yet. These things can be very frustrating for them and they need your help to gain self-control and learn to express emotions with words. Modeling for them with your action is a good way to help children learn how to act. If you've misplaced your key, calmly looking around and wondering aloud, "Hmm, where is my key? Maybe it's in my coat pocket" shows problem-solving skills and behavior that is under control.

As they grow, give them control over choices so they can practice making decisions. Ask, "would you like to wear the blue shirt today or the red one?" or "Do you want to read a story first or put your pajamas on first?" Allowing them to make these choices help them see that they have control in a situation. Another way to teach them to control emotions is to show them what they are allowed to do. If you see them pulling on a dog's ears or tail, show them how to use their hands to gently pet the dog. Knowing what is okay, and what is not okay, and then making the right choice without a big fuss is part of building emotional control. They will learn right from wrong and how to direct energy to positive things which is very important for success in school and for learning to get along with others.



Social Skills

Each child is learning that they are a very special person; that they are loved, smart, fun, and capable. When children feel good about themselves, they are more confident and willing to take on new challenges. Being strong, confident and having some independence are necessary for success in school, and in life. They will be able to get along with others, be able to deal with competition and set-backs better and expect to have healthy relationships where they are treated with respect. Help your child develop these traits with some everyday chances to practice, and give encouragement and praise as they try new things.

BIRTH TO 12 MONTHS

Having a stable and predictable routine at home is very important for infants and toddlers. It helps them make sense of the world around them, and their place in it. With so many new experiences every day, your child will feel secure with loving caregivers who respond to their needs and talk and play with them. A daily routine also helps. Knowing what is going to happen, like that they have a nap after lunch every day, or that you read a story together before bed, helps boost confidence because they will feel secure in knowing what to expect. It helps them spot patterns, which will apply to when they have to be around others on school days.



12 MONTHS AND BEYOND

As children become able to do more tasks, you can help boost their social skills by making things more challenging. If they have mastered the 5-piece puzzle, let them try a puzzle with more pieces. Encourage them to keep trying if they struggle with this more challenging toy, but let them work it out.

Talk to them in a positive manner, and ask questions to help them solve the challenge. Instead of completing the puzzle for them, you might say, "That puzzle piece looks too big for that spot. Is there another place it might fit better?" and let them work it out. Routines help them develop skills to succeed in social environments. Early classroom activity involves setting up routines, like first we hang up our coats, then we get our papers from our backpack, then we sit on the mat. Routines make children feel secure and confident in knowing what will happen next.

These early, everyday experiences are the ones that help children learn important skills and traits and create strong brain connections. With loving, involved caregivers and lots of encouragement, your child will transform from a totally dependent infant to an independent toddler, to a self-confident student before you know it. Make the most of early learning opportunities by making your home a fun, safe, learning space and set a strong foundation for the rest of her life.



For more information, go to
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