



CHILD DEVELOPMENT

Getting Young Children Ready to Learn

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This guide is adapted from a guide originally written by Ellen Abell, Extension Family and Child Development Specialist, and Muriel Azria, Extension Graduate Assistant — Family and Child Development, Auburn University, Alabama Cooperative Extension System.

Parents want their children to grow up to succeed in life. They want their children to feel like they can do anything they put their minds to. This can-do attitude comes from everyday experiences children have early in life when others notice and encourage their efforts.

Outside of the family, one of the first places children have a chance to do well is in school. For young children, doing well in school means being ready to learn. Being ready to learn is much



more than knowing the alphabet and counting to ten. Readiness requires that children develop their physical abilities, language skills, self-control, social skills and desire to learn.

Parents and caregivers often do not realize how their everyday interactions with young children sharpen these school-readiness skills. Yet, parents and caregivers are young children's first and most important teachers. This publication will outline the kinds of daily activities and interactions that help children develop school-readiness skills and a can-do attitude.

Developing physical abilities

Large muscle skills

Part of being ready to learn means

that young children can control the movements of their bodies. Children who can control their large muscles and physical movements are less likely to hurt themselves when playing. They may also have more chances for social play with other children. Children who can hop, skip, run and climb can find many ways to entertain themselves and to enjoy play with others.

Children develop these skills at different rates. Most children can learn these skills if they have the chance to practice and the encouragement of caring adults.

Large muscle skills for can-do kids

Run	Climb
Hop	Gallop
Jump	Balance
Skip	Walk backwards

Children do not automatically develop good physical skills. These skills require both maturation and practice. For example, toddlers don't have muscles mature enough to be able to skip. Most preschoolers do, but they need to practice to be able to skip well.

To develop good physical skills, infants, toddlers and preschoolers need the chance to be physically active every day. Being physically strong and able

Developing can-do kids



School readiness

- ✓ physical skills
- ✓ language skills
- ✓ self-control skills
- ✓ social skills
- ✓ desire to learn



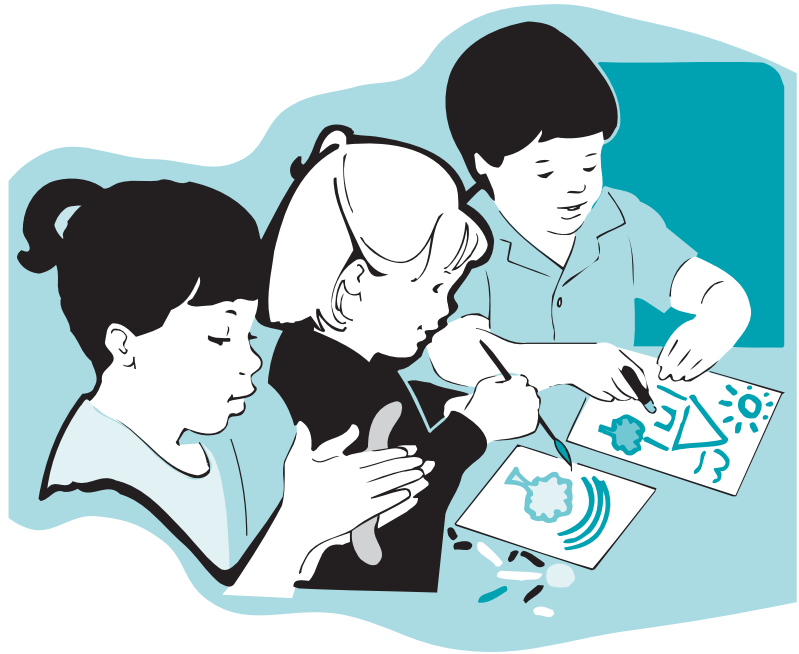
Ideas for developing large muscle skills

- ✓ Provide babies with opportunities to reach, grab, roll, scoot and crawl.
- ✓ Make safe spaces for crawlers to move around, climb and explore.
- ✓ Remove forbidden objects and furniture with sharp corners so toddlers can play safely.
- ✓ Take time to watch or join children in physical activities and games.
- ✓ Arrange to take children on walks around the neighborhood or trips to the park or playground.

helps young children develop a can-do attitude.

Fine muscle skills

Young children also need to be able to control the smaller movements of their hands and fingers. Control of these small muscles is important for



children's handwriting skill development. Children are using fine muscle skills when they grasp, touch and feel objects of different sizes, textures and weights. These skills also develop when children are given the chance to feed themselves finger foods — cereal, crackers and toast — or to practice using a spoon.

Learning how to manage buttons, snaps, zippers and other clothing fasteners also helps children learn to control these important muscles. Artistic play helps children develop both creative and fine muscle skills. These skills

develop best when adults allow children to try things without being pressured to do them a certain way.

Developing language abilities

Another very important part of school readiness is being able to understand and communicate with others. Young children need lots of practice learning and using words to talk about what they see, know and do. They need good language skills to help them organize their thinking.

Children develop language skills from their interactions with others. Parents' use of language and their responses to children's attempts to communicate guide language learning. For example, caregivers who talk to babies help them recognize that sounds and words are important, even if babies cannot yet understand what is being said. When caregivers respond to babies' babbling and speech-like sounds, they are preparing them to communicate with others. By talking with infants and toddlers, adults help them connect sounds with meanings.



Ideas for developing small muscle skills

Arrange for children to:

- ✓ Hold and use crayons, pencils, markers and paintbrushes
- ✓ Cut paper with child-sized scissors
- ✓ Glue together paper, leaves, fabric or other objects to make pictures or collages
- ✓ Work puzzles
- ✓ Pour, fill and empty containers of water, sand or other materials
- ✓ Trace, copy or draw basic shapes, designs and figures
- ✓ Match and sort objects

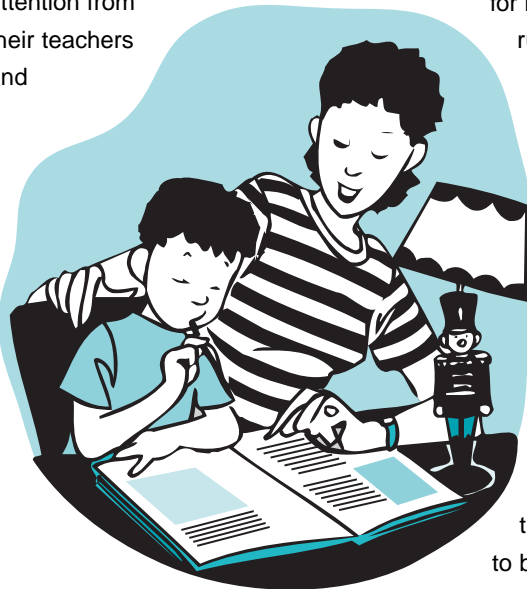
Language skills for can-do kids

- Listen to and understand others.
- Talk with others.
- Understand simple instructions.
- Understand a wide variety of everyday words.
- Listen and pay attention to short stories, songs and rhymes.
- Respond to simple questions.
- Use words to identify objects.
- Describe simple feelings (anger, sadness, happiness, fear), actions and needs
- Ask questions and give information.

Being a can-do kid means being able to talk about what you can do. Young children learn how to talk about what is important or interesting to them when adults use and teach them the words they need to describe these things.

Developing self-control

Early school success often depends on whether children understand and can follow rules and instructions. Children are more likely to enjoy learning and school when they get positive attention from their teachers and



classmates. Adults prepare young children for learning when they teach them how to calm themselves and to behave in appropriate ways.

This preparation begins early in life. For example, when adults respond promptly and sensitively to babies' needs for care and nurturing, they are helping their babies learn to feel secure. Secure babies often cry less and are more easily calmed.

How parents and caregivers deal with toddlers' behavior begins to set the pattern for how young children control themselves and interact with others later. Toddlerhood is the time when children begin learning to wait, to resist temptation and to meet adult standards

for behavior. Adults must now set rules that are reasonable for young children's abilities. They must use words to make very clear to the child what is wanted. A large part of teaching children self-control takes the form of good discipline. Good discipline teaches children what good behavior is and why misbehavior is not acceptable. When young children have experienced good discipline, they are more likely to be able to behave even when parents are not around.

Ideas for developing language skills — infants and toddlers



- ✓ Repeat rhymes and chants.
- ✓ Sing songs and lullabies.
- ✓ Look at and read simple books with them.
- ✓ Describe to them what they are doing or feeling.
- ✓ Talk to them about the events and activities in everyday life.
- ✓ Repeat children's speech sounds and expand or translate them into sensible, everyday words.

When young children misbehave, a way to teach them how to do better in the future is by having them experience reasonable consequences for their behavior.

The reasonable consequences of fighting over a toy is to have the toy taken away for a while. Hurting someone on purpose during play results in not having friends to play with. When adults explain why misbehavior is not acceptable and respond with fair and

Ideas for developing language skills — preschoolers



- ✓ Encourage them to talk about what they did each day.
- ✓ Ask them questions that require longer answers than just "yes" or "no."
- ✓ Read books and talk together about the stories.
- ✓ Encourage them to learn and use new words.
- ✓ Take time to listen attentively.

reasonable consequences, they are showing children how to think things through and make good decisions about how to behave.

Children must depend on the adults around them to help them develop self-control. It is a skill that will take time and patience to help young children achieve. Adults who work with young children to teach them self-control will be giving them an important way to succeed not only in school, but in life.

Self-control skills for can-do kids

- Express strong feelings in acceptable ways.
 - Wait a while for something instead of insisting on it immediately.
 - Understand the connection between behaviors and consequences.
 - Deal with anger and frustration in non-violent ways.
 - Behave in good ways, even when no one is watching.
 - Ask for help from an adult to help solve problems or conflicts.
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Developing social skills

Part of being ready for school means that young children have learned how to cooperate and get along with others. Knowing how to get along well socially makes it easier for children beginning school to make friends and fit in. Children who make friends do better in school and enjoy it more.

Children's social skills develop from the interactions they have with the important people in their lives. Children learn how to treat other people by the way they are treated. Their everyday experiences with family members and caregivers teach them how to relate to others. If children are treated fairly, with respect and consideration, they will gradually learn to treat others the same way.

Having opportunities to play and interact with their peers is another very important way for children to develop good social skills. Play with peers offers them needed practice in learning how to relate to others, to solve problems and to deal with conflict. Many adults are surprised to learn how important young children's relation-

ships with other children are. These friendships — even for children as young as 1 or 2 — are important emotional attachments in which they learn important skills.

Another way parents can help children develop social skills is by arranging for them to meet and play with other children. These play "dates" can be arranged to take place at home, at a neighborhood park or playground or at other community locations. They can include one other child or several children.

Social skills for can-do kids

- Feel comfortable with other children.
 - Show awareness of other children and their interests.
 - Understand the rights of others.
 - Stand up for one's own rights and avoid being taken advantage of by other children.
 - Play cooperatively and generally act positive with other children.
 - Show consideration and empathy for others.
 - Treat others fairly.
 - Show self-control in behavior with others.
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Ideas for good discipline that leads to self-control



- ✓ Make clear ahead of time what the limits of acceptable behavior are.
- ✓ State simple rules clearly.
- ✓ Help young children find ways to follow simple rules.
- ✓ Anticipate young children's actions and remind them of the rules before they break them.
- ✓ Tell children what they can do rather than just what they cannot do.
- ✓ Redirect unwanted behavior by offering children acceptable alternatives.
- ✓ Notice and encourage children when they are behaving well.
- ✓ Explain how children's misbehavior affects others.
- ✓ Model good behavior and self-control in daily life.

When supervising the social play of toddlers and infants, it is important to remember that sharing is not an idea that children of this age understand yet. Supervision should focus on making sure that bigger children do not constantly take advantage of smaller children. Adults can allow older preschoolers the opportunity to settle their differences on their own, unless there is a risk that someone will get hurt.

Ideas for developing social skills



- ✓ Use positive discipline to teach self-control.
- ✓ Take time to understand children's point of view.
- ✓ Show empathy for their feelings.
- ✓ Help them think about how their behavior toward others can create or solve problems.
- ✓ Join children's play, do what they do and have fun together.
- ✓ Help them find non-physical alternatives to expressing their angry feelings.
- ✓ Model behavior that is respectful of others.

Developing the desire to learn

Lastly, being ready for school means feeling excited about learning new things. Children are naturally curious. If parents and caregivers respond positively to young children's curiosity, children will develop a desire to learn.



Ideas for encouraging the desire to learn — infants and toddlers

- ✓ Create opportunities to look at and play with bright and interesting objects.
- ✓ Talk, sing, hum or play music for them.
- ✓ Allow them to safely touch and hold objects of different textures and weights.
- ✓ Provide them the chance to explore interesting, child-safe areas.
- ✓ Play gently with them and be sensitive to whether they need more or less excitement.

Children's desire to learn is influenced by events very early in life. Infants and toddlers who have experiences that excite their interest develop a greater capacity to learn later on.

As children grow, the attitudes about learning held by their family members and caregivers become very important to children's desire to learn. Parents and caregivers encourage children to value learning by giving positive attention to their questions, interests and activities, as well as by sharing with children their own interests.

There are many gifts that adults can give to children in a lifetime. Few are as useful in unlocking the doors to opportunity, however, as the gift of the love of learning.



Ideas for encouraging the desire to learn — preschoolers



- ✓ Answer children's questions rather than ignore them.
- ✓ Encourage children's curiosity about things by asking them questions.
- ✓ Notice and appreciate children's ideas.
- ✓ Take time to discover new things together.
- ✓ Show your own interest and enjoyment in learning new things.
- ✓ Keep children's drawings and other creative projects in a scrapbook or some other special place.

Conclusion

Getting young children ready for school is a process that begins in the first five years of life. School readiness is much more than just knowing certain facts. It requires the development of physical, language, social, behavioral and motivational skills and abilities. Parents and caregivers are children's first teachers and have a major impact on the development of these skills.

Each child is different, with different talents, skills and interests. Not every

child can be at the top of the class academically. It is important for parents to remember that there are other ways to succeed. For example, children can excel in athletics or in art. They can be successful by being socially sensitive, showing their ability to listen, demonstrating self-control or expressing themselves in creative ways. They can be skillful in their relationships with others. The important point is that children learn and develop the skills to allow them to succeed in some way and

develop a can-do attitude.

Without the basic skills needed to learn, children entering school will fall behind early. Then, they may have a harder time finding their own ways to excel. Those who care for and raise young children play a vital role in helping them develop these important skills and attitudes. They can help young children develop their talents, their belief in themselves and a lifelong love of learning.

