

Helping Children Learn[®]

Tips Families Can Use to Help Children Do Better in School



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Finger-counting helps preschoolers get a better grasp of math

A handy set of tools can help your child make sense of math—her fingers! Research shows that when preschoolers use their fingers to sort out numbers, they have an easier time understanding math concepts. One reason may be that the action serves as a “bridge” for kids to move from thinking about numbers to seeing them.



Encouraging your child to use her fingers to do math—by holding them up to represent numbers, for example—can help her improve her math skills. Try these “finger math” activities with your preschooler:

- **Tracing.** Write a number from 1-10. Have your child trace it with her finger. Then ask her to show you that many fingers to reinforce the connection between the numeral and the quantity it represents.
- **Dominoes.** Show your child how to match one two-dot tile with another. Then see if she can do the same thing with her hands: Have her hold up two fingers on one hand and touch them to two fingers on the other.
- **Puzzle play.** Flip over the pieces of one of your child’s jigsaw puzzles and write a number on the back of each. Have her show you a piece’s value with her fingers before she adds it to the puzzle.

Source: T. Jay and J. Betenson, “Mathematics at Your Fingertips: Testing a Finger Training Intervention to Improve Quantitative Skills,” *Frontiers in Education*, niscw.com/ec_fingers.



Consider format when choosing books

Reading picture books with your child is a proven way to build his language skills. A recent study shows that the format of the books you choose matters.

When children were read stories with one illustration per page, they learned twice as many new words as children who were shown pages with multiple pictures.

To maximize language learning when reading with your child:

- **Look for books** with one image per page that relates to the text. This focuses your child’s attention and helps him connect the words he hears to what is in the picture.

- **Point to the picture** that goes with the text you are reading if the pages have more than one image.
- **Limit lift-the-flap books.** Kids find these fun, but the act of lifting the flaps and looking underneath distracts from the words on the page.

Source: Z.M. Flack and J.S. Horst, “Two sides to every story: Children learn words better from one storybook page at a time,” *Infant and Child Development*, niscw.com/ec_pictures.

Relax the morning rush

To calm the frenzy that can come with getting a preschooler ready and out the door:

- **Wake your child** at a regular time that allows her a few extra minutes.
- **Establish a morning routine:** Get dressed, eat breakfast, brush teeth, etc.

If she is ready with time to spare, reward her by reading a short story or playing a game.

Build up staying power

Persistence is an essential skill for school success.

To develop your child’s ability to stick with a task until it’s finished, even if it’s frustrating or boring:

- **Give him time** to read or work alone.
- **Let him struggle** a little when he’s working on a task.
- **Encourage him** to keep trying.
- **Provide only a few** pieces of paper to draw on at a time—don’t let him throw away several before he really gets started.
- **Give him a chance** to blow off steam after he completes a challenging task.



Make the most of music

Enjoying music—listening to it, making it and moving to it—is great for your child’s brain and body. Music can enhance pattern recognition, self-regulation, language development and social skills. To help:

- **Introduce** your child to all kinds of music.
- **Sing songs** and clap rhythms.
- **Use tunes** to boost your child’s memory. Often it is easier to remember words sung to music than just the words alone.



Source: D. Wolf, “Why Making Music Matters,” Carnegie Hall, niscw.com/music.



How do I figure out if my child is kindergarten-ready?

Q: My son will turn five over the summer. In February, I will need to tell his preschool whether he will be returning to pre-K in the fall or heading off to kindergarten. How can I know if he will be ready?

A: The things that determine if a child is ready for kindergarten aren't necessarily academic skills. The kindergarten teachers will teach your child how to read, write and add. What they want is for their students to walk in the door prepared to learn.

Children who are kindergarten-ready can:

- **Listen and follow directions.** The teachers know their students are five-year-olds. They won't give the kids complicated directions. But when a teacher says it's time to sit down and listen, your child needs to do it.
- **Cooperate with others.** Your child may be in a classroom of 20 or more kids next year. He will need to know how to get along with them—by sharing and taking turns, for example.
- **Handle basic self-care.** On arrival, your son will be expected to hang up his jacket and put away his backpack. He will need to be able to use the restroom independently and wash his hands.

You don't have to make this decision alone. Reach out to your child's pre-K teacher for more guidance on his readiness.



Do you encourage creative expression?

Creative play gives your child opportunities to express herself. It also builds her critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Are you encouraging your child's creativity in a variety of ways? Answer *yes* or *no* below:

___ **1. Do you make up** stories with your child? Do you ask her to think up new endings to favorite stories?

___ **2. Do you provide** supplies—such as crayons and play dough—that your child can use to draw or make things?

___ **3. Do you enjoy** different types of art with your child, such as photography, sculpture, poetry and music?

___ **4. Do you protect** a workspace so your child can get messy while being creative?

___ **5. Do you offer** positive feedback on your child's creations?

How well are you doing?

More yes answers mean you are fueling your child's creativity. For each no, try that idea from the quiz.

"The world of reality has its limits; the world of imagination is boundless."

—Jean-Jacques Rousseau

Ask thinking questions

When you ask your child questions that begin with *why* and *how*—"Why is the girl frowning in this picture?" "How could you fit all the blocks back into the box?"—he'll have to really think before he answers.

It's OK if your child's answers don't make a lot of sense at first. The goal isn't to get a "right" answer. It's to encourage brainstorming and conversation.

Feed an interest in nature

Even in the winter you can help your child enjoy and learn about nature. Together, make a simple birdfeeder by spreading peanut butter on a bagel and rolling it in birdseed. Hang it up outside. Then:

- **Observe the birds** that visit the feeder. Help your child use binoculars or a camera to get a better look.
- **Ask your child** to draw pictures of what she sees.
- **Check in a bird guide** together to identify the birds.



For more bird feeding tips, visit www.humanesociety.org/resources/feeding-your-backyard-birds.

Go shopping for learning

Turn errands into learning opportunities for your child! At the grocery store:

- **Teach your child about shapes, temperatures, words and more.**
- **Point out new foods**, such as lemons or beets. Take some home to try.

At the clothing store:

- **Discuss different colors.** "That's a pretty blue shirt. I like the green one, too."
- **Talk about textures.** "These mittens are soft. Those shoes have bumpy soles."

Wherever you go, demonstrate respect by saying *please* and *thank you* to the employees.

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