

MIND in the Making

The Seven Essential Life Skills Every Child Needs

PRESCRIPTIONS FOR LEARNING

Independent Play

Promoting the Life Skill of Focus and Self Control in Preschoolers

Four Strategies that Work in Moving from Managing Behavior to Promoting Life Skills

Question: How can I get my four year old to play on her own?

Learning how to play independently is a valuable skill that involves Focus and Self Control. There are ways you can help your child develop this life skill as you support her in playing on her own.

Alison Gopnik of the University of California at Davis says: “Children possess an inborn imagination and a passion to explore and learn.”

- 1. Support your child's interests.** Caring strongly about interests beyond yourself takes true focus. Children are more likely to spend time immersed in play when they are deeply interested in or passionate about what they are doing.
 - Watch your child or talk with her about what she is interested in. Look for books, toys or other materials that could spark her imagination and extend her play. Your encouragement is crucial to your child's move toward independence.

Laura Schulz of MIT conducted an experiment with preschoolers to investigate the role of curiosity in learning by giving children pop-up toys where it wasn't clear which handle made which little toys pop up. She finds that children are more likely to stick one of these toys instead of moving on to something new when adults don't show them how the toy works, but let them explore. Schulz observes:

[Children] keep playing until they discover how it really works.

- 2. Encourage your child to ask her own questions and explore.** Curiosity is powerful. When you child is curious, she is motivated to wonder and learn more. There are many ways for you to foster curiosity in your child.
 - Use open-ended questions and comments to focus your child's attention and extend her pretend play.. You can say things like: “I wonder where your train is going?” Or “Yum, I see you're cooking something. What will you put in it?” Try not to take charge; you are helping your child learn to take the lead in managing herself.
 - When your child shows genuine interest in something, no matter how incidental it may seem to you, take the time to acknowledge her curiosity. Engage her in conversation about it. You are modeling focused attention for your child, while demonstrating that her ideas are valuable to you.

Maureen Callanan of the University of California at Santa Cruz studies parents and their role in promoting children's learning in everyday activities. She says:

What I think is important about the way parents tend to respond is that they are usually encouraging the kids to do this kind of questioning, guiding them in thinking about how [to find their own] answers to questions.

- 3. Help your child develop her own ideas for playing independently.** You can help your child become more independent in her play by coming up with practical ideas to set up some times she will play on her own.

- Make a plan. Explain that you are going to have some time where your daughter plays by herself. Ask her what she would like to do during that time so she makes a plan, even if it is for a few minutes.
- Evaluate how the plan worked. After she has tried out this plan, ask her how it worked. What made it work well? What didn't work and needs to be changed?
- Create an activity list together. As your child becomes more comfortable spending small amounts of time playing by herself, then make a list of activities with her that she can do on her own. Post this list where she can see it, using pictures or words to help her remember and "read" the list.

By giving your child some control over how to spend her time and encouraging a system with plans that are later reviewed, you are helping your child develop independence. You are also helping your child develop working memory skills, which are involved in creating and following through with plans.

4. Engage your child in games that promote the life skill of Focus and Self Control. Your child learns from trial and error. In fact, when you react to your child's mistake as simply a normal part of learning, you are doing more than helping your child become more independent. You are teaching your child a fundamentally helpful approach to life.

- Guessing games and puzzles require your child to pay attention.
- Games that have rules and sorting games build working memory, self control and flexible thinking when the rules are changed.

These four strategies promote the life skill of Focus and Self Control and move from managing children's behavior to promoting life skills in fun and doable ways.

Focus and Self Control involves paying attention, remembering the rules, thinking flexibly and exercising self control (not going on automatic, but doing what you have to do in order to pursue a goal). Children need this skill in order to achieve their goals, especially in a world that is filled with distractions and information overload.

Mind in the Making (MITM), at The Bezos Family Foundation, is an unprecedented effort to share the science of children's learning with the general public, families and professionals who work with them. Based on *Mind in the Making: The Seven Essential Life Skills Every Child Needs* (HarperCollins, 2010) by Ellen Galinsky, Chief Science Officer at The Bezos Family Foundation, its mission is to promote Executive Function life skills in adults and through them in children in order to keep the fire for learning burning brightly in all of us.

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