

MIND in the Making

The Seven Essential Life Skills Every Child Needs

PRESCRIPTIONS FOR LEARNING

Learning to Read

Promoting the Life Skill of Communicating in Preschoolers

Five Strategies that Work in Moving from Managing Children's Behavior to Promoting Life Skills

Question: I want my four year old to be ready to read when he starts kindergarten. How can I help him get ready for reading now?

There are plenty of things you can do at home to help your child become a lifelong reader by promoting the life skill of Communicating.

Kathy Hirsh-Pasek of Temple University says that literacy—learning to talk, learning to read and then reading to learn—is an ongoing process:

It's a process that starts with the very first smiles, the very first gaze, the very first back and forth [connection]. That turns into an opportunity for us to label words and for children to map those words together with their ideas, to understand the intents and minds of others and to express what they want to say.

1. Have back and forth conversations with your child. Exposing your child to language begins in infancy when you communicate with sounds, words, movements and facial expressions. You can use what child development researchers call “serve and return”—you or your child does something (serves) and the other responds (returns), back and forth, back and forth, like a game of ball. It's important to remember that a central purpose of literacy is to communicate.

When your child is four, you can:

- Comment on what your child is doing: “You kicked that ball very hard and it went rolling across the floor.”
- Talk about feelings—yours and your child's: “You are rubbing your eyes and seem tired. I am tired too. We had a busy day.”
- Ask specific, not general, questions: “Are you pretending that that paper towel tube is a car? Is it driving on the road? Wonder where it is going?”
- Always listen to your child's ideas and respond back: “Is the car going to the store? What do you think will be at the store when the car gets there?”
- Remind your child of past experiences you have shared: “Remember when we went to the store and bought lots of bananas? Now we have eaten them all up, and we need to go get some more.”

In The Home-School Study of Language and Literacy Development, Catherine Snow, David Dickinson and Patton Tabors, then of Harvard University, found that when parents use what is called extended discourse with their children, they increase their children's language and literacy skills. Snow says:

Extended discourse means talk about topics that goes on longer than just a sentence or two. So, for example, when families read books, they didn't just read the book and then ask questions like: “What's that?” or “What color is it?” They asked questions like: “Why do you think [the character in the story] did that?” [They asked] questions that involved the children in analysis, in an evaluation of the book, but also questions that gave them a chance to talk through their understanding of the story.

They [also] often encouraged children to tell stories about their own lives that mirrored the stories in the book like: “The little bear is scared. Do you remember when you were scared?”

2. Read interactively with your child. Catherine Snow calls books a platform for conversations to take place. Create family traditions around story time and the conversations that the books make possible. Asking “what” and “why” questions are great conversation starters. You can:

- Have your child guess what happens next and then see if it comes true.

- Ask your child to tell the story in his or her own words by looking at the pictures.
- See if your child can tell you what the characters might be thinking or feeling.
- Use books to watch your child’s response to the words and pictures. Build on what your child says (with sounds, with looks, with words or movements) and extend it.

Kathy Hirsh-Pasek of Temple University and Roberta Golinkoff of the University of Delaware have found that: “Learning takes place best when young children are engaged and enjoying themselves.”

3. Help children listen for the sounds in words and recognize letters in playful ways. You can encourage your child’s love for word sounds by singing and dancing together. You can also play sounds and word games like:

- If you see a cat, point to it and ask: “What else sounds like cat? Does rat sound like cat? Yes! Does bird sound like cat? No!”
- When you are shopping, say you are looking for something that begins with the sound “aaa.” Help your child figure out what food begins with that sound—apple, apricot, avocado, for example.
- Look for signs and letters. Ask: “What letter does your name begin with? Can you find that letter somewhere on this cereal box?”

Although learning to read involves recognizing the sounds of words and the sight of letters, don’t turn this into a performance where your child is reciting letters to please you. You want to keep the passion for learning alive!

Judy DeLoache of the University of Virginia notes the importance of reinforcing the notion that pictures “stand for” objects and that the squiggles on a page “stand for” written words.

4. Help children understand concepts of print. Dorothy Strickland of Rutgers University points to helping children acquire a concept of print—that pages are read from left to right, that there is a beginning and an end of books, a top and a bottom of pages, and space around each written word. You can help your child do this by:

- using your finger as a pointer to show the words going from left to right;
- holding the book upright and turning the pages from left to right; and
- reading the title and the author’s name, while pointing to the words on the cover.

5. Make writing down words an everyday part of what you do. You can encourage reading with your four year old by writing down what he says. Here are some suggestions:

- Children are always interested in their names. Write down your child’s name on a piece of paper and invite your child to draw on that paper.
- If you make a list for the market, talk to your child about what you are writing, such as: “We need milk. This is the way I write milk” or “Here is a big ‘M’ to remind me that I need to buy some milk.”
- Write down what your child says. If your child draws a picture, ask: “Is there something you want to say about this picture?” Don’t assume that your child is necessarily drawing a picture of something, so better to ask the question this way rather than to say: “What did you draw?” Write down your child’s words to go along with the picture.

These five strategies will promote the life skill of Communicating and move from managing children’s behavior to promoting life skills in fun and doable ways.

Communicating involves much more than understanding language, speaking, reading and writing—it is the skill of determining what one wants to communicate and realizing how our communications will be understood by others. It is the skill that teachers and employers feel is most lacking today.

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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