

MIND in the Making

The Seven Essential Life Skills Every Child Needs

PRESCRIPTIONS FOR LEARNING

A Case of the “Gimmes”

Promoting the Life Skill of Making Connections in Preschoolers

Four Strategies That Work in Moving from Managing Children’s Behavior to Promoting Life Skills

Question: My three year old has a bad case of the “Gimmes.” Whenever we go to a store, she asks for everything she sees. I try not to buy her something every time we go out, but when I don’t, she throws a tantrum in public, and it is so embarrassing. I don’t want my child to be spoiled. How can I help her understand that she can’t always have what she wants?

There are many things you can do to help your child understand the difference between her needs and her wants by promoting the life skill of Making Connections.

1. Give your child a sense of control. Encourage her to think of ideas to help manage. Say something like: “Every time we go to the store, you ask me to buy you something. I can’t spend money on things we don’t need, so what ideas do you have to help you manage when we’re in the store?”

Have your child think of as many ideas as possible, then talk with her about what would work and what wouldn’t work about each idea. Select one of her suggestions to try. If it works, continue to use it, and, if it doesn’t, go through this problem-solving process again.

By using this process, you are helping your child learn to differentiate between needs and wants. Parents find that it is by giving into wants (not needs) that children can become what is called “spoiled”—meaning, that it feels as if the child demands more and more, and the more you give in, the more the child will seem to want. In contrast, problem-solving helps your child learn to manage her own emotions.

You, too, can offer some suggestions:

- Have your child bring a toy from home or something to read or draw with to keep her hands and mind busy.
- Have your child help you shop for what the family needs by having her help make the grocery list. She can draw, cut out pictures, and/or use letters and words of things to look for in the store. Making lists gives her something useful to do as well as helps build the foundation for early reading and writing, which is all about Making Connections between letters, sounds, words and what they stand for.

2. Make it fun. Involve your child in the shopping process and make it fun. Children learn best when they are engaged in playful ways with important people in their everyday lives. Playing games will help your child focus on something other than asking for things, making the experience more enjoyable for both of you!

- Play “I Spy” as you walk through the store. Encourage your child to find items by describing their color or shape like: “I Spy a vegetable that is orange and pointy. That’s right, it’s a carrot!” Make sure to give your child a chance to ask you to find things.
- Ask your child to point out the different letters and numbers she sees in the store,: “Can you find the number 9 on a sign?”

3. Be a smart shopping example. Although your child doesn't fully understand the value of money, she can begin to learn, through your example, that it is important to think about what you are buying and that some things are more important than others.

- Talk with your child about what you are getting at the store and why: "First, we will pay for the apples we need and then, if we have money left over, we can pick up a treat for after dinner."

In an experiment by Rochel Gelman of Rutgers University, children were presented with two plates, one with three toy mice on it and one with only two. The experimenter told the children that the plate with three mice was the "winner plate," and every time they chose the winner plate, they would get a prize. The experimenter then covered the plates, moved them around and uncovered them again, asking the child to choose.

Gelman found that even children as young as two and a half are able to grasp the "more versus less" concept and learn that the winner plate has more toy mice and the loser plate has fewer. When the experimenter secretly removed one of the three mice from the covered plate, the children were surprised. They knew that there were supposed to be more mice in one plate than the other.

4. Use "math talk" while shopping. While young children seem to be born with a "number sense" (to tell the difference between large and small quantities of things), these skills take time and practice. Susan Levine of the University of Chicago emphasizes the importance of using the "language of mathematics" with your child, talking about number and quantity in a variety of ways.

- Build on your child's early number sense. When you use words like "more," "less," "bigger" and "smaller" and let your child experience what these words mean in her everyday life, you are helping her make connections between numbers and her experiences: "Look, here are two different cans of the same soup. This one is more money, and this one costs less. We need to buy the one that costs less."

Alison Gopnik of the University of California at Berkeley sees Making Connections as pathways into children's learning about how the world works:

One important thing that they're learning is what categories things fit into—what makes something one kind of thing rather than another kind of thing? ... And it turns out that that's a very important thing to understand. If you can sort the world out into the right categories—put things in the right boxes—then you've got a big advance on understanding the world.

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

Making Connections is at the heart of learning—figuring out what's the same and what's different, and sorting these things into categories. Making unusual connections is at the core of creativity. In a world where people can Google for information, it is the people who can see connections who are able to go beyond knowing information to using this information well.

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.

Prescriptions for Learning were created with funding from the Popplestone Foundation.

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