

# MIND in the Making

## The Seven Essential Life Skills Every Child Needs

### PRESCRIPTIONS FOR LEARNING

#### Loud and Embarrassing Remarks

Promoting the Life Skill of Perspective Taking in Preschoolers

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

**Question:** Sometimes, when we are in public, my daughter will blurt things out loudly like: "That man is old!" or "Why is that lady in a wheelchair?" It can be embarrassing. As she gets older, I want her to understand that words can be hurtful. How can I help her without making her feel bad?

Your reaction is completely understandable in these moments with your child, and your child's behavior is also completely typical of preschoolers. At this age, she is learning to understand how her words affect others.

**The American Academy of Pediatrics notes:**

*Between the ages of 3 and 4 years, [children] frequently ask "why" and "how" questions. Their exuberant use of language in play and social interaction often suggests a process of "thinking out loud."*

By promoting the skill of Perspective Taking, you can help your child understand when words are hurtful and when they are not, as well as how she can remain curious, but learn to express herself in constructive ways.

**Perspective Taking is fundamental to children's ability to thrive now and in the future. It involves understanding how others think and feel—their likes and dislikes—and how their views differ from your own.**

**Alison Gopnik of the University of California at Berkeley notes:**

*If we want to be successful and deal with other people, [we need] to understand the people around us—particularly what's going on in their minds.*

**1. Use everyday moments to talk about feelings.** Alison Gopnik finds that children learn about the perspectives of others when adults talk about feelings. Take the time to talk about feelings with your child—hers, yours and those of others.

- Label and discuss your child's feelings: "You were sad when your friend said she didn't like your dress." This helps your child understand the connection between her feelings and her responses to others. As she learns more about her own feelings and responses, she can begin to make sense of other people's points of view.

Connect her understanding of her own feelings to those of others. For example, you can say: "Remember when you asked the lady why she was in a wheelchair? You thought that she looked sad, just like you looked when your friend said she didn't like your dress. It's okay—you were just wondering and didn't know how your question would make her feel." Keep in mind that your goal is to help your child understand others' points of view, not to make her feel bad about what she says and does.

- Help your child think about how her comment might make the lady in the wheelchair feel badly. You can suggest ideas, like: "Maybe she looked sad because she was feeling tired." Encourage your child to come up with reasons, too.

**Ross Thompson of the University of California at Davis finds that Perspective Taking makes the social world children live in more predictable and memorable. Through his studies, Thompson concludes that how children gain insight into “what goes on in people’s hearts and minds” depends on how parents interpret “the everyday events of their lives.”**

**2. Promoting Perspective Taking starts with you and how you interpret the thoughts and feelings of others.**

As we all know, children learn what they experience, not what they hear.

- How do you react when someone says or does something that is hurtful to you? If you try to understand why that person might be behaving this way—even when you don’t like what he/she said or did—you are teaching why Perspective Taking is important.
- Express understanding when it comes to your child’s emotions. For example, you can say: “You must be really upset about something.” You are helping your child “realize that there are human needs underlying these emotions,” (in the words of Ross Thompson).

**Using brain-imaging equipment, MIT researcher Rebecca Saxe has found that the brain region used to think about others’ thoughts and feelings is still developing in the early years of life. Additionally, the part of the brain that helps us take another person’s perspective develops earlier than the part of the brain that helps us control our behavior so we can express that understanding. According to Saxe, to practice Perspective Taking:**

*[Y]ou have to be able to inhibit your own knowledge. If you look at [children’s] ability to be able to inhibit one answer in order to respond based on somebody else’s perspective, that’s an incredibly important accomplishment, and it’s developing a lot, changing a lot, between ages two and six.*

**3. Help your child practice self control.** She can learn that there are other options besides blurting out comments that might be hurtful. For example:

- Help her think of ways of asking questions or making statements that might not be hurtful. For example, she can ask the lady on the street about her wheelchair and how it goes back and forth.
- If she has a question, she can wait until you are out of earshot of the person to ask it or she can ask it in a quiet voice.

**4. Encourage pretend play.** Use your child’s play as an opportunity for her to explore other perspectives in a fun way. Join in with your child and encourage her to think about how she might respond to different situations. When she pretends, your child has to think on her feet and not go on autopilot. You are helping your child strengthen her ability to listen to others and use self control to play the role she is pretending to be.

- You can take an experience you both have had together and have her pretend to be the other person, such as the person who is old or the person in the wheelchair. Have her pretend to be that person and make up a story about him or her. Ask her questions about how she would feel, what she would do during the day, and so forth, so she puts herself in the other’s person’s shoes.
- You can use dolls, puppets, stuffed animals or other toys to act out different experiences together.

**The research of Larry Aber of New York University has demonstrated that simply teaching children problem-solving skills to use in social situations is not enough. Parents and other caregivers must help children practice what Aber calls an “appraisal process” in which children take a step back to look for clues that might help them understand the reactions of other people.**

**5. Look for opportunities in books and on television to talk about characters’ feelings and actions.** Aber’s research confirms that children need to learn to figure out the intent of others when they’re in situations that could easily turn into conflicts with adults or children. You can help your child learn appraisal skills by asking her what she thinks about the characters’ intent in books, on television and in the movies.

- Ask your child to think about what the characters might be feeling. You can ask: “I wonder how the girl felt when her grandma went back home? What clues do you have that this is what the girl was feeling?”
- Ask your child to think about her own life and connect it to what she sees or reads: “What do you do when you feel sad, happy, tired, etc.?”

**These five strategies will promote the life skill of Perspective Taking and work to move from managing children's behavior to promoting life skills in fun and doable ways.**

**Perspective Taking** goes far beyond empathy; it involves figuring out what others think and feel, and forms the basis for children's understanding of their parents', teachers' and friends' intentions. Children who can take others' perspectives are also much less likely to get involved in conflicts.

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**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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