

# MIND in the Making

## The Seven Essential Life Skills Every Child Needs

### PRESCRIPTIONS FOR LEARNING

#### Frightened by New Experiences

Promoting the Life Skill of Taking on Challenges in Preschoolers

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

**Question:** My four-year-old recently started swimming lessons. He asked us to sign him up, but now when we go, he doesn't want to get in the water, and this is typical of him. How can I encourage him to participate?

As your child gets older, there will be more and more opportunities for him to engage in activities outside of the house and to form new relationships. This is an exciting time of self-discovery for your child, but this growing independence can also be overwhelming. By promoting the life skill of Taking on Challenges, you can support your child in trying new things and help make these experiences enjoyable for the whole family.

**Megan Gunnar of the University of Minnesota, a foremost authority on stress and coping in children, says:**

*[S]tress is when challenge overwhelms your capacity to manage it. With a trusting relationship with a parent who's been there for you and [who's] accessible, you're not overwhelmed.*

- 1. Talk with your child about his feelings and experiences.** When children have supportive adults in their lives, they are more willing to Take on Challenges. You can show your support for your child by encouraging him to share his thoughts and emotions about swim class with you.
  - Start a conversation in a calm moment with your child: "You seemed excited about swim class, but now you didn't want to go in the water. Can you tell me about it?" When your child feels that what he says is important and that you take him seriously, he is more likely to share what is on his mind.
  - Be a detective. Ask your child questions to see if you can find out what is behind his behavior. Is the water too cold? Is it too deep? Is he feeling shy? Does he worry that he can't stay afloat? According to Jerome Kagan of Harvard University: "The behavior you see in a child is like observing the sky without a telescope. You just see a little. You've got to peer deeper."
  - Take the time after swim class to talk with your child about what worked and what didn't work at that day's lesson. What did he like, and what didn't he like? Is there something different he might want to try next time? Are there ways that help him feel safer than other ways?

**A study by Joseph Campos of the University of California at Berkeley demonstrates just how important parents' non-verbal communication is with their children. Campos found that even babies use their mother's face as an indication of how they should respond to an unfamiliar situation. And it's not just babies who react this way. Campos says:**

*By 11 to 12 months of age, the baby is already doing what ALL OF US DO when something unusual happens—we look around to figure out how other people are reacting.*

- 2. Think about your response.** Your child looks to you for clues about how to react, especially in stressful situations. He is paying attention to your words, your tone of voice and your facial expressions. If you seem nervous or scared, it is likely

that he will, too. Try to send calm and supportive messages to your child before, during and after swim class.

- Use non-verbal communication, like clapping, smiling, hugs and pats on the back. Sometimes just being there with your child and really paying attention is all it takes for him to feel your support.
- Let your child know that you trust the other adults in the room and that the swim instructors are there to keep him safe.
- Don't dismiss your child's fears. Assure him that it is okay to be frightened and that everyone gets nervous about trying new things. Share a personal example: "I was nervous to meet my new boss at work, but she seems very nice, and now I feel better about working with her."

**According to Heidelise Als of Children's Hospital Boston and Harvard Medical Center, in order to help children cope with stress on their own, parents and caregivers must try to "read" the language of children's behavior to figure out how they function best and then build on their positive strategies to manage their emotions and behavior.**

**3. Build on your child's strengths.** Rather than dwell on what your child can't or won't do, take a positive approach. Recognize what helps your child do well and build on those strengths. Ask yourself:

- Does your child like to observe from afar or immediately get involved in new activities?
- Does he do best one-on-one or in a small group?
- Does he prefer to have you participate or sit and watch him?
- If your child takes a long time to warm up to new situations, let him know that is okay. It is one way for him to gain control before taking on a challenge. Reinforce this technique by saying: "Let's sit on the side and watch the kids swim in the pool before you go in. Sometimes it helps to take time to get used to something new."

**Megan Gunnar of the University of Minnesota has concluded that:**

*Having control is the principal variable in determining whether [the individual] responds to stress when situations are potentially dangerous or not, threatening or not.*

**4. Help your child take control of his stress.** Brainstorm with your child for stress-busting strategies and help him make a plan for managing challenges on his own. Ask him: "What ideas do you have to help you during swimming?" Some ideas for strategies are:

- A certain gesture or signal that your child can use to let you or his teacher know that he is nervous and needs help or a break.
- Special swimming gear (such as swimmies) that will help him feel confident. He might also want to bring a special toy or object from home that makes him feel safe.
- Remind your child of these strategies so he can use them if you see him start to get upset at swim class.

**Carol Dweck of Stanford University has explored the question of "how children cope with challenges and setbacks" and has come up with her theory of mindset. A fixed mindset is one in which the child thinks his abilities are an unchangeable trait, while a growth mindset is one in which children see their abilities as something they can develop as they pursue challenges. According to Dweck, a growth mindset is supported when parents use specific praise to comment on their children's efforts and strategies, not their abilities.**

**5. Promote a growth mindset in your child.** Rather than praise your child's personality or intelligence with phrases like: "You're so smart" or "You're so talented," celebrate your child's efforts and strategies. Recognize his hard work and persistence in swim class, not just his successes. Acknowledge all the steps he makes along the way by saying things like:

- "You worked hard to kick your legs fast in the pool!"
- "You blew so many bubbles in the water!"
- "I know it is hard to hold your breath underwater, but I know you can do it if you keep practicing!"

**6. Try teamwork.** Part of learning to take on challenges is being able to ask others for help and work together. Your child might benefit from you or another important adult joining him in his swimming. You can try swimming together before the lesson starts or finding a program that involves children and their caregivers. Look for programs that fit the needs of your family and that support your child in ways that feel comfortable for him and for you.

And, if you decide that the teacher or the class is not right or that he is too young, the best solution is to try again another time. Tell him so in a way that reinforces his ability to do something difficult: “We are going to wait a little while until you are older and then try swim class again. Learning something new like swimming takes time, and I know you can do it!”

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

**Taking on Challenges:** Life is full of stresses and challenges. Children who are willing to take on challenges (instead of avoiding them or simply coping with them) do better in school and in

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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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