

MIND in the Making

The Seven Essential Life Skills Every Child Needs

PRESCRIPTIONS FOR LEARNING

Attention Span in Preschool

Promoting the Life Skill of Focus and Self Control in Preschoolers

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

Question: My three year old does not stay focused long enough to finish one thing before he moves onto another. He takes out a puzzle, doesn't finish it and then takes out another game. How can I help him stick with an activity?

Focus and Self Control involves Executive Functions of the brain. These are the skills used to manage our attention, our emotions and our behavior in order to meet our goals. Phil Zelazo of the University of Minnesota has found that this higher level of thinking becomes possible when children reach preschool age and older. These skills continue to develop through the school-age years and in adulthood.

- 1. Be aware of typical child development.** Your three year old is still working on developing the skill of attention and self control. At this age, it is common for children to get distracted or disinterested in an activity.
- 2. Observe your child and ask questions.** In order to figure out how to help him learn focus and self control, it is important to understand what your child is telling you with his behavior. Be a detective and watch your child in these moments. Ask yourself questions like:
 - Is he bored or frustrated?
 - Are the tasks too easy or too hard?

At the Bing Nursery School at Stanford University, when children are given a very difficult puzzle to work on, teachers reinforce the children's problem-solving strategies, using words like: "Look, you turned that piece around and around to see where it would fit." Although the children struggled, they didn't give up. Based on studies of what helps children continue to persist in the face of challenges, parents and other adults praised their efforts or strategies, not their personalities or intelligence.

- 3. Praise your child's efforts.** When you recognize your child's efforts, regardless of the length of time he spends on an activity, you encourage him to keep trying, even when things are hard. Tell your child things like:
 - "You were working so hard on that picture. I wonder if you can finish it."
 - "It looked like you were doing that puzzle. Can you show me how?"

Alison Gopnik of the University of California at Berkeley notes that a focus on inhibition must not come at the expense of taking away children's inborn imagination and passion to explore and learn. She says,

["]Inhibition has a downside ... To be imaginative, you want to consider as many possibilities as you can, even wild and unprecedented ones ... In learning, you want to remain open to anything that may turn out to be the truth.

- 4. Encourage exploration.** At this age, your child is still exploring the world through his senses and testing out his ideas. This exploration may seem chaotic to you, but your child may be taking the lead in his own learning. Here are some things you can do with your child to promote Focus and Self Control as he explores:

- Extend your child’s learning by looking for toys or reading material that build on his interests. Make sure to rotate these items so he does not get bored. Your child is more likely to stay focused when he is really interested in something.
- Limit distractions. Don’t put too many toys out at once. In addition, the studies of Daniel Anderson of the University of Massachusetts at Amherst have shown that children are more unfocused when the television is on, even it is in the background.
- Offer your child a variety of ways to express himself. Does he prefer to write, draw, sing or have hands-on experiences? When your child is engaged, he is more likely to be motivated and pay attention.
- Promote your child’s curiosity by asking lots of questions and encouraging your child to ask them, too. “Wh” questions, like “who,” “what,” “why,” and “when” are great prompts for discussions.
- Repetitive experiences build your child’s memory. Even if your child only plays with the same puzzle for a few minutes at a time, he is learning to master a task while building his abilities to focus and remember.

The more experiences your child has, especially with things that interest him, the more likely he is to build skills of focus, memory, creative thinking and self control.

5. Play games that promote Focus and Self Control. Give your child opportunities to practice skills of focus, self control, memory and flexible thinking in fun and casual ways.

- Play games like “I Spy,” “Simon Says,” and “Red Light/Green Light.”
- Play games with rules, like board games and sports.
- Even when you play pretend with your child, he is required to use his Focus and Self Control to stay true to his character and his memory to recall what he is supposed to do.

These five 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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