

# MIND in the Making

## The Seven Essential Life Skills Every Child Needs

### PRESCRIPTIONS FOR LEARNING

#### Playing with Others

Promoting the Life Skill of Perspective Taking in Preschoolers

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

**Question:** My three-year-old daughter is our only child. I try to provide her with opportunities to play with other children, but she sometimes seems to struggle with knowing how to play with others. How can I help her?

At its core, knowing how play with others involves understanding what others' think and feel. When a child can understand and empathize with other children, she can read their cues and clues and get along with them much more effectively. This is the life skill of Perspective Taking.

There are many ways you can help your child learn this skill, whether your child is in a preschool program or with play dates or with family members.

**Ross Thompson of the University of California at Davis emphasizes how Perspective Taking helps children make sense of their own and others' experiences. Studies have found that young children who learn Perspective Taking have a better adjustment to kindergarten. It helps them understand what their teachers and other children want and expect.**

You already provide opportunities for your daughter to play with others, which is crucial! Now you can use these times to promote the skill of Perspective Taking with your daughter.

- 1. Talk about your feelings, your child's feelings and the feelings of others.** Talk about your own feelings in certain situations. Help your child come up with a vocabulary of feelings words to label her own experiences. For example, you could say:
  - "I'm feeling pretty grumpy right now after being stuck in traffic. I just need a couple of minutes to unwind before I'm ready to play with you."
  - "You seem frustrated that you can't find where that puzzle piece fits."

**Alison Gopnik of the University of California at Berkeley has been a leader in studying how people develop what is called "theory of mind"—becoming aware that others have different beliefs, desires and intentions from our own. She has found that this understanding develops over time. By around a year and a half, young children can understand that someone else might like something that they don't like. When they are preschoolers, they can understand that someone else might know or believe something that they don't know. This type of understanding continues to develop over our lifetime.**

**Alison Gopnik and others have found that the more children hear adults talk about others' perspectives, the more likely they are to learn this skill.**

- 2. Use everyday moments to talk about other people's perspectives.** Perspective Taking involves developing the self control to put aside one's own thoughts and feelings in order to understand the viewpoints of others. In everyday

situations, talk with your child about how other people might be feeling or thinking and why. For example, you could say,

- “Your baby cousin doesn’t understand that this toy is yours. She just sees something colorful and interesting and wants to explore it.”
- “He didn’t like it when you grabbed his banana. It made him feel angry.”

**3. Stay tuned in to your child.** Children are often their “best selves” when they feel understood by others. But, as we promote Perspective Taking in our children, we have to practice it. You can model this life skill by putting yourself in your child’s place and trying to understand what the world looks and feels like to her. Children who feel known and understood are likely to have an easier time connecting with others.

**4. Pretend with your child.** During pretend play, use words and actions to act out and talk about how your characters are feeling, what they’re thinking and why. When your child pretends to be someone else, he or she is practicing the life skill of Perspective Taking in a way that is fun and comfortable.

**5. Talk about the characters in books and stories.** When reading books or telling stories with your child, ask her about what the characters might be thinking and feeling in the story and why. You can say things like:

- “Why do you think the boy is crying?”
- “What could his friend do to help him feel better?”
- “What do you do when you feel sad?”

Stories are great tools with which to explore the world of emotions in a safe and pleasurable way.

The American Academy of Pediatrics also recommends encouraging interactive play between your child and other children and helping your child understand the importance of taking turns. Some ways to do this might be during pretend play with your child or when playing games.

**These five strategies will promote the life skill of Perspective Taking and 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.

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