

MIND in the Making

The Seven Essential Life Skills Every Child Needs

PRESCRIPTIONS FOR LEARNING

School Readiness

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: What should I do at home to help prepare my three-year old for school?

Adele Diamond of the University of British Columbia is a pioneer in studying the Executive Functions of the brain. These are the functions that we use to manage our attention, our emotions and our behavior in pursuit of our goals. Diamond says:

If you look at what predicts how well children will do later in school, more and more evidence is showing that Executive Functions—working memory and inhibition—actually predict success better than IQ tests.

There are many things you can do at home with your child that will help him get ready to enter school while also promoting the life skill of Focus and Self Control. Here are a few suggestions:

- 1. Play games with your child.** Children learn best when they are engaged socially, emotionally, intellectually and physically. Play games that require your son to pay attention, remember the rules, respond to changing circumstances and resist the temptation to go on automatic, but instead use self control. These skills help him thrive now and in the future. Some of these brain-building games include:
 - **Simon Says, Do the Opposite.** In this game, your child must pay attention and not go on autopilot. The aim is to do the opposite of what the leader says. For example, if you say, "Simon Says, 'be noisy,'" then your child would stay quiet. If you say, "Simon says, 'move fast,'" then your child would move slowly.
 - **Red Light/Green Light, Freeze Dance, Musical Chairs.** These games all require children to use self control to Stop and Go. You can challenge your child and change the rules to these games. For example, in Red Light/Green Light, change the colors to purple and yellow lights. Have the purple mean Stop, then change it so purple means Go.
 - **Guessing games.** Listening games encourage children to focus, remember and practice self control. For example, you could say, "I am thinking of an animal with a name that sounds like a 'rat.'"
 - **Sorting games.** When you ask your child to sort objects or pictures into different groups according to a set of rules, your child must use his working memory and ability to make connections. When asked to sort according to new rules, your child engages his cognitive flexibility and self control. You can make sorting games at home using printed pictures or drawings on cards.
 - **I Spy.** Encourage your son to pay close attention and tell him what you spy. ("I spy something in this room that is green.") Ask your child to guess what it is. Then let your child take a turn to spy and ask you to guess.
 - **Puzzles.** Puzzles help your child develop focus and attentional skills. You can use store bought puzzles or make them at home by tearing or cutting magazine photos into different shapes. Encourage your child to "find the picture" by putting the pieces back together.
- 2. Be creative and promote pretend play.** When your son plays pretend or invents stories, he is developing what researchers call "cognitive flexibility." This requires being able to readily adapt to changed circumstances and to flexibly switch perspectives or focus of attention.
 - **Pretend play.** When children play "baby," "house," "school," "restaurant," and other pretend scenarios, they are using themselves to represent other people and using objects to represent something else. For example, you might pretend to be the baby and your child would act as the parent, perhaps using a block or other item as a baby bottle. Expand on the play scenario by introducing a new idea like, "I'm feeling tired. Let's get ready for bed."

This symbolic thinking lays the foundation for learning how to read and comprehend more abstract concepts. These experiences not only expand your child's thinking, but also promote another life skill, Perspective Taking, essential to social and emotional development.

- **Pretend stories.** When children use their imagination to make up their own stories, they are thinking flexibly. You can take turns creating a story: one person starts and then passes it to the next person who adds on to it. This game requires your son to use his working memory and attention while not going on autopilot.

Jerome Kagan of Harvard University performed an ongoing study of children who were shy as babies but didn't turn out to be shy or inhibited as older children. Kagan found that a number of these children had a special talent or interest.

3. Foster your child's interests. Caring strongly about interests beyond yourself takes true focus, as children are motivated to learn when they are interested and curious. Your child's budding interests can become a launching pad for you to help elaborate and extend his learning. When you support the things your child really cares about, you encourage him to take risks and try harder. Some ways you can do this are:

- selecting books and play materials related to your child's passions;
- encouraging pretend play that involves topics that your child cares about; and
- planning experiences that build on your son's existing knowledge and pushing him to ask more questions.

4. Help your child become familiar with literacy, math and science concepts. There are many opportunities throughout the day to promote these concepts. For example:

- tell stories or read books with your son;
- help him enjoy the sounds of words, through making up rhymes;
- talk about science concepts at the grocery store, like: "Is this box bigger or smaller than that box?"; and
- have your child estimate numbers in the number of steps in a staircase or steps to reach the corner of the street.

For everyday brain building activities, download <http://joinvroom.org> on your iPhone or Android. It will provide age-appropriate things that you can do daily to promote learning in the moments you are with your child.

The American Academy of Pediatrics suggests arranging times for your child to be with other children his age.

5. Create time for your child to be with other children. In addition to getting together with other children, you can arrange visits to other places where children go, like parks or children's museums or libraries. These experiences not only provide learning activities, they also help your child learn how to be with other children, negotiate when both want the same toy or piece of equipment and to understand the perspectives of others.

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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