

# MIND in the Making

## The Seven Essential Life Skills Every Child Needs

### PRESCRIPTIONS FOR LEARNING

#### Yelling Preschooler

Promoting the 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 four year old yells at me when she doesn't like what I tell her. How can I get her to stop this behavior?

During the preschool years, your child is learning to assert herself and to become more independent in taking control of her life. This desire often comes in direct conflict with what you, as a parent, want and expect of her. But change is possible! You can transform these moments with your child into opportunities to promote the life skill of Focus and Self Control and help her learn to respond without yelling.

**The research of Anne Fernald of Stanford University reveals that parents affect their children's behavior not only through their words, but also through their facial expressions, body language and tone of voice. In fact, Fernald found that even children as young as infants are affected by their parents' tone of voice and use it to guide to guide their actions. Fernald audio-recorded parents saying things that conveyed approval or disapproval in several different languages.**

*These American babies would hear the praise, and they would smile and relax; they would hear the prohibition and they would stiffen a little and their eyes would widen. These sounds—in a different language, from a total stranger—had predictable effects on the babies' behavior.*

**1. Think about how you are responding to your child.** It is only natural for your child's yelling to affect your feelings. As much as you can, try to be a role model to your child in helping her learn to manage her behavior and effectively communicate her feelings.

- Take time to reflect on how you interact with your yelling child. Is there anything that works in what you are already doing? Is there anything you are doing that is making things harder? Build on the techniques that you know work best for you and your child.
- When your child yells, try using a calm and quiet voice instead of matching her volume and tone. Your child will have to listen closely and control her behavior in order to hear your words.
- If you feel yourself getting upset by your child's reaction, take a step back. Take a breath or two before responding or, if you can, take some time away from the situation to think clearly.
- It is also important to think about what else is going on. Is your daughter more likely to yell when she is tired or hungry? Sometimes a snack at the right time can prevent an outburst.

Most crucial of all is for you to let your child know that you are there for her and love her, even when she is upset and angry.

**The American Academy of Pediatrics gives the following guidelines to help foster positive behavior in your child:**

- **Praise specific behavior you want to reinforce.**
- **Acknowledge when your child is doing something positive.**
- **Prepare your child for changes to routines ahead of time.**
- **Make your expectations clear.**

- 2. Create “yes” opportunities. Set yourself and your child up for more productive interactions.** Think carefully about the way you are asking your child to do things: are you demanding that she do something? Are you begging her?
- Make positive requests. Instead of saying, “Put your shoes on,” try saying: “It’s time to put on your shoes.”
  - Give your child limited choices. This is one strategy that can help your child feel in control and learn to manage her behavior. Say something like: “Will you take two bites or three bites of your beans?”
  - Ask open-ended questions, like “who,” “what,” “where,” “when” and “why.” These kinds of questions require more than a yes/no answer and ask your child to think beyond her immediate response. Ask your child: “Please tell me what you want me to know in quieter words so that I can hear them better.”

**Adele Diamond of the University of British Columbia has been a pioneer in studying what scientists call the Executive Functions of the brain. These are the functions used to manage attention, emotions, and behavior to pursue goals. The skill of Focus and Self Control very much depends on Executive Functions and begins to develop in the early childhood years. It doesn’t fully become established until the later teen and early adult years. The prefrontal cortex, where much of this brain activity takes place, is among the last parts of the brain to mature. Diamond says she is repeatedly asked:**

*“How can you say that a three year old or a four year old is capable of executive function?” ... An immature prefrontal cortex is capable of supporting a lot of the functions it’s supposed to support. So, even babies, toddlers and kindergarten children are capable of exercising executive functions to some extent.*

- 3. Help your child learn to express herself and to manage in different ways besides yelling.** Knowing that your daughter—like all children this age—is just learning self control, is helpful information. So instead of thinking of her as a willful or disobedient child, think of the preschool years as providing a great opportunity for you to help her learn to use more self control.

You can tell her that you are not going to let her yell at you, but you are going to help her learn other ways of telling you what she feels or what she wants. When you brainstorm with your child to do this, you are helping her sharpen her problem— solving skills and develop the tools to manage her behavior on her own.

- Give your child the space to express big emotions in appropriate settings. Tell her: “It is not okay for you to yell at me, but if you feel like you need to yell, you can go outside or yell into a pillow.”
- Ask your child for her own ideas of managing her behavior. What solutions or strategies can she come up with to help her control her yelling and to tell you what she wants in a way that you can listen to?
  - ✓ Take her ideas seriously, even writing them down.
  - ✓ Select one of these ideas to try. If and when she yells at you, remind her that she had a great idea of other ways to talk to you about what she needs and wants, and to please use it.
- Offer her opportunities to express herself through creative activities like writing, drawing, painting, music, or movement. Art experiences are great settings to let out all kinds of emotions in safe and enjoyable ways.

**Using brain-imaging technology, Rebecca Saxe of MIT has found that the brain region used to understand the social world is still developing in the early years. Much of this has to do with children’s emerging skills of Focus and Self Control, which children are just developing during the preschool years. Saxe says:**

*[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.*

- 4. Help your child see how her behavior affects you and others.** For both children and adults, Focus and Self Control are very important when it comes to relating to others. Although these skills develop over time, even the youngest children can begin to use them with parental support. You can help support these emerging skills by using what researcher Martin Hoffman of New York University calls other-oriented discipline. In this approach, you encourage your child to step back from the situation and see how her behavior affects other people in order to help her respond more positively in the future.
- Again, it is important to let your child know in a firm, but calm, voice that it is not okay to yell at you. Tell her that you will not be able to talk with her until she can speak more calmly. You can say something like: “When you yell, it hurts my ears, and I have trouble understanding what you’re trying to tell me. I know sometimes it is hard to be calm when you

feel upset, but can you tell me again, in a quiet voice, what you are feeling?” And, as always, let your child know that you are there for her and love her, even when she is angry and yelling.

**5. Play games that promote skills of Focus and Self Control.** You can best promote life skills, like Focus and Self Control, in your child by including them in playful and fun ways in everyday moments. Your child learns best when she is engaged and directly involved in meaningful and enjoyable experiences with the important adults in her life.

- Play games that encourage your child to pay attention like “I Spy” or “Red Light/Green Light.” Storytelling is also a great opportunity to promote focus and listening.
- Games that have changing rules or use opposites help children become more flexible in their thinking. Play “Simon Says” and challenge your child to do the opposite of what you say. For example, when you say: “Simon says ‘Touch your head,’” your child should touch her toes.
- Games with rules require your child to develop her working memory—her ability to use what she knows in the moment to guide her actions. Puzzles, board games and even playing pretend are all examples of activities in which your child must remember what to do in order to reach her goal.
- Play “Musical Chairs,” “Freeze Dance” or other games that ask your child to move and stop to the music. Games like these promote self control and ask your child to stop her automatic response in order to follow the rules. Make the game even harder by asking her to move when the music stops and stop moving when the music comes on.

**These five strategies promote the life skill of Focus and Self Control and work to move from managing children’s behavior to promoting life skills in fun and doable ways.**

**Focus and Self Control:** Children need this skill in order to achieve their goals, especially in a world that is filled with distractions and information overload. It involves paying attention, remembering the rules, thinking flexibly and exercising self control.

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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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