

Parenting by Play

Loving your most important job

Tips for parents of preschoolers (3-6 years)

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Children usually admire their parents more than athletes, TV or movie stars, teachers, or other adult role models. Thus, they count on parents' caring.

Being a good parent is hard work, and it demands wisdom, patience, and a lively sense of humor. Parents must sometimes make tough decisions and stand firm. Yet children respond to guidance best when it is put in the language of play.

Pretend play, turning routines into games, and laughing through triumphs and tragedies is good medicine for both parents and kids.

“Rules of the game” for parenting by play

Trust Your Child

Children treat play as...

- A way to discover
- A time for fun
- Something to talk about
- Good exercise

QUALITY TIME

Children thrive on regular contact with warm, enthusiastic adults who share their curiosity and playfulness.

However, research shows parents spend as little as 15 minutes per day in activities focused directly on children.

Daily events such as feeding, bathing, housework, and play provide the best opportunities for parents to express caring and teach discipline.

Children's play varies by...

- Age and stage of growth
- Personality type
- Interests or familiarity with objects or activities
- Gender (sometimes)

Children's play involves...

- Formal and informal events, and toys
- Alone and together times
- Short and long bursts of interest

Trust yourself as a parent

Parents are children's first and most important influences. They are the earliest, most consistent observers of a child's abilities, interests, moods, and difficulties in everyday routines (play, meals, bedtimes, etc.).

Parents are also a child's most dependable caregivers. They can best show caring by spending time with their child in play or making routines playful.

Parents are a child's most important guides, demonstrating rules or skills through hands-on activities.

What to Expect with Preschoolers

2-3 1/2 years old

- Enjoy learning new skills
- Learn language rapidly (especially spoken)
- Sense some danger, have a need to learn safety rules
- Gradually improve hand and finger control for grasping small objects
- Can become easily frustrated and bored
- Begin to act independently, yet still need nurturing
- Pretend and imitate familiar events of peers and parents

3 1/2-5 years old

- Gradually increase attention and focus
- Act silly, boisterous, and sometimes enjoy shocking adults
- Talk a lot, ask many questions
- Want to imitate adults, use adult tools
- Test physical skills of running and climbing, courage with caution
- Like play with friends, sometimes upset by losing games
- Sometimes share and take turn, but typically think about themselves

5-6 years old

- Curious about people and the world
- Increasingly interested in numbers, letters, reading, and writing
- Show skill and confidence in physical abilities
- Imitate and share in adult activities
- Use words to express feelings but may still need help to calm down
- Exercise mental and social skills that allow for problem solving and coordination in many situations
- Have independence to play alone and ability to play cooperatively with others
- Need reassurance and affection
- Need the encouragement and protection of adults to build self-esteem, confidence, and coping skills





Tuning in to the Natural Learning Cycle

By using a preschooler's **natural learning cycle** (typical pattern of mastering challenges), a parent can introduce fun and learning:

1. **The child looks on:** The child sees a trusted role model do the activity.

Everyday events: Children want to try washing dishes, vacuuming floors, or shoveling snow, sometimes with a toy or possibly the real thing.

Note: Be sure to keep blunt items in sink, protect electric outlets, and limit access to vehicles.

New adventures: Children enjoy using ordinary items for play (pots and pans for sorting or music); mastering new puzzles, blocks, games; and playing with toys other children may have.

Note: Safe items (pans, plastic boxes), natural materials (sticks, pebbles, pinecones), and garage sale items can be used to inexpensively expand a toy collection.

Turnabout is fair play: Parents also benefit from watching kids. Clues to possible play and learning activities can be found in a child's favorite toys at daycare, favorite sports, counting, art activities, and interest in animals.

2. **Do it together:** The child plays best with a sibling or adult who introduces a game or activity at the child's ability level.

Send an invitation: Preschoolers love playmates and don't have time for boredom when parents show them a simple board game, fishing skills, or how to draw. For real action, dress in costumes and pretend to attend a Cinderella ball or cattle drive.

Note: Schedule time for fun, caring, and learning. Also spontaneous play activities often work better than punishment. If a child misbehaves, divert attention to positive activities.

Encourage ideas: Kids like to imitate, but real esteem, skill, and imagination come when they are given some guidance and then allowed to choose how to build block towers or suggest the next scene of a story. Writing down a child's story and allowing him/her to illustrate it builds language expression, imagination, and finger and hand control.

Keep an eye on progress: Parents can tell interests, abilities, or needed help by watching the troubles and triumphs of their children at play. Expect these to change with fads, moods, playmates, and stages of growth. Parents may also notice that children are more warm and cooperative because they spend play time together.

3. **The child tries with support:** The child independently tries an activity, with help as needed.

To err is human: Until the age of four a child likely won't pour from a pitcher to a cup without spilling, even after being shown how to hold and pour. Wear a smile and plastic apron to the first tea party.

Practice makes fun: Parents are often worn out by playing the same events over and over. For children, however, repeating the same game, somersault, or puppet

drama brings independence, skill, and confidence. Patience, repeated demonstration, and support are the best strategies for parents during these times.

Note: Children's individual abilities and styles may make practice different than demonstration. Younger preschoolers may have trouble recalling rules, and children often 'bend the rules' to win a game.

The best help is to not interfere: Once a child understands a new activity, such as riding a tricycle or building a snowman or sand castle, a parent can show confidence by being present but not giving direct help or advice.

4. **Child celebrates:** The child reaches the "eureka" moment with a first-time accomplishment.

All of a sudden: A child announces he/she can plant seeds one-by-one in rows "just like mom" or simply begin dressing in a smock and painting without direction. Notice and enjoy the child's own sense of accomplishment—no special offers or rewards are necessary.

5. **The new skill becomes habitual:** The child uses the new skill over and over and delights in showing it off in his/her daily routine.

Milestones: A child takes for granted skills, such as independently feeding the pet, that may have been a struggle just weeks or months ago.

Building blocks: By five to six years of age girls and boys are able to combine abilities to learn more complex tasks such as trying multi-part recipes or games.

Ad-lib: Once a child (three years or older) can play simple instruments such as the tambourine, cowbell, cymbals, and loomy sticks in rhythm, he/she may try singing along or playing with others.

MAKING PARENTING FUN

Help children *tune in to their senses*. Activities that develop the five senses are fun for children.

SIGHT

- Mixing paint colors
- Matching like objects
- Growing beans in a styrofoam cup
- Blowing bubbles with straws

SOUND

- Recognizing familiar sounds
- Playing instruments

TOUCH

- Mixing dough for biscuits
- Sorting rough and smooth objects
- Guessing objects (rocks, fabrics) in a bag by touch (texture, weight)
- Finger painting
- Playing in sandbox

SMELL

- Blindfolding and guessing substance (apple, orange, chocolate)
- Placing herbs or spices in two dark containers and matching smells

TASTE

- Taste testing with cheese or bread
- Making up a game to allow child to guess foods by taste

MAKING PARENTING EXCITING



Get physical in a big way

Rock climbing ('spot' for safety)
Jumping rope
Swinging, playing on playground equipment
Playing ball, frisbee, ring toss, bean bags
Roller skating

Get physical in a small way

Doing puzzles, building with blocks, or stringing beads
Shaping playdough or pottery
Playing with pegboards, sewing cards, and stacking toys
Painting with a brush or sponge
Dressing and changing clothes of dolls or action figures
Hammering, sawing, sandpapering, inserting and removing screws

FUN ON THE RUN

Not all activities have to be long and drawn out. Short activities can also improve learning and discipline.

ACTIVITIES IN THE CAR

Repeating children's songs
(*ABCs, Old McDonald*)
"I spy." Describe an object visible to a child and let him/her guess what it is
Tell stories

ACTIVITIES IN THE STORE

Turn a shopping trip into an adventure by asking child to help look for things

ACTIVITIES AROUND THE HOUSE

Washing dishes (watch sharp objects)
Recycling (glass, plastic, metal)
Washing windows

A Flair for the Dramatic

Imitate the real world and imagine the fantastic for children.
Make costumes from old clothes (dresses, jackets, hats, capes)
Pretend different situations: campout, cattle drive, hospital, zoo, space trip, babysitting, myths, legends, fairy tales
Make puppets from old socks or paper bags and let child talk about parent-child or sibling conflicts, taking a trip, things that scare them, favorite book characters)
Make a TV, kitchen set, or pretend house from cardboard boxes.

Speaking Their Language

Repeat and memorize a poem
Write down a story from child's dictation
Read picture books, then illustrated books

Music to Your Ears

Drum, shake tamborine, etc. in rhythm
Learn a tune on the xylophone

Home Science

Learn to operate egg beater, tape recorder
Experiment with magnets, funnels, food coloring, pump, or baster
Explore nature with a magnifying glass

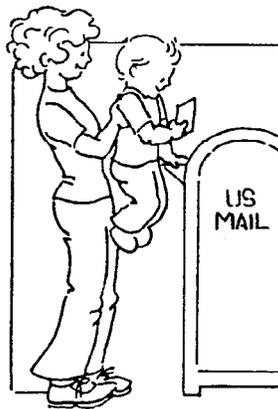
“Am I Having Fun Yet?”

If you check most of the items below, you're probably enjoying parenting a preschooler. If not, think about how giving yourself a break and using play more often.

- ___ I don't mind getting on the floor with my child. (*Not that it's always easy to get up!*)
- ___ My child and I have at least one healthy “belly laugh” weekly (*often about something only a preschooler considers funny*).
- ___ Puppets are a great way to entertain and teach (*and keep my imagination alive*).
- ___ I look at many things (boxes, old clothes, brooms, pots and pans) in terms of their play value for children.
- ___ There's always paper and a set of markers handy in case a story springs up or a child needs something to do.
- ___ I know both boys and girls like doll characters, trucks, tea parties, and shooting baskets.

Some Useful Books

- Lesley Britton. (1992). *Montessori Play and Learn: A Parent's Guide to Purposeful Play from Two to Six*. New York: Crown Publishers.
- Bess-Gene Holt. (1977). *Science with Young Children*. Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children.
- J.K. Sawyers & C.S. Rogers. *Helping Children Develop Through Play*. Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children.
- Denise Chapman & Mark S. Weston. (1994). *Playful Parenting*. New York, NY: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam Books.



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