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Preschool Prep

5 Ways to Get Kids Ready for School

By Emily Alona

Parents approach preschool prep differently. Some eagerly jot down a list of all the things their child should know or be able to do before entering preschool. Others just roll their eyes. As is the case with most important matters in life, the truth lies somewhere in the middle. Should parents consider their children's development before enrolling them in preschool? Absolutely. Is there a list of 25 skills a toddler should have before crossing the threshold of a preschool classroom? In my opinion, certainly not. Perhaps, then, preschool prep is really about building a psychological and social foundation. Here are some building blocks.

Hold onto your child.

According to developmental psychologist Gordon Neufeld, attachment is the primary task of the first few years of life. It sets the stage for a healthy ability to develop most, if not all, of life's most fundamental skills, including

Treat your children the way you wish to see them treat others.

the ability to be independent. Attachment creates independence—sounds like a contradiction, doesn't

it? But research shows that the more attached children are to their primary caregiver(s) in the first few years of life, the more capable they are of developing independence later in life. So spend time with your kids, as much and as often as you can. Communicate with them through play, laughter, and affection.

Ask open-ended questions that tap into your child's natural curiosity.

Promote social-emotional skills.

On her website transformingtoddlerhood.com, ICF-certified coach Devon Kuntzman provides a wealth of empowering resources for parents of young children. The message that permeates her work is: respond to your child's needs. Use validation, labeling, and modeling to teach your children how to manage their emotions. Also, treat your children the way you wish to see them treat others. This will encourage them to develop awareness and care for the emotions and needs of others.

Foster a love of learning.

You are your child's first teacher. But rather than develop a curriculum of ABCs and 123s, focus instead on fostering the love of learning. Rachel Rainbolt, MA, believes, "as long as you teach your child how to learn, they will happily and bravely be willing and able to learn anything they have a need or desire to learn. In other words, anything your child has a need or a desire to learn, they can and they will." What

does it look like to teach your child how to learn? 1) Asking open-ended questions that tap into your child's natural curiosity, and 2) offering up more information when your child expresses interest in something.

Get outside. The North American Association for Environmental Education states that "nature is widely recognized as an important, and often low-cost, tool for fostering children's health and development," including brain development, mental health and self-regulation, and motor development. We can expose our children to nature in a variety of ways: gardening, hiking/walking, and visiting farms and wildlife preserves.

Prepare for the transition to school. If what you are really after are ways to ease the transition to a classroom environment, check out understood.org. The website provides an easy-to-remember

Attachment creates independence.

acronym—PIECES—to help parents recognize when their children might be ready for group learning: P is for potty-trained; I, for independent; E, expressive; C, concentration; E, emotionally ready; and S, stamina. Kids should have the desire to go to school and to make friends. They should also be able to engage in

self-directed play for 5-10 minutes as well as express themselves and understand basic communication from others.

In short, preschool prep is life prep. The first few years of life are sacred, and they go by so fast. Allow your child to stop and smell the roses. Literally. ❖



Emily Alona, LCSW, is a Sonoma native. She has worked in the fields of early childhood education and mental health for a number of years and has worked at the Hanna Center in Sonoma since 2015. She enjoys traveling and, above all else, spending time with her husband and young daughter. Find out more about the Hanna Center at hannacenter.org.

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