

# Foundational 2 Curriculum: 3 Years Through Kindergarten



Parents as Teachers®

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*Ciudad de bloques: usar las manos y jugar a juegos para simular*

Bowling: Aiming and Rolling

*Bolicho: apuntar y rodar*

Can You Move Like This? Stretching and Balancing

*¿Puedes moverte así? Estirarse y mantener el equilibrio*

Challenge Course: Moving and Developing Coordination

*Pista de obstáculos: movimiento y desarrollo de la coordinación*

Circle Jump: Noticing Colors and Making Big Movements

*Spanish Circle Jump: Noticing Colors and Making Big Movements*

Clean It Up! Picking Up and Helping Out

*¡A limpiar y poner en orden! Recoger y ayudar*

Colander Chaos: Using Fingers and Practicing Pincer Grip

*Spanish Colander Chaos: Using Fingers and Practicing Pincer Grip*

Color Drop: Matching and Maneuvering

*Spanish Color Drop: Matching and Maneuvering*

Creative Movement: Exploring Movement and Dancing

*Movimiento creativo: explorar el movimiento y bailar*

Drawing to Music: Listening and Making Marks

*Dibujar al son de la música: escuchar y hacer marcas*

Freeze Dance: Starting and Stopping

*Spanish Freeze Dance: Starting and Stopping*

Get Up and Move Dice: Cutting, Writing and Doing Action Words

*Spanish Get Up and Move Dice: Cutting, Writing and Doing Action Words*

Hands and Fingers Frenzy: Exercising Small Muscles and Finger Painting

*Juegos con dedos y manos: ejercitar los músculos pequeños y pintar con los dedos*

High Wire Act: Balancing and Pretending

*Acto de la cuerda floja: equilibrio y juegos para simular*

How Can You ...? Moving and Challenging Our Bodies

*¿Cómo puedes...? Movimientos y retos para el cuerpo*

It Takes Two: Throwing and Catching

*De a dos: lanzar y atrapar*

Jump and Count: Exercising and Taking Turns

*Saltar y contar: hacer ejercicio y tomar turnos*

Junk in the Trunk: Controlling Muscles and Moving

*Spanish Junk in the Trunk: Controlling Muscles and Moving*

Keep It Up: Blowing and Making Connections

*Jugar a mantenerlo en el aire: soplar y hacer conexiones*

Knock 'Em Down: Aiming and Rolling

*Spanish Knock 'Em Down: Aiming and Rolling*

Making Dough: Measuring and Kneading

*Preparar masa: medir y amasar*

Mats of Color: Cutting and Weaving

*Spanish Mats of Color: Cutting and Weaving*

Milk Jug Mitts: Tossing and Catching

*Spanish Milk Jug Mitts: Tossing and Catching*

Mother, May I? Moving and Following Directions

*Spanish Mother, May I? Moving and Following Directions*

Movin' and Groovin': Dancing and Exploring Movement

*Moverse al ritmo de la música: bailar y explorar el movimiento*

Music to My Ears: Making and Shaking Maracas

*Spanish Music to My Ears: Making and Shaking Maracas*

Newspaper Nonsense: Exploring and Manipulating

*Spanish Newspaper Nonsense: Exploring and Manipulating*

Paper Bag Puppet: Creating and Storytelling

*Spanish Paper Bag Puppet: Creating and Storytelling*

Paper Plate Play: Jumping and Grabbing

*Spanish Paper Plate Play: Jumping and Grabbing (coming soon)*

Picking Up Pompoms: Squeezing and Sorting

*Recoger pompones: apretar y clasificar*

Play Ball: Batting and Hitting a Ball

*Jugar a la pelota: golpear y patear una pelota*

Raining Grains: Scooping and Pouring

*Spanish Raining Grains: Scooping and Pouring*

Scissors Station: Cutting and Snipping Practice

*Spanish Scissors Station: Cutting and Snipping Practice*

Scrap Art: Developing Eye-Hand Coordination and Making a Collage

*Arte con recortes: desarrollo de la coordinación de ojos y manos y hacer un collage*

Sew Fun! Squeezing and Lacing

*Spanish Sew Fun! Squeezing and Lacing*

Thread Hunt: Finding and Threading

*Spanish Thread Hunt: Finding and Threading*

Torn-Paper Collage: Tearing and Gluing

*Spanish Torn-Paper Collage: Tearing and Gluing*

Walk the Line: Balancing and Learning

*Spanish Walk the Line: Balancing and Learning*

Zigzag Race: Twisting and Turning

*Spanish Zigzag Race: Twisting and Turning*

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Learning Through Play

Play and Your Child (PH)

*El juego y su hijo*

Why Play Is Important (PH)

*Spanish Why Play Is Important*

Floor Time Is Fun Time (PH)

*Spanish Floor Time Is Fun Time*

Balancing Play Time and Screen Time (PH)

*Spanish Balancing Play and Screen Time*



Pretend Play Experiences: Why, What and How?

Ways to Encourage Make-Believe Play (PH)

*Spanish Ways to Encourage Make-Believe Play*

Let's Play Pretend (PH)

*Spanish Let's Play Pretend*

Pretending in the Great Outdoors (PH)

*Spanish Pretending in the Great Outdoors*

The Day We Stayed Indoors (PH)

*Spanish The Day We Stayed Indoors*

Imaginary Friends (PH)

*Spanish Imaginary Friends*

Rough-and-Tumble Play, Pretend Fighting and Aggression

It's a Bird, It's a Plane, It's Your Superchild! (PH)

*Spanish It's a Bird, It's a Plane, It's Your Superchild!*

Your Child's Quest for Action and Adventure (PH)

*Spanish Your Child's Quest for Action and Adventure*

Playing Games

Let's Play Games (PH)

*Spanish Let's Play Games*

Electronic Entertainment and Plugged-In Families

Your Plugged-In Child (PH)

*Spanish Your Plugged-In Child*

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*Spanish Making the Most of Digital Play*

## Development-Centered Parenting

### Crianza centrada en el desarrollo

Developmental Topics Chart

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Attachment

Attachment With Your Child (PH)

*El apego con su hijo*

Forming New Bonds at School (PH)

*Cómo establecer nuevos vínculos en la escuela*

Attachment After Divorce (PH)

*El apego después del divorcio*

Attachment and Adoption (PH)

*El apego y la adopción*

Attachment as a Foundation for Positive Discipline

Building a Foundation for Positive Behaviors (PH)

*Cómo sentar las bases para las conductas positivas*

#### Discipline

A Positive Approach to Discipline and Guidance

Discipline: A Positive Approach (PH)

*Disciplina: un enfoque positivo*

What Are Logical Consequences? (PH)

*Spanish What Are Logical Consequences?*

How to Handle Time Outs (PH)

*Spanish How to Handle Time Outs*

Avoiding Power Struggles (PH)

*Spanish Avoiding Power Struggles*

My Views on Discipline (PH)

*Mi punto de vista sobre la disciplina*

Spanking as a Discipline Technique

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*Spanish Say No to Spanking*

Temper Tantrums

Taming Temper Tantrums (PH)

*Spanish Taming Temper Tantrums*

Behavior and Discipline at School

Talking About Discipline With Your Child's Teacher (PH)

*Spanish Talking About Discipline With Your Child's Teacher (PH)*

A Look at Classroom Behavior Strategies (PH)

*Spanish A Look At Classroom Behavior Strategies*

## Health

The Medical Home

Your Family's Medical Home (PH)

*El hogar médico de su familia*

After-Hours Illnesses (PH)

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Talking to Your Doctor About Health Concerns (PH)

*Cómo hablar con su médico sobre inquietudes de salud*

Immunizations (PH)

*Las vacunas*

Reliable Sources of Health Information (PH)

*Fuentes confiables de información acerca de la salud*

Health at School

Your Child's School Health Team (PH)

*Spanish Your Child's School Health Team*

The School Nurse (PH)

*La enfermera escolar*

Talking About Germs (PH)

*Cómo hablar sobre los gérmenes*

Playing in the Sun (PH)

*Jugar bajo el sol*

Food Allergies

When Your Child Has Food Allergies (PH)

*Cuando su hijo es alérgico a algunos alimentos*

Food Allergies at School (PH)

*Alergia a los alimentos en la escuela*

Food Allergies and Playdates (PH)

*Alergias a los alimentos y salir a jugar con otros niños*

Dental Care and Concerns

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*Spanish Bye, Bye Baby Teeth*

Tips for Better Brushing (PH)

*Spanish Tips for Better Brushing*

Setting Up Dental Care Routines (PH)

*Spanish Setting Up Dental Care Routines*

Fluoride's Role in Healthy Teeth (PH)

*Spanish Fluoride's Role in Healthy Teeth*

Keeping Children Active

Your Child in Motion (PH)

*Su hijo en movimiento*

Playing Organized Sports (PH)

*Cómo jugar a deportes organizados*

Understanding Stress and Its Effects on Children

Recognizing Stress in Your Child (PH)

*Spanish Recognizing Stress in Your Child*

Helping Your Child Deal With Everyday Stress (PH)

*Spanish Helping Your Child Deal With Everyday Stress*

*Learning to Handle Stress Through Role Play (PH)*

*Spanish Learning to Handle Stress Through Role Play*

Why Did He Do That? (PH)

*Spanish Why Did He Do That?*

Coping With Stress at School (PH)

*Spanish Coping With Stress at School*

Helping Families Understand Trauma  
Helping Your Child Cope With  
Trauma (PH)

*Spanish Helping Your Child Cope With  
Trauma*

## **Nutrition**

Nutrition, Food Groups and Portion  
Sizes

Your Child's Nutritional Needs (PH)  
*Las necesidades nutricionales de su  
hijo*

Small Bodies, Big Thirst (PH)  
*Cuerpos pequeños, sed grande*

The Benefits of Breakfast (PH)  
*Los beneficios del desayuno*

Eating and the Young Child  
Making Mealtime Work for  
Everyone (PH)

*Haga que la hora de la comida  
funcione para todos*

Frequently Asked Questions About  
Feeding Your Child (PH)

*Preguntas frecuentes sobre la  
alimentación de su hijo*

Learning to Like New Foods (PH)  
*Aprender a disfrutar de alimentos  
nuevos*

Taste, Texture, Look: Sensory Sticking  
Points (PH)

*Gusto, textura, visión: puntos de  
sensibilidad sensorial*

Meals and Snacks at School (PH)  
*Comidas y refrigerios en la escuela*

Tips for Adding Variety to Your Child's  
Diet (PH)

*Consejos para agregar variedad a la  
dieta de su hijo*

## **Safety**

Protecting Against Health Hazards at  
Home

Helping Your Child Recognize Dangers  
(PH)

*Cómo ayudar a su hijo a reconocer los  
peligros*

Lead Exposure (PH)

*Exposición al plomo*

Second-Hand Smoke (PH)

*Exposición al humo del tabaco como  
fumadores pasivos*

Four-Legged Friends (PH)

*Amigos de cuatro patas*

Furniture and Toy Safety (PH)

*Seguridad con los muebles y los  
juguetes*

Fire Safety (PH)

*Seguridad contra incendios*

Gun Safety (PH)

*Seguridad con las armas de fuego*

Poisoning (PH)

*Envenenamiento*

Staying Safe While Out and About  
Car Seat Q&A (PH)

*Preguntas y respuestas sobre el  
asiento de seguridad para el coche*

Playground Safety (PH)

*Seguridad en el parque de juegos*

'Stranger' Safety and 'What If?'  
Questions (PH)

*Seguridad ante personas "extrañas" y  
preguntas sobre "qué pasaría si..."*

Getting Rolling on a Big-Kid Bike (PH)

*Andar en una bicicleta para niños  
grandes*

Water Safety (PH)

*Seguridad con el agua*

Safety and Schools (PH)

*Spanish Safety and Schools*

Understanding Child Abuse and  
Neglect

If You Feel Overwhelmed (PH)

*Spanish If You Feel Overwhelmed (coming soon)*

Indicators of Child Abuse and Neglect

If You Suspect Abuse or Neglect (PH)

*Spanish If You Suspect Abuse or Neglect*

## Sleep

Sleep Needs and Routines

Sleep: Why, How and How Much? (PH)

*Sueño: ¿por qué, cómo y cuánto?*

A Space for Snoozing (PH)

*Un lugar donde tomar la siesta*

Bedtime Routines (PH)

*Rutinas para la hora de dormir*

Your Child's Wake-Up Call (PH)

*Spanish Your Child's Wake-Up Call*

Does My Child Still Need a Nap? (PH)

*¿Mi hijo necesita todavía tomar una siesta?*

Rested Up for School (PH)

*Spanish Rested Up for School*

Sleep Challenges

The Trouble With Bedtime (PH)

*Spanish The Trouble With Bedtime*

Nighttime Wake-Up Calls (PH)

*Spanish Nighttime Wake-Up Calls*

Transitioning to a Big-Kid Bed (PH)

*Spanish Transitioning to a Big-Kid Bed*

Sharing a Room (PH)

*Spanish Sharing a Room*

Bedwetting (PH)

*Spanish Bedwetting*

## Transitions/Routines

Transitions and Continuity

Transitions Within Our Family (PH)

*Transiciones dentro de nuestra familia*

Visual Reminders and Charts (PH)

*Spanish Visual Reminders and Charts*

Home Routines for the First Weeks of School (PH)

*Spanish Home Routines for the First Weeks of School*

Your Child's First School Routines (PH)

*Spanish Your Child's First School Routines*

Understanding Temperament

Your Child's Temperament (PH)

*Spanish Your Child's Temperament*

Toilet Learning for Young Children

Toilet Learning (PH)

*Spanish Toilet Learning*

Accidents Happen (PH)

*Spanish Accidents Happen*

Using the Bathroom at School (PH)

*Spanish Using the Bathroom at School*

## Family Well-Being

### Bienestar de la familia

#### Basic Essentials

Fueling Families

Family Food Choices (PH)

*Opciones de alimentos para la familia*

Transitioning to a Healthier Menu (PH)

*Transición hacia un menú más sano*

Rethinking Family Meals (PH)

*Volver a pensar las comidas en familia*

Eating Well on a Budget (PH)

*Comer sano con un bajo presupuesto*

Navigating Your Food Shopping Options (PH)

*Cómo elegir entre las opciones de alimentos que compra*

Quick Cupboard Shape-Ups (PH)

*Mejore los alimentos de su alacena*

Label Reading (PH)

*Leer las etiquetas*

Families and Housing

When Home Is Changing (PH)

*Spanish When Home Is Changing*

## Education and Employment

Education and Employment Options for Parents

An Outlook on Education and Employment (PH)

*Spanish An Outlook on Education and Employment*

## Physical Health of the Family

Keeping Fit

Fitting in Fitness (PH)

*Dedicar tiempo a ponerse en forma*

## Mental Health and Wellness

Stress and Stress Management

Stress (PH)

*Spanish Stress*

Coping With Stress and Preventing Burnout (PH)

*Spanish Coping With Stress and Preventing Burnout*

Time Management for Families

Time Management Tips (PH)

*Spanish Time Management Tips*

Death and Loss

Talking With Your Child About Loss (PH)

*Cómo hablar de la pérdida con su hijo*

When a Loved One Dies (PH)

*Cuando un ser querido muere*

## Early Care and Education

The Importance of Early Childhood Education

Understanding the Options: Early Care and Education

Helping Parents Select an Early Care and Education Program

Does My Child Need Preschool? (PH)

*Spanish Does My Child Need Preschool?*

Getting to Know Early Care and Education (PH)

*Spanish Getting to Know Early Care and Education*

Partnering With Your Child's Care Provider (PH)

*Spanish Partnering With Your Child's Care Provider*

The Right Start (PH)

*Spanish The Right Start*

Getting Ready and Letting Go (PH)

*Spanish Getting Ready and Letting Go*

School Standards and Readiness

Starting Kindergarten: Decisions and Discussions

When Should My Child Start Kindergarten? (PH)

*Spanish When Should My Child Start Kindergarten?*

Kindergarten Readiness Starts Early (PH)

*Spanish Kindergarten Readiness Starts Early*

What Will Be Different for Our Family When School Starts? (PH)

*Spanish What Will Be Different for Our Family When School Starts?*

Attendance and School Success

Why Go to School Every Day?

*Spanish Why Go to School Every Day?*

Gaps and Barriers to Student Achievement

Cultural Considerations for Families and Schools

Things to Share With My Child's School (PH)

*Spanish Things to Share With My Child's School*

Reflections on My Own School Experiences (PH)

*Spanish Reflections on My Own School Experiences*

Family Engagement Can Take On Many Forms

Ways to Be Involved in Your Child's Education (PH)

*Spanish Ways to Be Involved in Your Child's Education*

*Challenges to Family Engagement*

Developing Positive Lines of Communication With the School

How to Talk to Teachers (PH)

*Spanish How to Talk to Teachers*

When Your Child's Teacher Doesn't Speak Your Language (PH)

*Spanish When Your Child's Teacher Doesn't Speak Your Language*

**Relationships With Family and Friends**

Families Today

Sharing About Your Family at School (PH)

*Spanish Sharing About Your Family at School*

Sibling Relationships

The Joys and Challenges of Siblings (PH)

*Spanish The Joys and Challenges of Siblings*

That's Not Fair! (PH)

*Spanish That's Not Fair!*

Responding to Sibling Disputes and Rivalry (PH)

*Spanish Responding to Sibling Disputes and Rivalry*

Divorce and Young Children

Adjusting to Separation and Divorce (PH)

*Adaptación a la separación y al divorcio*

Strengthening Parent-Child Bonds After Separation or Divorce (PH)

*Spanish Strengthening Parent-Child Bonds After Separation or Divorce*

Life in a Blended Family

Our Blended Family (PH)

*Spanish Our Blended Family*

On the Same Page: Consistent Co-Parenting (PH)

*En sintonía: co-crianza constante*

Building New Parenting Relationships (PH)

*Spanish Building New Parenting Relationships*

Adoption and the Young Child

Adoption and Your Child's Development (PH)

*Spanish Adoption and Your Young Child's Development*

Talking About Adoption With Your Child (PH)

*Spanish Talking About Adoption With Your Child*

Seeing Double: Young Multiples

Parenting Young Multiples (PH)

*Spanish Parenting Young Multiples*

Your Multiples Are Starting School (PH)

*Spanish Your Multiples Are Starting School*

Kinship Care

Caring for a Young Relative (PH)

*Spanish Caring for a Young Relative*

You're Raising Kids ... Again (PH)

*Spanish You're Raising Kids ... Again*



Kinship Care and School Enrollment (PH)

*Spanish Kinship Care and School Enrollment*

Legal Considerations for Kinship Care (PH)

*Spanish Legal Considerations for Kinship Care*

Teaching Values: Helping Parents Foster Their Child's Character Development

Knowing What's Right: Character Development (PH)

*Spanish Knowing What's Right: Character Development*

Teaching Your Children Values (PH)

*Spanish Teaching Your Children Values*

Our Family's Values and Beliefs (PH)

*Spanish Our Family's Values and Beliefs*

Reflecting on Our Family's Values and Beliefs (PH)

*Spanish Reflecting on Our Family's Values and Beliefs*

Family Culture

Culture: Where it All Came From (PH)

*Cultura: De dónde viene todo*

Feelings in Our Family (PH)

*Spanish Feelings in Our Family*

Accepting Reality: Who's In Charge? (PH)

*Spanish Accepting Reality: Who's in Charge?*

Values We Want to Teach (PH)

*Spanish Values We Want to Teach*

Families and Communities

Communities and Schools

### Recreation and Enrichment

Family Opportunities for Recreation

Free Time Pays Off (PH)

*Spanish Free Time Pays Off*

Using the Public Library (PH)

*Spanish Using the Public Library*

Why Families Need to Celebrate

Fun Through Family Celebrations (PH)

*Spanish Fun Through Family Celebrations*

## Forms and Additional Materials

### Formularios

#### Forms

Milestones by School Readiness Domain

*Spanish Milestones by School Readiness Domain*

Milestones by Age

*Spanish Milestones by Age*

Activity Page Template

*Hoja de actividades*

Activity Page Tracking Tool

Guidance for Using the Activity Page Tracking Tool

Developmental Topics Tracking Tool



# 4 to 5 Years: What's Special About This Age?

*These are things your child will be doing soon in all four domains; language, intellectual, social-emotional and motor. With your help, he can learn these skills more quickly.*



	Look for your child to:	What is happening and how you can help:	What I saw:
Language	Learn a song and do the actions that go with the words.	> Adding movements to songs helps your child listen and remember. Make up your own words to songs with her.	
	Use six to eight words in a sentence.	> Ask your child interesting questions that begin with what, how and why. This gives her practice describing objects, events and relationships.	
	Know her own name when she sees it printed.	> Put her name on many things – her books, her artwork and even the refrigerator with magnetic letters.	
	Print some letters.	> Scribbling and making letter-like shapes are early writing skills too. Encourage your child to practice, maybe using the letters of her name.	
Cognitive	Count 10 objects out loud.	> Ask your child to give you 10 objects, such as blocks or chips.	
	Connect time with her daily routines.	> Your child understands the concept of time related to what she's doing, not by looking at a clock. Give her the idea of what to expect at different times of the day.	
	Sort objects into groups.	> Your child can look at objects and tell what is different or the same. She might not sort them the same way you would, so ask her about her decisions.	
	Go back to what she was doing after an interruption.	> Your child's attention and memory skills are stronger at this age. She has the ability to focus longer and more closely.	





	Look for your child to:	What is happening and how you can help:	What I saw:
<b>Social-emotional</b>	Do what adults ask most of the time.	> Your child understands that sometimes what she wants to do and what you want her to do are different. Give her time to do what you ask and thank her afterward.	
	Notice differences and similarities between herself and others.	> Hair and skin color are two obvious examples of your child's growing self-concept and awareness. Answer her questions about differences patiently and honestly.	
	Choose to play with children who have something in common with her.	> Your child is aware when others like the same things she does. Spend some time near your child and her friends so you are aware of their interests.	
	Can calm down again after a disappointment.	> As she gains more ability to regulate her emotion and behavior, your child will need less help from you to calm down. But she still welcomes your comforting presence too!	
<b>Motor</b>	Balance on one foot for 10 seconds.	> Your child's movements progress in patterns. Play games like Simon Says and Follow the Leader. Include moves that challenge your child to try new skills.	
	Run and pivot to change directions without stopping.	> Your child used to slow down or make wide turns while she was running. Notice how much smoother her movements are getting!	
	Pour liquid or sand into a small cup without spilling.	> This activity takes hand-eye coordination and timing. Cook with your child. She can help pour ingredients. > Give her cups and containers to play with in the bathtub.	
	Cut out simple pictures following a general outline.	> Her hands are getting stronger, which gives her more control over scissors. Offer her different textures to cut.	

# Early Reading

*Preschoolers and kindergarteners generally show an interest in reading if they have had early experiences with books and stories. An interest and understanding of how books work, as well as an awareness of print and sounds, are key indicators of a child's readiness for success in school.*

"I will read my book to you," says 4-year-old Sarah, as she climbs into her mother's lap. Is Sarah a child prodigy? No, she is not yet reading in the conventional sense, but she already holds a view of herself as a reader. She possesses a love for books and a good

story. She knows that you must hold a book upright, begin at the front, and turn the pages one-by-one, and that the pictures tell something about the story. She has observed her parents enjoying reading themselves. When she "reads" her book, she points to the words on the

page just as she sees her parents do because she knows that the symbols mean something.

Sarah is not a reader yet, but her emerging literacy skills indicate she is already well on the way to successfully mastering reading.

## Parent handouts

- [Ready for Reading \(or Not\)](#)
- [Developmental Stages of Reading](#)
- [Learning Letters](#)
- [Environmental Print in the Kitchen](#)
- [Rhyme Time: Playing With the Sounds of Language](#)
- [Rhymes and Songs](#)
- [No-Cook Play Dough Recipe](#)
- [Books in Your Home](#)

## Activity pages

- [Act It Out](#)
- [Book Nook](#)
- [Let's Make a Book](#)
- [Rhyme Time](#)

## Related topics

- [Child Development](#)
- [Cognitive Development](#)
- [Developmental Concerns](#)
- [Motor Development](#)
- [Parent-Child Interaction](#)
- [Parenting Behaviors](#)
- [Play](#)
- [Social-Emotional Development](#)
- [Recreation and Enrichment](#)

Home



Child Development



Parenting Behaviors



Family Well-Being



Development-Centered Parenting



Parent-Child Interaction



Forms



Hubs



Learning to read is part of the natural progression of language development that started at birth. However, it is not until the later preschool years that children begin demonstrating skills adults associate with emerging literacy.

## **Emerging literacy and domains of development**

The emergence of early literacy involves every domain of development. From the moment children are born, they are immersed in a world of spoken words, print, symbols, pictures and books. They observe print in their surroundings by learning that the shape of a sign means “stop the car” and a big “C” on a bright yellow box indicates their favorite breakfast cereal. They learn about language in all its forms by observing their environment and hearing the speech that fills it.

Literacy develops directly from **language development**. Children must hear, speak and understand words and the conventions of grammar in order to be able to read and write in a meaningful way. Fluency in oral language greatly increases from 3 to 5 years of age. Vocabulary expands rapidly and grammar begins to conform to the rules and conventions of the child’s native language or dialect. By the time a

typically developing child enters school, he is making few grammar errors. He uses most of the words necessary for day-to-day conversation, although his vocabulary will continue to grow to reflect special interests or new knowledge throughout his life.

Social-emotional skills provide the context for gaining experiences that enable children to find meaning in what they read. Communication is a social process, and **social-emotional development** forms its foundation, whether the communication is verbal or written. A child may use language to form relationships, to ask about unfamiliar situations or to share information – all social interactions. Words can be used to obtain what the child wants or to manipulate others into doing what he desires. An awareness of humor develops and joke telling becomes part of the child’s communications. Social interactions during this time are a critical part of encouraging strong speaking and listening skills that develop into reading and writing skills as communication moves from oral to written modes.

Physical abilities and **gross and fine motor development** greatly impact the process of acquiring literacy. If infants and toddlers cannot see or hear properly, even for a short period of time, language

acquisition and eye-hand coordination can be compromised. Young children need the physical ability to hold a book, follow print with their eyes and grasp a pencil in order to learn to read and write. When physical disabilities occur, early intervention is crucial to help children compensate and keep literacy development on track.

Much of **cognitive development** in the preschool and kindergarten years contributes to emerging literacy. New skills such as increased memory capacity, the ability to predict outcomes based on actions and experience and the ability to talk about differences in objects based on physical attributes (color, length, weight and so on) lay the foundation for learning to read and write.

As preschoolers and kindergarteners learn concepts, they gain the tools necessary for reading and writing. Learning to make comparisons in size help them understand capitalization and word and sentence length. Understanding positional words such as “before,” “after,” “in front of” or “behind” enables them to understand sequencing, which is used in spelling and sentence construction. Learning proceeds at a rapid rate as children use new experiences to construct knowledge, which becomes the basis

for learning new vocabulary and reading comprehension.

## Components of early literacy

When parents think of their child learning to read, they may imagine him phonetically sounding out words or pointing to letters in a book. But many skills must be mastered before the child is ready to decode words or interpret text. Most of those skills are gained during the preschool and kindergarten period, making these years important to later school success.

Many theorists and educators have identified the components of early literacy. While terms may overlap or change from perspective to perspective, the process of learning to read and write is the same.

Components identified in the [Missouri Pre-K Literacy Standards](#) are an example of one such perspective. They include symbolic development, spoken/expressive language, listening/receptive language, written language, reading and writing.

### 1. Symbolic development

Symbolic representation – the child’s ability to use an object, thought, idea or symbol in place of something else – is the meeting of language and cognitive

abilities. Symbolic representation allows children to engage in pretend play. From the young 3-year-old who feeds his father ice cream from an empty dish to the 5-year-old who uses a box as a fort from which to fight imaginary “bad guys,” using objects and mental images to act out scenarios of varying complexity involves symbolic representation.

The skills needed to play roles such as ballerina or superhero are the same ones involved in writing a story or a poem. Symbolic play helps children get ready to understand that letters and numbers represent concepts, as explained in more detail in the parent educator resource [Symbolic Representation](#). Research has demonstrated that children who are sophisticated pretend players become successful readers and writers.

Art and building activities are also ways to represent feelings or ideas. Preschoolers and kindergarteners progress from undifferentiated drawings to more realistic pictures that they label. They are intentional about what they create; can tell others about their drawings, paintings and constructions; and begin to create pictures on request. Likewise, they represent feelings and ideas through music, singing favorite songs, inventing songs and lyrics and moving or responding appropriately to

music (e.g., marching to vigorous music, calming down to soft music).

Symbolic representation is also evident through children’s movements. If they pretend to be an animal, they need to be able to imagine how that animal moves. Preschoolers and kindergarteners use gestures and movements to appropriately represent thoughts and feelings. For example, a child may stamp his feet when he is angry or jump up and down to express his excitement.

### 2. Spoken/expressive language

As we have seen, learning to read and write is the next step in communication for preschoolers and kindergarteners. As explained in the parent educator resource [Listening, Understanding, Talking and Expressing](#), they must first use oral language to communicate their needs and feelings, inform others, ask for information and respond to the world around them.

### 3. Listening/receptive language

Just as children use more words and better grammar at this age, they also understand more of what they hear spoken and read to them. This is the foundation of reading comprehension.

As children understand more, they will:

- > Become very engaged with the plot and characters of books.
- > Respond with facial and body gestures and make verbal comments on stories.
- > Laugh at the funny parts and become upset when a favorite character has a problem because they are able to project their own feelings into the story line.
- > Engage in conversations because they can understand and respond appropriately to the words of another person, asking and answering simple questions.
- > Wait and pay attention as another talks or as a book is being read, developing the focus and patience which will allow them to get more out of books.

#### 4. Reading

It is no surprise that specific reading skills, including a child's increasing ability to recognize and understand print and books, is a key piece of emerging literacy. This can in turn be divided into three related elements.

- a. **Application of early reading skills** – This includes showing interest in, being able to handle and pretending to read books, as well as viewing themselves as readers. Children hold

books right side up, turn the pages from front to back and scan the page from top to bottom, left to right. They enjoy predictable stories and chime in on predictable parts or lines (“I’ll huff and I’ll puff and I’ll blow your house down”).

Children can use pictures to anticipate the story line. They will pretend to read books they have memorized, sometimes volunteering to read to peers. Rhyming books, wordless books, or picture books enable them to recreate the story from memory. They may play the role of different characters, using inflection and different voices. They have an understanding of the beginning, middle and end of a story and include these parts in the stories they tell.

- b. **Use of print concepts** – Print takes on meaning gradually. Children begin to recognize that print represents spoken words. Environmental print refers to the signs, advertisements, packaging and product logos that children meet in their environment. It is often the first print to which they attach meaning or are able to read.

Most preschoolers and kindergarteners can identify some

alphabet letters by the time they enter kindergarten. The particular letters are usually ones that have personal meaning for them – the letters in their name or address, familiar words (M for Mom) or from their favorite toys. Later in the preschool and kindergarten period, they may recognize their name in print or begin to recognize words they see frequently.

- c. **Development of phonological awareness** – This refers to children's ability to pay attention to the sounds of language, apart from the meaning of the words. They demonstrate phonological awareness when they can notice similar-sounding words, rhyme words, count syllables and remove and replace the beginnings and endings of words.

Playfulness with language is an indicator of phonological awareness. Preschoolers and kindergarteners with this skill love word games, the sillier the better. They can clap syllables of words they hear. They can substitute one sound for another to create new words, and can participate in rhyming games. They increasingly notice beginning sounds and apply the knowledge they have to unfamiliar words.

**Phonemic awareness** is the highest level of phonological awareness. While phonological awareness is the general understanding of the sounds of language, phonemic awareness is the understanding that words are made up of a sequence of sounds, or phonemes, that make a difference in meaning. For example, the word “cow” is made of the phonemes /c/, /o/ and /w/. A change in just one phoneme (the /w/ to a /t/ to form “cot”) completely changes the meaning of the word. A reader needs to understand sound units to gain the intended meaning from the text.

Children who have attained phonemic awareness can separate words into phonemes, or sound units, which is not the same as identifying, separating or clapping syllables. Few children reach this level of literacy development during their preschool years, so parents will be unlikely to observe phonemic awareness in their child.

## 5. Written language

Reading and writing go hand in hand. For most children, learning in one area enhances learning in the other. Preschoolers and kindergarteners show an eagerness to experiment with writing

tools and materials. Pencils, pens, paper, paint, brushes, markers, chalk, dry erase markers and play dough tools all interest children as they begin to gain fine motor control.

They also begin to understand that adults write for a reason, such as making lists or sending messages. They intend their scribbles to be drawing or writing, and they differentiate between the two. They can tell others the meaning of their drawing or writing. In the later preschool and kindergarten years, their scribbling may include some letters. They may copy letters or words they have seen around them. Children may incorporate writing into their pretend play, demonstrating their awareness of the conventions of written communication.

### Your role as a parent educator

Most parents see reading and writing proficiency as instrumental to academic success, and they are motivated to give their child the best start down the road to literacy. And parents do have an important role to play in building the foundation for learning to read and write in elementary school, but it may be broader than they realize. For example, research has shown that while parent-child shared book reading is fun for both parent and child, the positive

social-emotional interactions that occur between them have consequences for multiple areas of development. One study (Kassow, 2006) has even found emergent literacy skills to be related to the quality of the parent-child relationship.

Increase parents’ understanding of emerging literacy as something they support all day long, through many types of activities.

#### For more information

- > [www.readingrockets.org](http://www.readingrockets.org)  
Literacy resources and videos for educators and parents.
- > [www2.ed.gov/parents](http://www2.ed.gov/parents)  
Resources and activity suggestions for parents.
- > [www.scholastic.com/parents](http://www.scholastic.com/parents)  
Parent guides, activities and online games related to reading readiness.

**Reading aloud to their child on a daily basis** – This alone supports development across almost all of the standards: symbolic development, how books work, what print is and eventually how to actually read what is on the page. Research has shown that children need

thousands of experiences watching adults read and hearing print read. During the preschool and kindergarten period, longer books with more print and more complicated story lines can be introduced. Beautifully illustrated books are available for children in this age range.

Getting the child a library card and visiting the library frequently assures a supply of new and interesting books. For more information, refer to the parent educator resource [Family Opportunities for Recreation](#).

Be sensitive to the reading level of the parents. Connect them to adult or family literacy programs if they need to improve their reading skills.

Become familiar with the dialogic reading strategies in the parent educator resource [Sharing Books Through Conversation](#). For example, parents should stop reading from time to time and ask questions that cause their child to relate the story to his own experiences, encourage him to form an opinion and ask him to predict events in the plot.

**Modeling a love for reading** – Adults should make a point to let their child to see them enjoying reading, and occasionally read aloud from adult materials, such as reading a new article

to another adult or reading a travel brochure for a family trip. Families can also cultivate traditions around reading, such as regular time for quiet book sharing. This can be done each night before bed, with all technology turned off and put away, and everyone in the family coming together to read to themselves or in groups.

**Playing rhyming games and singing songs** – This increase the child's phonological awareness by surrounding him with rhyming words. Rhymes, finger plays, poems and songs tune the child's brain to hear the sounds in words. Children also have fun clapping along with nursery rhymes on every syllable. If they have had practice clapping along with a song, they will know about keeping the beat; there are just more beats to keep when you start clapping every syllable.

School-age children will do more complicated work with phonemic awareness, such as listening for ending and middle sounds in words, making sound substitutions and clapping individual sounds in words.

**Exposing their child to the alphabet and to environmental print** – Most parents realize that being able to sing the alphabet song does not mean their child

can recognize or name letters. Children do develop a beginning knowledge of the alphabetic principle during the preschool and kindergarten years, but they learn letters like they learn everything else, through hands-on experience.

Children most often recognize the letters of their name or the name of other family members first, especially the first letter. Labeling the child's possessions or space with his name can facilitate learning those letters. Pointing out letters on signs or written material can connect letters to the child's experience.

Parents should follow the child's lead and not demand letter recognition or printing before the child has a firm grasp of letter shape and name and has achieved the necessary cognitive and fine motor skills. This may not occur until early elementary school for some children.

Some children may be very interested in writing letters and ask their parents or caregivers to show them how to print certain letters. Rote teaching methods such as flash cards or letter drills may discourage preschoolers from learning letters. Children do not typically connect sounds to letters until very late in the preschool period, and most often not until kindergarten or first grade. As long as the

parents keep the activity fun and do not push their child past his developmental capacity, exploring the alphabet is an important part of emerging literacy.

What about teaching letter names? Preschoolers and kindergarteners tend to have an interest in the letters in their own names, and therefore they learn them much more readily than the whole alphabet. And that's enough for 3- and 4-year-olds! If a child can get started on the road to knowing letters using a word, he or she has been given a good start.

Many children also enjoy matching the first letter in their name with the first letter of a word they see in the environment, e.g., Michael starts the same as McDonald's, both in the way it sounds and the way it looks. And learning these names helps them later with reading and writing (Bowman & Treiman, 2004; Treiman, Pennington, Shriberg & Boada, 2008).

**Making writing a part of the child's everyday experience** – Have paper, pencils, markers and crayons easily available and give their child opportunities to write on different surfaces, such as chalkboards or sidewalks with chalk. Encourage any paper and pencil activity and acknowledge when the child declares his marks to be writing, even if he is not writing letters or words yet.

**Helping their child increase his vocabulary** – The preschool and kindergarten years are a time when the child begins to participate in the wider community. Parents can provide new experiences and talk about them together. Rich experience forms the basis for learning to read new words and for comprehending what is read. Young children need first-hand experience and exploration in order to advance to the symbolic activities of reading and writing. If you don't know what a word means you cannot learn to read or write it.

Patently answering a young child's seemingly endless stream of "what's this?" or "why" questions is another way parents can foster vocabulary development.

**Encouraging pretend play and art** – Continued opportunities to express feelings, thoughts and creativity in pretend play, art and movement develops symbolic awareness and narrative, all important for an interesting and enjoyable relationship with stories and books.

### Strengthening Families™

Programs that help parents understand emerging literacy skills and provide suggestions to them on how to foster these skills in their child not only facilitate children's social and emotional development but also strengthen parenting. Social and emotional competence of children and knowledge of parenting and child development are protective factors in the prevention of child abuse and neglect.

To learn more about the Strengthening Families™ initiative, visit [www.strengtheningfamilies.net](http://www.strengtheningfamilies.net).



*When parents remember learning to read and write themselves, they are likely to remember experiences in early elementary grades and be anxious for their preschooler or kindergartener to achieve those. Help them have realistic expectations based on child development during this period.*



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# Developmental Stages of Reading

*Most children start reading by themselves between the ages of 6 and 8. But your child is already going through the developmental process of becoming a reader during the preschool and kindergarten years.*

Many of the skills that are a part of the true reading process emerge during this time. You may notice some of these stages of emerging reading in your child:

- > She holds a book upright and turns pages one page at a time, beginning at the front.
- > She enjoys being read to and often asks you to read to her.
- > She requests favorite books over and over.

**By age 3 or 4**, many preschoolers have accomplished a number of skills related to reading:

- > Recognizing books by the cover.
- > Pretending to read books.
- > Understanding that books are handled in certain ways.
- > Enjoying a book-sharing routine with parents or caregivers.
- > Labeling objects in books.

- > Commenting on characters in books.
- > Looking at a picture in a book and realizing it is a symbol for a real object.
- > Listening to stories.
- > Asking adults to read or write things for her.
- > Beginning to notice specific print, like letters in names.

**By age 5**, children's skills have reached a new level:

- > Understanding that alphabet letters are a special category of visual graphics and that letters have individual names.
- > Recognizing print in the world around them.
- > Knowing that print is being read in stories (not the pictures).
- > Recognizing their own names in print.

**By age 6**, children's reading skills include:

- > Recognizing many letters of the alphabet.
- > Knowing the sounds that letters make.
- > Identifying beginning and ending sounds of some words.
- > Counting out syllables of words (with help).
- > Memorizing favorite books.
- > Using the pictures to "read" new books.
- > Saying favorite rhymes and fingerplays or singing songs from memory.



*Books in various electronic forms are becoming more popular. It's fun to play with devices that "read" books, but they can't replace the experience of sharing a book with a real person.*



## Supporting early reading skills

To help your child stay motivated to learn to read, you can:

- > **Read to your child.** Exposure to books and other forms of print helps develop your child's vocabulary and sense of story structure.
- > **Let your child see you reading.** Often parents only read for fun after their children are in bed. Your child needs to see that reading is important to you personally.
- > **Collect environmental print.** Help your child make a book of words she sees around her. For example, take photos of signs or labels and print them out. She can "read" this book to you.
- > **Encourage memory reading.** Praise your child's efforts if she pretends to read a favorite book that she has memorized. She is not really reading yet, but she is doing a valuable prereading activity.
- > **Pause and wait for your child to supply words in stories she knows well.** Your child benefits more when she is an active participant in the experience.
- > **Wonder aloud.** Stop and ask what she thinks will happen next or have her make up an ending. (But be sure to take your cue from your child; sometimes she just wants to hear the story.)
- > **Encourage your child to become a character in a book.** Choose a predictable new book or a favorite familiar book and let her "read" the character's words.
- > **Have relatives, siblings and friends read to your child.** Children enjoy sharing and discussing books with a variety of people.
- > **Read all kinds of books.** Wordless books encourage your child to make up their own stories. Nonfiction books satisfy her curiosity about topics that interest her.

# Nurturing

*Much of the way children approach learning depends on their view of themselves, their parents and their world. Nurturing helps children see themselves as competent, their parents as a safe base and their world as a welcoming place, making them more likely to explore with curiosity, eagerness and persistence.*

## Nurturing happens when ...

Parents demonstrate a loving, trusting interaction that enhances their child's social-emotional development, especially the attachment relationship.

Warm, nurturing relationships with responsive adults are necessary for many key areas of children's development, including empathy, cooperation, self-regulation, cultural socialization, language, communication, peer relationships and identity formation (Dunn, 1993, as cited in NAEYC, 2009).

Nurturing behaviors involve showing love and physical closeness, responding to children's behaviors and feelings and making positive expressions toward them. When children feel a sense of being seen and heard, they feel safe, protected and valued by their parents.

## Parent handouts

[Nurturing Your Child](#)

[Raising a Risk-Taker](#)

## Related topics

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Preschoolers and kindergarteners are further nurtured when their parents make time to support their interests, acknowledge their friendships and advocate for their needs when necessary. Research shows that children reared by nurturing parents tend to be less aggressive, show greater readiness for school, have higher self-esteem and have fewer psychological and behavioral problems (Carton & Carton, 1998, Caspi et al., 2004, and Child Trends, 2004, as cited in Comfort & Gordon, 2013; Dodici et al., 2003, Estrada et al., 1987, MacDonald, 1992, Petrill et al., 2004, and Sroufe et al., 1990, as cited in Roggman, Boyce & Innocenti, 2008).

At this age, children are learning the skill of seeking interactions with peers and adults independent of their parents. Ongoing trusting relationships outside the family enrich children's social network. Children's confidence to explore these new relationships is built by the consistent assurance of nurturing parents.

Nurturing responses help children see the world in a positive way and to expect that future relationships will be rewarding. For example, positive teacher-child relationships have been shown to promote children's learning, academic achievement, social competence and emotional development (Pianta, 1999).

## **Celebrates accomplishments and efforts**

Children benefit from parents who notice the persistence they put forth in tackling a challenging task – regardless of the end result. The purpose of celebrating accomplishments is to acknowledge learning moments in hopes of fueling a child's enthusiasm, eagerness to explore and focus on the task at hand. Celebration of effort nurtures children's persistence on a task or interest in approaching a new task. Children need this acknowledgement for their determination and ability to overcome frustration while mastering new skills – from writing their names to putting on their clothes.

Celebration and praise are most effective when they are nonjudgmental and descriptive. Parents should share their observations about what they see their child doing, thus fixing their child's attention on the task and freeing their child for continued persistence and exploration. Asking questions about the accomplishment or effort encourages the child to talk about what she is doing. This is a powerful tool for building a child's self-confidence.

Body language can also be powerful, whether it's a smile, a nod, clapping, a

high five or a pat on the back. These nonverbal messages show that parents are attentive, interested and enthusiastic about their child's learning.

By carefully reflecting their child's level of enthusiasm, parents can support their child's feeling of intrinsic motivation and acknowledge positive emotions like joy, gratitude, interest, hope, amusement, awe and pride.

## **Uses a warm tone**

Parents' tones and the ways they use their voices are tremendously powerful tools of communication. A strong, firm voice can indicate danger; a quieter, calm voice during a chaotic moment can nurture a sense of safety. When these variations are used, the voice becomes a teaching tool far more powerful than words. Teachers learn in their classroom management courses that the louder and louder they speak, the less students are able to pay attention. The lower a person speaks, on the other hand, the more emphasis there is on his voice.

However, there is more to nurturing than the words parents use. In fact, Albert Mehrabian, a pioneer researcher of body language in the 1950s, found that the total impact of a message is about 7 percent verbal (words only) and 38 percent vocal

## Our beliefs fuel our motivation

Like adults, young children are constantly trying to understand why things happened the way they did. Did I not try hard enough? Do I need a different strategy? Or am I just not talented enough?

Each of these explanations has different consequences for what people choose to do next and how motivated they are to do it.

When we talk about “achievement situations,” we mean anything where either success or failure is possible because there is some kind of noticeable, measurable standard. Beyond schoolwork and academic subjects this includes “achieving” in sports, music and even relationships with others. So, what children think drives their successes and failures has tremendous impact on their motivation in the future.

Fortunately, most preschoolers and kindergarteners seem predisposed toward **achievement motivation**; in other words, they have a strong desire to learn. They have a limited capacity to:

- > Distinguish among their strengths and weaknesses.
- > Recognize that their ability is not infinitely adaptable.

- > Use social comparisons to judge their own skills and competencies realistically.

Preschoolers are often self-confident because they can compare their current abilities with past abilities and see the improvement. They know they are getting better all the time!

However, some children as young as 4 appear highly impaired by the experience of failure. They express feeling “very sad” about their performance and generalize their diminished self-confidence to other tasks.

Research indicates that as early as preschool, some children can already fall into a less healthy pattern of being “entity” or “fixed” theorists about achievement situations (Smiley & Dweck, 1994; Cain & Dweck, 1995). In other words, they tend to think of abilities (e.g., academic smarts, athletic prowess, artistic skill) as fixed entities that aren’t changeable. Thus, they will tend to seek out situations in which success is assured and praise is likely.

Unfortunately, that means they may also avoid challenges and be less able to learn from failures and struggles. Indeed, research

with much older children shows that entity theorists tend to pay less attention during feedback after a failure, in turn increasing the chances that they won’t improve (e.g., Dweck, 2006).

But at this age, the window is still very open for encouraging and developing a more incremental or mastery orientation. Seeing the power of one’s own effort and attentiveness to feedback allows children to push through challenging situations.

For most young children, intrusive adult behavior discourages attempts at mastery, as do criticism and directive comments. Parents can motivate their children through encouragement, offering suggestions and information and demonstrating effective strategies.

The questions parents ask young children as they play can support their inborn desire to learn and explore. The primary goal should be to communicate and exchange information with children rather than to test or teach them. If they feel adults are talking at them instead of with them, they may tune out. Refer to the parent educator resource [Communicating](#) for more information.

(including tone of voice, inflection and other sounds) and 55 percent nonverbal (Mehrabian, 1972; Pease & Pease, 2006). Nonverbal communication is received first and will often trump a verbal message sent to a child.

Maintaining a calm, soothing and soft tone of voice will help a child feel safe and able to express himself. An animated tone of enthusiasm will help the child become more alert and aware. Thus, strategic use of tone of voice can engage children.

### Shows affection

Affectionate behavior provides a child with a sense of being loved and valued and contributes to a positive relationship for a lifetime. Through affectionate parent-child experiences, children learn social skills which lay the foundation for later interactions with peers and adults. For example, social responsiveness requires self-knowledge as well as sensitivity to others – and children gain both of these when they practice showing affection (Gordon, 2013).

Some relationships use more physical closeness, others more positive facial expressions or verbal expressions, but the intent for closeness and connection is what's important.

Expressing affection through physical

behaviors includes eye contact, smiles, hugs, caresses, kisses, back rubs, lap sits, shared laughter and snuggles. Touch is a common ingredient in many of these. Psychologist Daniel Stern maintains that “touching is the bedrock of a nurturing attachment. Touch is the mother of all senses” (1998, p. 95). Touch stimulates all the systems of the body and releases hormones such as oxytocin (the cuddle hormone), which help reduce stress and promote attachment.

Some parents use less obvious ways of expressing affection. For instance, affection can be expressed by positive statements about their child or his actions or by a willingness to spend regular “special time” with him (Roggman, Boyce & Innocenti, 2008).

Young children live in the moment; when they are hurt physically or emotionally, they need a responsive adult right away. Caring for children when they are in distress gives them the essential ingredients for a healthy sense of self – making them feel valued, nurtured and safe (Carlson, 2006).

When children experience feelings of distress, their neural pathways are firing within the limbic region (seat of emotional reactions) of their brains. Calming affection during a challenging learning

experience brings their attention toward problem solving and self-regulation, thus exercising their executive function skills.

### Accepts the child's emotions

Emotions provide powerful energy for preschoolers and kindergarteners. They motivate learning and heighten the impact of an experience. Three-year-olds can understand that others' experiences have an effect on how they feel. Four-year-olds can understand that different people can respond to the same situation with different emotions (Smith, 2013).

To help children feel acceptance of their emotions, parents can:

- > Repeat back the words or the message their child is trying to communicate.
- > Acknowledge the child's emotions and help the child label how he is feeling.
- > Use their voice, face and emotions to signal sincere understanding.

Research indicates that children whose parents understand and support their emotions get better grades in school, have enhanced social and emotional well-being and are healthier (Gottman & DeClaire, 1997). Examples of statements that can be used to indicate understanding are “I can see that you are upset” or “It hurts my feelings when someone says that to me.”

Awareness of their child's unique ways of expressing his emotions informs parents' responsive interpretation of his cues. (Refer to the parent educator resource [Responding](#) for more information about cues and responses.) When children express positive sensations such as moments of joy at an accomplishment, parents can share these emotional states and enthusiastically reflect and strengthen them with their children. Likewise, parents can empathize with and comfort negative or uncomfortable sensations such as disappointment or fear (Siegel & Hartzell, 2003).

The contagious nature of emotions can affect parent-child interactions in both positive and negative ways. Past experiences, temperament and emotional health can make expressing feelings, sharing positive feelings or accepting a child's negative feelings difficult for parents.

Parents will go farther in navigating caregiving emotions if they first learn to understand and regulate their own feelings. This leaves them approachable and open to accepting their child's emotions. Daniel Hughes and Jonathan Baylin call this "staying parental" (2012, p. 145).

### **Allows the child to make mistakes without criticism**

Children whose parents overreact to mistakes tend to avoid taking risks and end up blaming others for their problems. It's normal for parents to get frustrated over children repeatedly spilling milk, for example, but children need to know that mistakes are a part of life. Parents can help their children understand this value by reacting calmly or even with a sense of humor when mistakes happen.

Children feel encouraged when their parents treat mistakes as opportunities to learn rather than as a failure – because this is how children themselves view mistakes at this age. Perfection is really not the goal. In fact, a quest for perfection can damage children's self-esteem and deter future efforts.

Instead of pointing out mistakes as failures, parents can respond to them as opportunities to learn something new. Instead of saying, "I told you not to do it that way," parents can say, "Let's try to do that part again and see if we can make it work" (DiProperzio, 2010). In situations where parents find it difficult not to offer a suggestion, they can approach children by saying something like, "I hadn't thought to do it that way. Would you like to see how I do it?"

Adults have learned from experiences fraught with mistakes over their many years. It is important for parents to step away from a potential power struggle and encourage their child to learn from the experience.

Failure and adversity are critical parts of building character. Researchers have found that adults who had experienced little or no adversity growing up were actually less happy and confident than those who had experienced a few significant setbacks in childhood (Seery, Leo, Lupien, Kondrak & Almonte, 2013). Overcoming those obstacles, the researchers hypothesized, "could teach effective coping skills, help engage social support networks, create a sense of mastery over past adversity [and] foster beliefs in the ability to cope successfully in the future" (Tough, 2012, para. 4).

Internal skills such as problem solving, distress tolerance, internal motivation and emotional regulation are best developed when children use them. A family system is an incubator for children to practice these skills by making their own choices during everyday tasks while parents remain nearby, ready to step in if they reach the point where frustration or stress arrests their learning.



## **Consoles the child when he is upset**

Preschoolers and kindergarteners spend their days negotiating new experiences and enjoying tasks they have mastered. This feels empowering to them. However, their advancing awareness of what they can and cannot control can also contribute to frustration and disappointment.

When mastery takes many tries, children can express agitation and may feel tempted to give up. During these moments, children rely on their parent's acknowledgement of their frustration, followed by reassurance as their children push through the discomfort. Parental consolation assists them in learning that struggles are a natural part of reaching goals.

Consoling young children includes:

- > Guiding them in conversation about what helps them when they are upset.
- > Being there for them as they experience negative or positive feelings.
- > Listening to their expression.
- > Providing a comforting space.
- > Offering physical reassurance (hugs or a comforting lap).

- > Focusing together on the concern, fear or harm.
- > Helping them think about the situation in a different way.

Parents can soften overwhelming experiences with timely consolation, thus modeling how to behave toward others in distress. One study asked preschoolers to predict how their parents would respond to them in various situations. The children who expected their parents to be comforting were rated by teachers as more skilled with peers, more empathic and more cooperative (Denham, 1997).

## **Anticipates the child's needs**

Each person approaches and reacts to the world differently, creating their personal style. Living with a child day in and day out gives parents many opportunities to understand their child's unique needs. Anticipating those needs is a proactive skill.

All children have basic needs like nutrition, shelter, clothing, health, sleep, exercise and safety. Many challenging and difficult behaviors can be linked back to a basic need. For instance, a morning of sitting in a waiting room can tire a preschooler who is relying heavily on self-regulation to sit still. Exhaustion

and boredom can lead to misbehavior. Anticipating the energy it takes for preschoolers to maintain their self-control, parents can prepare by bringing interesting hands-on activities to use while they wait.

Reflecting on a situation from their child's perspective helps parents choose the most effective response. But thinking and feeling like children is difficult for many adults. Fortunately, preschoolers and kindergarteners are able to share a lot of information by talking about their needs.

Perspective taking is also a skill preschoolers can learn. When parents include their child in a conversation about the anticipation of others' needs, it will build their child's skills.

Even though parents may anticipate a child's need, they may not be able to meet it. Parents can show nurturing by explaining this to their child.

Overall, parents are best equipped for anticipating children's needs when they know the typical developmental behaviors for the child's age and understand their child's temperament.

## Provides a safe base

Keeping their children safe is not new to parents. But as a **safe base**, parents reassure and instill confidence in their children to encourage them to take initiative and explore. This can be expressed with holding a hand, giving a hug, attending to an injury or simply being present in the background.

The safe base concept applies to physical as well as emotional situations. For example, preschoolers and kindergarteners seeking new relationships may experience moments where they may be alone. These moments may create feelings of isolation. Parents can be available to minimize these moments.

Fear of the unknown or stress from challenging tasks may trigger feelings of aggression, confusion or futility. When these feelings are prolonged, they can result in toxic stress and cause a child to struggle with concentration, memory and self-control. For more information about how strong relationships with parents can buffer stress, refer to the parent educator resource [Understanding Stress and Its Effects on Children](#).

Managing one's own sense of safety is a life skill that children at this age are just beginning to learn. Although appropriate

risk-taking is beneficial, children may need help gauging what situations are potentially dangerous. On the other hand, children may feel personally threatened when they overhear news or see images of a scary event, even if it is far away or fictional. Parents' reassurance that they will keep their children safe will help (PBS Parents, 2013).

Young children need understandable and predictable structure in their lives in order to learn (Galinsky, 2010). Parents provide a sense of safety when they structure consistent, reliable routines.

## Encourages appropriate risk-taking

Risks – good or bad – are inevitable in life. Think of children riding a bicycle for the first time, or entering a new classroom to meet teachers and students. Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard said, "During the first period of a man's life, the greatest danger is not to take the risk" (as cited in Dru, 2003, p. 192).

Risk-taking means jumping into the unknown. Parents' role is not to prevent children from taking risks or to encourage unguided risk-taking, but to build the skills that help children select good risks (Davis & Eppler-Wolff, 2009).

Raising children to choose positive risks is essential. Without the challenge that risk brings, children's development suffers. Children who are able to respectfully disagree with others, who explore conventional attitudes and who hold their own perspectives are learning to withstand the potential criticism that comes with expressing one's beliefs.

In addition, initiative is strengthened through the development of thoughtful risk-taking. Children gain experiences that equip them to embrace life's opportunities and to rebound from life's disappointments.

In an effort to protect children, parents sometimes overprotect them. It is natural to have anxiety about children's discomfort or pain, but parents who prevent their children from experiencing setbacks are costing their children a chance to learn. Parents can mitigate their feelings of anxiety by reflecting back on their own experiences, seeking to identify where their anxiety originates.

Parents can focus on making experiences and environments as safe as necessary rather than as safe as possible. Put another way, parents' role is not eliminating or reducing risk completely, but rather making sure children are not exposed to situations

that might cause unacceptable levels of distress and misery (Alliance for Childhood & KaBoom, 2009). This approach will allow children to take more responsibility for themselves, creating space for them to persevere through failure and use their determination.

Learning to take smart risks early prepares children to recognize and think through potential safety concerns and danger. They have experience weighing and identifying the challenge and the risk and using their intellect and social-emotional skills to know how to decide on a course of action (Davis & Eppler-Wolff, 2009).

Parents also have a role in guiding children in ways to approach risks. The degree of risk-taking varies in children. These variations are often due to temperament. Children with a more cautious temperament may have an advantage toward taking smart risks; at the same time, they may be hesitant to act even when the risk is small. These children can be helped by parents who identify the problems and opportunities, think through and weigh options and evaluate the likelihood of success or failure.

Sometimes testing limits is actually appropriate risk-taking. Old rules may no

longer be relevant for a preschooler or kindergartener's new skills. Parents who observe testing of limits may want to step back and evaluate what their child is able to do now and what new responsibilities would be safe to allow.

For example, after finding their 3-year-old with knives multiple times and saying, "No! Knives aren't safe," parents might start thinking to themselves, "Is there a way I could help him use a knife safely?" They may decide to let him use a table knife to spread mayonnaise or cut a banana while they supervise.

Risk-taking helps young children become independent. This can be a time of frustration for parents, but it should also be a time of reevaluation.

### Your role as a parent educator

Your understanding of the nurturing parenting behavior informs focused observation, facilitation of parents' self-awareness and sharing of parental strengths. It can also prompt conversations about parents' actions not seen during visits and help you connect nurturing to key areas of children's social-emotional development.

Explore parents' perceptions of this parenting behavior, keeping in mind that nurturing may look different from

one parent to the next. Compare their perceptions with the descriptions found throughout this parent educator resource and consider how their perceptions may have been shaped by their family culture or parental experiences.

For instance, consider asking parents to take time to think about their answers in advance, then write for several minutes completing the sentences "A good mother is ..." or "A good father is ...". Ask them to read what they have written aloud to themselves or someone who they trust (they may choose you). Do they feel they received anything on their list from their own parents? There may be many, or there may be few or none. Of these responses, which qualities do they feel they give to their own children at this time? Ask them to choose one quality that they would like to develop initially as an area of growth.

Other ways to promote nurturing parenting behaviors include:

- > Encourage parents to monitor their tone to match the message they intend to send. Prompt them to notice how tone of voice affects their child's response, or how speaking the same phrase can communicate a different message depending on their tone.

- > Observe and comment on the ways parents express their love.
- > Prepare parents for shared observations of parent-child interaction by reinforcing that being actively engaged with their child is itself a form of nurturing.
- > Share with parents that their child learns social skills and internalizes the family's values more from "being caught than taught." Praise for the desired behavior can be a powerful motivator.
- > Discuss the nuances of "engagement." What might appear engaging with a preschooler or kindergartener can be intrusive, while simply being an attentive bystander is a form of active engagement that provides a safe base for children. Partner with parents in considering how they can best engage in enjoyable activities that support their child's skill development.

Active engagement with children takes energy and focus. Parents who are juggling many competing obligations may benefit from reminders that establishing and following routines can assist them in using parenting energy efficiently.

Encourage parents to talk with their child about challenges they have overcome. For children not to fear their own mistakes (or to be afraid and avoid

any chance of failure), they need to know their parents are OK with mistakes. When parents share how they have overcome challenges, they teach their child to think in a healthy way and give their child specific strategies they might be able to apply in their own lives.

However, when talking about strategies their child might apply, it's important to avoid conversation stoppers like "You're making a big deal out of nothing" or "What you should have done is ...". Instead, parents can help their child feel acceptance by:

- > Reflective listening. One way to signal sincere understanding is repeating back the words or message their child is trying to communicate.
- > Soothing or comforting their child and expressing an understanding of the feelings related to the situation.
- > Encouraging their child to think up possible solutions to choose from next time. "I wonder if there is another way to look at this situation ..." instead of "What you should have done is ..."

Parents can support children in learning to take smart risks by facilitating behaviors that minimize taking poor risks. Four steps parents can implement toward good risk-taking include (Davis & Eppler-Wolff, 2009):

1. Identify the risk – physical, emotional, social, cognitive or a combination.
2. Stay aware of the potential dangers and benefits of moving forward or staying still.
3. Think through one's actions.
4. Evaluate one's actions afterwards.

Finally, encourage parents to think about their own achievement theory. It is never too late to open one's eyes to a growth perspective. Many adults have "fixed" theories about their own achievements, including their abilities as parents. Opening up this conversation can allow them to move toward a more effort/learning orientation to their own parenting skills, and in turn allow them to support their children in a healthier learning view.

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# Nurturing Your Child

*Your actions help your child get the most out of his day. A steady supply of playful interactions, hugs and encouraging statements helps your child see the world in a positive way.*

Nurturing your child means that you:

- > Celebrate both results and efforts. Give your child positive, specific feedback when he keeps trying or searches for new ideas after running into problems.
- > Use a warm tone of voice when you talk to and about your child.
- > Show how much you love him. Make eye contact, give hugs, share laughter, snuggle up and spend time together.
- > Accept your child's emotions. Talk about what he's feeling – happy, sad, angry or fearful – and the reasons why. Let him know everyone feels that way sometimes.
- > Allow him to make mistakes without criticism. Perfection is not one of your child's goals! Children learn from correcting their own mistakes.
- > Comfort him when he's upset. Discuss what happened and help him understand that he will be OK.
- > Think ahead about your child's needs. Stay flexible – his needs may change over time.

- > Provide a safe base. Your child explores more when he knows you will be there when he returns.
- > Encourage appropriate risk-taking. Taking on new tasks or trying new experiences can feel scary to your child, but he will be more willing to try if you are there to support him.

These behaviors help your child build loving, trusting relationships with you and with others.



## The risks and rewards of failure

Your child is learning to explore new things and try new tasks. He is motivated to see what will happen, even if he runs into problems. Sometimes he will be successful and finish a task. Other times, he will make mistakes.

At this age, children typically aren't worried about mistakes. Your child's temperament and past experiences play a role in this. But young children are often self-confident simply because they can compare their current abilities with the past and see how much they have improved. They know they are getting better all the time!

Your reaction to your child's mistakes is important. It helps shape his attitude toward future challenges. When you react calmly – or even with a sense of humor – you send a message that mistakes are part of life.



When you help your child think up new ways to solve a problem, he stays motivated to learn from his mistakes. This mindset will help him overcome challenges and be more resilient later in life.



**REFLECTION**

**Take time to think about setbacks.**

> What have you noticed about yourself when you make a mistake?

> Think about a challenge in your life. What motivated you to push ahead?

> What motivates your child when he faces a challenge?

> How does your child respond to mistakes?

Sample



## ACTIVITY *page*

### What do we have?

- > 3 or 4 zip-top bags
- > Hole punch
- > Pipe cleaners or yarn
- > Colored tape (optional)
- > Safety scissors
- > Construction paper
- > Magazines or stickers with pictures
- > Glue stick
- > Markers
- > Children's book

# Book of Words: Learning Words and Reading

### How do we do it?

1. Help your child punch three holes in the closed end of the bags. Bind them together with pipe cleaners or yarn. For extra durability, tape over the binding.
2. Cut construction paper “pages” to fit inside the bags.
3. Let your child choose a letter he recognizes (maybe the first letter of his name). Look for pictures or stickers of things that start with the letter. If you can't find any, encourage him to draw pictures.
4. Help him cut them out and glue one on each page. Have him write the word under each picture. Don't worry too much about mistakes – they are part of his learning process.
5. Have your child slip the “pages” into the bags. Zip them shut.
6. Allow your child to read his new book to you!

### What's in it for us?

#### Language

- a. Younger children understand that pictures are symbols for objects. They can “read” the pictures.
- b. When the words and pictures are placed together, children begin to recognize the words thanks to the clue of the picture.
- c. Older preschoolers and kindergarteners recognize some letters and the sounds they make. Knowing the first sound will help them figure out the rest of the word later on.

#### Connecting across development

- > **Motor:** Writing, gluing, taping and bending pipe cleaners all help children practice fine motor skills that will help them to grow their writing skills.
- > **Cognitive:** Children experiment with shapes and spatial relationships when they figure out how to fit the pages into the bags.
- > **Social-emotional:** Making a book that they can read on their own can be a great source of pride for young children.



### Book sharing

*Once your child starts to recognize a letter, he will notice it everywhere. Encourage him to point out the letter in his book when he sees it in other books. Talk about how it looks different in uppercase and lowercase.*



### Your child's brain

*Changes in the brain during the preschool years allow children to create mental images of objects, process language and control the finger muscles needed for writing.*





Parenting behavior ...

Observing my child's development ...

### Continued learning

*Remind your child that he's a reader! Ask him to point out words he knows on street signs or in stores. This helps him understand that print has meaning – and that he has the ability to understand that meaning.*

*Your child is starting to notice which differences between letters matter. For example, color doesn't matter, but shape does. The shorter straight line on "n" is what makes it different from an "h." As your child recognizes more letters, make more books (or swap out the pages in this book).*

Reflecting with my child ...

Keeping it going ...

sample



## ACTIVITY *page*

### What do we have?

- > Masking tape (cut into ten 12-inch strips)
- > A die
- > Small stuffed animal
- > Children's book about counting

# Jump and Count: Exercising and Taking Turns

### How do we do it?

1. Make 10 straight lines by sticking each strip of tape onto the floor. Space the strips 1 foot apart. Place the stuffed animal just past the last strip.
2. Model the activity: Stand behind the first piece of tape. Roll the die, count the number of dots and make that many jumps along the lines. Count out loud while you jump. Continue to play until you reach the last line. Pick up the stuffed animal.
3. Next, let your child have a turn.
4. Help your child if he struggles with counting, jumping or combining the two.
5. If your child is ready for a bigger challenge, demonstrate hopping or skipping along the lines.
6. Continue taking turns with your child as long as he is interested.

### What's in it for us?

#### Motor

- a. Children like movements that are fun and purposeful. Repeated jumping helps children develop coordination of their upper body, trunk and legs.
- b. Jumping over and over again helps children develop rhythm and timing.
- c. Activities like jumping help children develop strength, balance, agility, flexibility and coordination. These skills help develop mature movement patterns.

#### Connecting across development

- > **Cognitive:** When children point to – and count – the number of dots on a die, they show knowledge of one-to-one correspondence.
- > **Language:** Children learn the names of numbers while they are jumping and counting.
- > **Social-emotional:** Taking turns helps children grow socially. Asking children to count along when it isn't their turn keeps them engaged in the activity.



### Book sharing

*There are many children's books about counting. Read a counting book with your child. Encourage him to count with you. Does he make comments about how many things there are? Does he recognize any numbers in the book?*



### Your child's brain

*Jumping and counting at the same time engages several areas of the brain at once. This strengthens communication between the right and left hemispheres of the brain.*



Parenting behavior ...

Observing my child's development ...

Reflecting with my child ...

### Continued learning

*Help your child recognize shapes. Draw shapes on small pieces of paper and add one to each piece of masking tape. Pick a shape card and jump to the piece of tape that matches that shape.*

*Have a jumping contest: jump side by side. Who will get to the stuffed animal first?*

*Take it outside! Draw the lines or shapes with sidewalk chalk.*

Keeping it going ...

Sample



# Discipline: A Positive Approach

*In the long run, you can't "control" your child's behavior. But you can teach her to meet your expectations by using positive discipline strategies that support her development.*

As your child's skills grow and change, so does her behavior. For example, she is learning to act in ways that are acceptable to you and other adults. Her control over her emotions is getting better. She is picking up on the appropriate social skills you model for her.

But all children misbehave sometimes. Your child is no different! When she does, it helps to plan ahead of time how you will respond to her actions.

Positive discipline is part of a relationship-building process. It includes many strategies, from modeling the desired behavior to logical consequences and time outs. All of them work best when you have:

- > A strong parent-child bond.
  - > Age-appropriate expectations.
  - > An environment where your child feels empowered to make her own choices to act in responsible ways.
- When you set – and stick to – limits that encourage desired behavior, you are teaching your child self-control and helping her to feel good about herself.

## Discipline strategies

There are three types of strategies for effective discipline: **preventing** behaviors you don't want, **promoting** positive behaviors and **addressing** problem behaviors.

All three work best when you and your child have a warm, supportive and loving relationship. Your affection and encouragement strengthen this bond.

### > Preventing

Set reasonable expectations based on what your child can do at this age. Model the behaviors you want to see. Be consistent with your family's rules and routines.

### > Promoting

Encourage your child's positive behaviors. Offer her limited choices so she feels some independence. Talk about actions you want to see instead of overusing "don't" and "no."

### > Addressing

Research shows that these responses work: Pay extra attention to your child's good behavior; ignore minor misbehavior; reward her for overcoming problems; and use logical consequences instead of punishment.



**Discipline** means teaching children to act with self-control and responsibility. **Punishment** means controlling children through fear by using verbal statements or actions that cause pain to your child.



## Before your child misbehaves

Sometimes quick discipline decisions are not our best. It can help when you:

- > Make sure you and your child are clear about what you consider “problem behavior.”
- > Talk about the reasons for your family’s rules and expectations. Keep in mind that, at this age, your child can only focus on a handful of rules at a time.
- > Explain what will happen if your child misbehaves. If you are using time outs, practice what she will do and what you will do.
- > Communicate with your child’s other parent, teachers and caregivers. When everyone’s rules and expectations are consistent, your child will recognize limits more easily.
- > Consider situations that could cause your child to lose self-control. For example, she may be extra tired or hungry after school or sports practice. Or she may be bored from sitting still for a long time.
- > Prepare to respond to the same behavior the same way every time.
- > Remind yourself to stay calm and act with empathy.

### REFLECTION

### Take time to think about discipline.

- > What are some examples of the way you were disciplined as a child?
  - > What sets your views apart?
- > Do you plan to handle discipline differently in your family? Why or why not?
  - > What are some examples?
- > What viewpoints about discipline do you share with other parents you admire?

# Life in a Blended Family

*Many blended families face unique challenges related to normal aspects of parental life such as parent-child relationships, attachment and discipline. However, members of blended families can also develop new strengths. Parent education supports families through all of these transitions.*

The 1970s offered an uncomplicated, yet fictitious, view of the life of a blended family: The Brady Bunch. But real life presents blended families with many different compositions. The most traditional blend, a stepfamily, forms when one or both adults in a new relationship bring children from a previous relationship. Census data shows that approximately half of marriages

annually are remarriages for both partners, and approximately 65 percent of those adults have children from a previous relationship (Adler-Baeder & Higginbotham, 2004).

The previous relationship may have ended in divorce, separation or death. In certain cases, the biological parent may be a single parent who has never been

married. In other cases, the parent could be an adoptive parent or a legal guardian (American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy, n.d.). While some parents choose to marry, other parents cohabit or share a residence with a partner outside of marriage. A blended family structure is formed in any of these cases.

## Parent handouts

[Adjusting to Separation and Divorce](#)

[Building New Parenting Relationships](#)

[On the Same Page: Consistent Co-Parenting](#)

[Our Blended Family](#)

[Attachment After Divorce](#)

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Often this expanded family network is a positive turn of events that brings greater adult attention. But even in the best of circumstances, creating a blended family can present difficult adjustments. Parents may use different childrearing practices than the child is used to, and having to switch to new rules and expectations can be stressful. In addition, children often regard stepparents and new relatives as intruders.

How well children adapt is related to the overall quality of family functioning.

### Loyalty conflicts

Because of a child's loyalties to his absent parent, bonding with a new parent may be difficult (Amato, 2005). Many children experience loyalty conflicts while adjusting to their parent's new partner. Loyalty conflicts occur when parents make the child feel torn between the other biological parent and/or his stepparents (Ganong, Coleman, & Jamison, 2011). For instance, parents may do this by badmouthing a stepparent in front of the child or by making the child feel guilty for spending the weekend

with his nonresidential parent and their partner. In other cases, the child may be conditioned to believe that if he shows affection to his stepmother, he is being disloyal to his mother.

Other loyalty issues can concern siblings of the child (Martin, 2011). How a child's siblings react to the new parent can also influence how the child bonds with the adult. In any case, loyalty issues make it especially difficult for the stepchild-stepparent relationship to function, as the child may withdraw from the new parent in order to ease the tension around him.

Children can benefit from stepparent relationships and the increased diversity in their lives when they are not forced to choose sides in parental conflicts. Likewise, the stepchild-stepparent relationship can affect the quality of the adult relationships encompassing the blended family. Parents and their new partners often need help in discovering how to cooperate while considering the child as a primary motive. Family life education and therapy can help blended families adapt to the new complexities they face.

### Making the adjustment

Studies have shown that it is usually more difficult for girls to adjust to new parents than it is for boys. Researchers advise that a girl often feels that the new stepfather is a threat to her secure relationship with her mother, whereas a boy often has trouble adjusting to living with a single mother and benefits from an adult male figure (Papalia, Olds & Feldman, 2008). These preferences affect how the new parent should approach establishing a relationship with the child (Nodrick & Nodrick, 2008).

A child can be expected to test the limits of the new blended family relationships, often leading to unpleasant power struggles. It is important for blended families to understand that this is typical behavior. Therapists suggest that blended families need at least two years to begin functioning as a unit (American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy, n.d.). However, each child is different; some children may need more time to adjust and others need less. Patience and persistence are essential for nurturing a blended family.



*Life in a single-parent home is often a temporary condition, as many single, divorced or widowed parents marry or remarry within a few years.*

As with any new relationship, forming strong ties takes time and effort.

Children must learn that the new parent is not a replacement for the biological parent, no matter how much the child may yearn for that. If both parents support each other during times of conflict, the child will eventually understand that the relationship is solid, even if at first he tests it and tries to undermine it. The opportunity for everyone to openly express their feelings will help in the transition.

### **Benefits of a blended family**

Research is mixed about how family structures that differ from the conventional two-parent led, biological family affect children socially, emotionally or academically. Regardless of family structure, the “quality of parenting” has the most fundamental impact. Research suggests that quality of parenting is “one of the best predictors of children’s emotional and social well-being” (Amato, 2005, p. 83). Thus, several benefits can emerge through a solid blended family unit.

Two-parent families can provide greater economic security, support with shared household tasks, emotional support that ends loneliness and greater fulfillment of parenting roles. While new parents should not be expected to replace a child’s biological parent, they may at

### **Discipline**

Disciplining someone else’s child can cause resentment between the new parent and the child’s biological parent. Effective strategies encourage new parents to move into their roles gradually rather than abruptly. Likewise, it is important to provide consistency in childrearing. When the biological parent and their partner are consistent with discipline strategies, young children will know what to expect.

Research has found that stepparents who show high warmth and flexible control have better relationships with their stepchildren as compared to those who demonstrate low warmth and high control (Ganong et al., 2011). Building trusting relationships before attempting to discipline is vital. Once a warm bond has been formed between stepparents and stepchildren, more active parenting is possible.

times fill a void that the child has been experiencing. When they are warm and involved in the lives of all the children in the family, and when they offer reassurance that they are not going to leave, new parents in blended families can be a welcome addition to the lives of young children.

A blended family can bring along extended family, more social activities for children and positive adult role model influences. For example, imagine the possibilities a blended family can bring to an only child from a small single-parent family who yearns to socialize. Having extra family members (stepsiblings, cousins, grandparents, aunts, uncles) means more children to play with, more people to talk to and bigger family dinners during holidays.

Many families have already established parenting plans that detail how events such as holidays, birthdays and family vacations should be spent. These may need to be adjusted during the transition to a blended family, and care should be used when introducing new routines to the family. Children may feel resentful if they are forced to go along with someone else’s routine (Help Guide, 2014).

Parents can emphasize that a blended family brings more opportunities to celebrate and create new family traditions specific to the blended unit. Encouraging input for new traditions and family fun allows children to offer their own creative suggestions and feel like valued members of their blended family.



### From the mouths of children

The following is a list of things children have said they like about being in a blended family (Better Health Channel, n.d.):

- > It's good to have extra adults to care for them, as well as their parents.
- > It's nice to be part of a two-parent family again.
- > It feels more secure and safe.
- > It's great to see parents happy again.
- > There are more presents at birthdays.

### Your role as a parent educator

Your role will align largely with the blended family's willingness to share any concerns or updates about their transition. When they share their family's status with you, ask them how you can best support them at this time.

It is important to encourage parents to focus on the needs of the child(ren) involved. Help parents and stepparents think of ways to gradually ease the transition of the blended family. Inform parents that it is important to always consider the child's cues, such as temperament and parental attachment. Share with the families that it is okay to allow children and new parents to bond naturally; be patient and don't overwhelm the child with attempts to bond.

Offer fun family ideas to help with the transition, such as encouraging the child's input on creating new family traditions and household rules and responsibilities. You can help blended families reflect on their new situation by talking about the various benefits their new family brings. Provide the parent handout [Our Blended Family](#) for more information.

Another key role is to help families identify stresses they may be experiencing. Each family and child responds differently to certain types of

stress. Rebelliousness and resentfulness are normal behaviors for children adapting to blended families. Inform the parents that these are typical experiences and, thus, try not to take it personally.

Discipline often causes tension among blended families. Encourage families to reflect on their own values and beliefs regarding discipline and childrearing. Advise them of how important consistency is in childrearing. To help them reflect on their blended family's strategies and routines regarding discipline and raising children, offer the parent handout [On the Same Page: Consistent Co-Parenting](#).

If the family has also experienced a separation or divorce from the child's other biological parent, loyalty issues to the nonresidential parent often trigger stubborn behaviors in young children. Reassure the family that this is typical. To further support the family, offer the parent handout [Adjusting to Separation and Divorce](#).



*“The well-functioning stepfamily provides the child with many more people resources. The children are exposed to a variety of lifestyles, points of view and experiences. Adults gain the love, admiration and respect of another child. History is filled with great men and women who have had stepmothers and stepfathers who became powerful and positive influences upon them” (Lofas, n.d., para. 25).*

You may see signs of ineffective, desperate or even abusive parenting as a result of the stress associated with a blended family. Families are often shy about discussing intimate family situations; however if you witnesses stress-related behaviors in either the parents or the child, refer the family to a local mental health professional or agency.

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# Our Blended Family

*If you (or your child's other parent) remarries or moves in with a new partner, your child will become part of a blended family. This can be a positive situation for your child in the long term, but many times the adjustment is hard.*

It will take time for your child to get used to the new parent's childrearing style, rules and expectations.

Sometimes young children view stepparents or stepsiblings as intruders into the family. You can expect your child to test the limits as he figures out the new family dynamics.

Generally, the transition goes more smoothly if the new parent gradually eases into the role. If your new partner is warm and involved in your child's life and reassures him that he or she will not leave, they will begin to form a bond of their own. This will make it easier for your child to accept guidance and discipline from his new parent.

Backing each other up in times of conflict shows your child that you and your new partner have a solid relationship and that you mean what you say.



## REFLECTION

Take time to think about your family.

- > One way to celebrate your new family is to paint a family tree together. Include names and pictures of all the new family members.
- > What are some other fun activities you can do with your child to represent your blended family?

## Helping your child adjust

Ask for your child's input in creating new household rules for everyone in the family to follow. When everyone agrees to the rules, you and your partner can feel more secure supporting each other in following through on them.

Encourage your child to express his feelings. It helps him when you show how you express your emotions.

Provide firm, loving and consistent discipline. Form a united front with your new partner so that your child is not forced to choose sides in parental conflicts.

Discuss any concerns you have with your parent educator. She can help you, your child and your new partner adjust to the new family structure.

Eventually, your child may find many things he likes. Researchers have found that children in blended families say:

- > It's good to have an extra adult to care for them.
- > It's nice to be part of a two-parent family again.



- > There are more adult family members to bond with (grandparents, aunts, uncles).
- > There are more children to play with (stepsiblings, cousins).
- > It feels more secure and safe.
- > It's great for them to see that their parents are happy.
- > There are more presents at birthdays.

### **New family traditions**

Blended families often add new routines for holidays, birthdays and family vacations. This allows you to create new traditions for your life together.

However, your child may be confused by these changes. He may even feel resentful if he is forced to go along with routines without having any input.

At this age, your child likes to help make decisions that affect him. Encourage your child to share his ideas for new family traditions. This helps him feel like a valued member of the family.

### **Tips for blended families**

*You can help the transition go smoothly for everyone when you:*

- > *Reassure your child that your new partner is not replacing his other parent.*
- > *Remind your new partner to be patient and bond gradually rather than abruptly.*
- > *Give your child time to adjust to the new way of life.*
- > *Allow your child to ask questions. Answer as honestly as possible.*
- > *Encourage your new partner to build trust with your child before attempting to discipline him.*
- > *Develop open communication and a co-parenting relationship with your child's other parent (if it is safe for your child).*