

# Helping Children Learn®

EARLY CHILDHOOD

Tips Families Can Use to Help Children Do Better in School  
Mexico Academy & Central School District



March 2025

## Identify patterns together to help develop math readiness skills

The activities you can do with your preschooler to build math readiness go far beyond counting. Numbers are only one part of math. Math also involves recognizing patterns—the sequences in which numbers occur that gives them meaning.

When children can line up a blue crayon, then a red one, then a blue one, and know that red comes next, they are practicing this essential math readiness skill.



Here are some other ways to teach your child about patterns:

- **Play with rhythms.** Demonstrate a simple sequence, such as *clap, clap* (clap twice), *slap, slap* (slap thighs twice). Ask your child to repeat it. Add other motions as this gets easy, but always repeat them in the same order.
- **Examine a calendar.** Point out how every month begins with the number 1, and the days of every week occur in the same order.
- **Sing songs that rhyme.** Rhymes are patterns of word sounds. Also try songs with repeated phrases, such as “B-I-N-G-O.”
- **Hunt for patterns** around your home and in nature. What patterns are on the fabric of your clothes? Look at pictures of snowflakes, which have six matching segments.
- **Read books about patterns**, such as *A-B-A-B-A: A Book of Pattern Play* by B.P. Cleary.



## Build skills and interest in reading

Helping your preschooler develop literacy skills and enjoy reading is an important way to support success in school. Recent research shows that when children’s skills are stronger, they enjoy reading more and do more of it. To encourage your preschooler’s desire to read:

- **Practice skills** in lots of ways. Help your child connect letters and their sounds, identify words that start or end with the same letter sound, form letters out of fun materials (cooked spaghetti, cookie dough, etc.) and learn about how books work.
- **Let your child choose** which books you will read. It’s OK if it is often the same book. Familiarity

with words and phrasing helps children build fluency.

- **Choose read aloud times** when your child is relaxed.
- **Encourage your child** to ask questions while you read, and take time to discuss the answers.

Source: E. van Bergen, “Literacy skills seem to fuel literacy enjoyment, rather than vice versa,” *Developmental Science*, Wiley.

## Explore shadow science

To help your child investigate the nature of shadows, all you need is a sunny day, a piece of chalk and a paved sidewalk or driveway. To get started:

1. **Draw an X** on the pavement in the morning and have your child stand on it.
2. **Draw an outline** of your child’s shadow.
3. **Return several times** throughout the day and repeat step 2 each time.



At day’s end, ask what your child notices about the outlines. How did they change? Follow up your experiment by reading a book about shadows, such as *What Makes a Shadow?* by Clyde Robert Bulla.

## Get your child’s attention

The length of a preschooler’s attention span can depend on the situation. If your child seems more distracted than usual during a learning activity, ask yourself:

- **How does my child feel?** Make sure your child is fed and rested before tackling a new or challenging concept.
- **Is my child having fun?** If not, it’s probably time to take a break.

## Draw and write in a journal

Journaling can help preschoolers learn to express ideas on paper—even before they can write. Ask your child to tell you about something that happened today, then:



- **Have your child draw** a picture of it.
- **Ask your child to tell** you about the picture. Write a caption underneath.
- **Explain that the words** tell about the picture. Have your child “write” something too, even if it is just lines.
- **Repeat often.** Staple pages into a book.



## How can I help my child make friends more easily?

**Q:** Shyness is making it difficult for my child to make friends. I'm worried about how kindergarten will go if this continues. What should I do?

**A:** Some children are naturally self-confident and outgoing, and others are shy. While you can't change your child's personality (and you shouldn't try), you can instill more confidence when interacting with others.

To strengthen your child's social abilities:

- **Act out different situations.** Shy children don't always know what to say to other kids. Say to your preschooler, "Let's pretend you're on the playground and kids are playing a game you want to join. What could you say?" At first, have your child pretend to be one of the children playing the game. You pretend to be your preschooler. Then, switch roles.
- **Read stories about friends.** Talk together about what good friends do and don't do. Understanding what makes a person a friend may help your child identify other children who could be one.
- **Invite just one of your child's classmates** over to play. Some children are more comfortable with one person than a crowd.
- **Think about activities your child likes.** Look for community classes or programs where your preschooler can meet other children with similar interests. Practicing enjoyable skills can boost self-confidence—which also helps when making friends!



## Are you leaving room for independence?

Your preschooler needs some freedom to learn and grow and gain a sense of independence. You need to protect your child from harm. Are you keeping these two priorities in balance? Answer *yes* or *no* to the questions below:

- \_\_\_ **1. Do you play** with your child often, and also encourage some independent play time?
- \_\_\_ **2. Do you allow** your child time to try to solve problems before you offer help?
- \_\_\_ **3. Do you supervise** from a short distance when your child plays with friends, rather than directing the interaction?
- \_\_\_ **4. Do you ask** your child to give opinions and listen respectfully, even when you disagree?

- \_\_\_ **5. Do you offer** chances for your child to make choices?

### How well are you doing?

More yes answers mean you are fostering your child's autonomy. For each no, try that idea.

"Children are not things to be molded but are people to be unfolded."

—Jess Lair

## Head outside with friends

Research shows that playing outdoors with friends benefits children's minds, bodies and behavior. It helps your child learn to:

- **Think creatively.** Making up a game and using available items to represent other things takes imagination.
- **Solve problems.** What happens when there are more children than stick "horses" to ride?
- **Interact with others.** Your child will learn how to include children who want to join in, or how to adapt games to accommodate others.

Source: A. Cakan and D. Acer, "Analysis of preschool children's outdoor play behaviours," *Journal of Outdoor and Environmental Education*, Springer.

## Reinforce positive behavior

To encourage appropriate behavior and avoid melt-downs, try these teacher-tested tips:

- **Clearly explain** the behavior you want.
- **Establish routines** for regular tasks.
- **Post pictures** to remind your child what to do.
- **Use silent signals**, such as flicking the lights off and on to give a five-minute warning before changing activities.



## Start school-friendly habits

Establishing certain healthy lifestyle habits for the whole family now can improve your child's ability to pay attention and learn in school. These include:

- **Getting enough sleep.**
- **Engaging in regular exercise.**
- **Eating a nutritious diet.**
- **Limiting recreational screen time.**

Source: J.J. Walsh and others, "Associations between 24-hour movement behaviors and global cognition in U.S. children," *The Lancet Child & Adolescent Health*.

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