



Health and education professionals passionate about brain science, learning and child development

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Academic Readiness

Ensuring your child is prepared for school

Foundations of learning

Cognitive skills

These are mental abilities, such as memory, attention, auditory processing (listening) and processing speed, which allow your child to learn. Cognitive skills allow children to be interested in learning new things and solving problems, as well as give them the confidence to learn. When cognitive skills are strong, academic learning is easy and fast. When cognitive skills are weak, learning will be a struggle.

Language skills

This refers to a child's ability to produce language, as well as their ability to understand what is spoken to them. Strong language skills will allow your child to ask questions and communicate their thoughts and ideas, and will help them to enjoy listening to stories and being read to.

Social and emotional skills

These skills will allow your child to participate in play, show an interest in others, approach other children in a positive way and make new friends. They will also help your child to cope with transitions, express their needs and wants, deal with conflict in an appropriate manner and understand rules and directions.

Physical skills

Skills such as running, jumping and balancing will allow your child to use playground equipment and participate in physical activities. Fine motor skills will also be used inside the classroom for cutting, gluing, colouring and writing.

Cognitive skills – memory and attention

Remember that cognitive development is all about growing and exercising thinking skills... not acquiring information! The best thing you can do is to **set up a learning opportunity and be there** *but don't tell your child the answer. This is difficult to do, but this is what causes their thinking skills to grow.*

Everyday things

- When your child hits the “Why?” stage, ask ‘why’ a lot yourself. Not only does this stimulate thinking, but it helps you revise the knowledge they have which is often slightly off. (i.e. “Yes we have to pick up your brother now. Do you know why?”)
- Every now and then, stop and let your child fill in the word you were going to say. This has to be in an easy context like, “Where’s the towel? It’s time to have a ...!” Or you can sing nursery rhymes and let them fill in the rhyming word.
- Read stories and ask your child comprehension or evaluation questions like, “Why did Harold choose a purple crayon instead of red?” or “Do you think it was a good idea for Tom to refuse his bath?”
- Encourage natural curiosity – do different things with your child and encourage them to try different ways of doing things.

Activities

- Share activities with your child to help develop skills and build a concentration span. See www.abc.net.au/abcforkids for activity ideas.
- “Follow My Directions” and “Simon Says”: “Crawl under the table...move two steps to the left...” (Works even better if you hide an M&M at the end). Experiment with ‘silly’ or unusual directions (“crawl behind the lounge, lie down and pretend to drink a cup of tea”).

Games for the car

- The “I’m thinking of...” game. Animals are a favourite thing, or objects, people, foods, but try to use less and less obvious clues over time.
- “Which One Doesn’t Belong, and Why?”: “Newspaper, book, computer, or birthday card?”
- “Categories”: “sock...shoe...shirt...” (the child says, “Clothes!”). Or you can play the reverse game where you name the category, and the child thinks of as many items that fit. You can also play this game on paper while drawing pictures, and take turns if you have multiple children.

Cognitive skills – listening

What are “listening skills”?

In order for a child to be able to gain meaning from any information that is spoken to them, they first need to have good listening skills. Listening skills refer to the ability to pay attention to, recognise and discriminate sounds in our environment.

Listening and hearing are not the same thing. Hearing refers to receiving sounds through our ears. Listening requires more effort, and involves using our brain, eyes, body movements as well as our ears.

Why is listening so important?

Recall a time when you weren't listened to. It's frustrating, isn't it? It can also be very frustrating for the person trying to listen. Poor listening can result in errors and even serious accidents. Listening is especially important during a child's early development. Problems with speech, language, memory, reading and attention can result from ineffective listening.

Remember: Chastising your child or telling them to pay attention is not particularly helpful. They need support, encouragement and activities that are at their level. With time you can help develop your child's listening skills, helping them learn and fully experience their environment.

Activities to help your child develop effective listening skills:

1. Create a “listening book”. Look through magazines or catalogues and cut out interesting items. Talk about these items and add new ones each day to your book. Ask your child to find particular parts of pictures (e.g. The horse's tail, the horse that is running).
2. Tell your child various children's stories, changing your voice for the different characters (e.g. Low voice for the wolf, high voice for the 3 little pigs). Ask your child who is talking when you use these voices. This trains your child to tune into the various pitches we use when communicating.
3. Read stories and short poems to your child until they are familiar with them. Then leave out an obvious word for them to fill in. Stop in the middle and get them to finish the story/poem. Remember to read stories that are an appropriate length for your child. Stories that are too long and complex will 'lose' your child.
4. Get your child to close his eyes, then get him to identify different sounds (e.g. Knock on the door, tearing paper, scissors cutting, a cat, dog, running water, etc.)
5. Again, get your child to close his eyes, then call him from different parts of the room, getting him to point where the sound came from.
6. Look at magazine pictures and ask your child to imitate the sounds made by the pictures (eg. Baby, dog, car, budgie, etc).
7. The silence game: This game can be played anywhere. Sit down with your child, and explain that they need to listen very carefully. When they can hear a noise and identify it, they can say what it is. Depending on where you are playing this game, you might hear aeroplanes, crickets, a lawnmower, the sound of the fridge. To make it a competition, try to identify more sounds each time you play the game.

Language Skills

A child's language skills (receptive and expressive) need to be at an age appropriate level to make the most of the school environment. As children's language develops at different stages, a child's expressive language may still be developing. It is important that a child is able to follow simple instructions.

“Why?”

Between the ages of three and five, you might hear the words ‘Why? Why? Why?’ constantly. This is because preschoolers have a better understanding of cause and effect – they’re more interested in why things happen and they can understand explanations better. They learn basic reasoning: eating makes you grow, running makes you tired, and putting petrol in the car makes it go.

Beat your child to asking ‘Why?’ by explaining things when you’re speaking. For example, ‘We don’t ride bikes on the road because we might get hit by a car’.

Preschoolers express themselves through:

- constant chatter and play (particularly make-believe)
- body language – they still use gestures and noises to communicate
- painting and craft.

By this age, children become capable of maintaining simple conversations and should use specific words to say what they mean. With a vocabulary that's constantly growing, they can also express that they are upset rather than resorting to tantrums.

Tips for talking and listening to preschoolers

Even though their language skills might have improved dramatically, preschoolers still rely on your facial expressions, tone of voice and gestures to understand things.

- Get used to repetition. Preschoolers love repetition in stories because it helps them understand the world and test their imagination.
- When your child tells you something, summarise it back. This lets your child know that you're listening and gives them a chance to learn new words and longer sentences from you.
- Take questions seriously, and take the time to give a real answer. When you do this, you encourage your child to keep asking questions and exploring the world – an important part of development.
- Use phrases that show you are interested. For example, you can say, ‘Really?’, ‘Go on’, or ‘And then what happened?’ Let your child finish telling a story - resist the temptation to butt in.
- You can repeat the same message in a couple of different ways. This will help your child understand what you want.
- Give your child lots of praise and encouragement, and explain why you're happy with your child.
- Make everyday things an exploration of language – ask the child questions, listen carefully to their answers, and encourage the child to ask why.
 - Read to your child and use books as a pleasurable daily shared activity.
 - When putting away groceries, talk about the function or uses of each item: “Here's the milk. What can we do with milk?”

Social and Emotional Skills

Practise in socialisation before arriving at school is a key component. Some children can socialise appropriately, while others are not as good at using their expressive language and therefore rely more on their non-verbal communication to convey a message. For instance, they may snatch, or take, rather than say, "I want to have a turn". Correct modelling gives children an opportunity to practise appropriate social interactions.

Socialising

Encourage your child to mix with other children in different supervised activities so they learn to socialise with their peers, take turns and share their toys and books. Giving your child ample opportunities to play with other children her age is one of the best ways to exercise her social skills.

Problem solving

Role playing with your child to help him learn to effectively solve problems is an ideal way to teach him how to confront another child. Sit on the floor with him and act out various real-life scenes, like fighting over a toy, being called a name or asking to play. Instead of telling your child what to do in each scenario, ask him what he thinks he should do. It opens the discussion so you have a chance to talk about appropriate social behavior and problem solving, even with children who behave unacceptably. This, in turn, helps build your child's confidence when in social situations.

Turn taking

Allowing your child to play a variety of games shows him the importance of taking turns and following rules, suggests ParentingScience.com. Play games like "Follow the Leader," "Duck, Duck Goose" and "Tag." As you explain the rules, talk about the importance of letting other children have turns and following the rules without cheating. This teaches your child to successfully play with other children and how to be courteous when playing games with others. When playing, Talk through the steps, saying things like, 'Now it's my turn to build the tower, then it's your turn. You share the red blocks with me, and I'll share the green blocks with you'.

Sharing

Help your child learn to share. Start by modelling good sharing and turn-taking, giving your child a great example to follow. Other ways to promote sharing are:

- Point out good sharing in others. You can say things like, 'Your friend was sharing her toys really well. That was very kind of her'. Point out sharing examples in books, DVDs or TV shows.
- When you see your child trying to share or take turns, make sure you give lots of praise and attention. For example, 'I liked the way you let Jack play with your train set. Good sharing!'
- Talk to your child about sharing before she goes on play dates with other children. For example, you could say, 'When Georgia comes over, you'll need to share some of your toys. Why don't we ask her what she wants to play with?' You can also talk to your child about sharing before leaving for school.

Physical Skills

As a parent, you are your child's first teacher and best playmate. You can help choose toys and activities that motivate your child to play, explore and learn about their environment while developing their fine motor, gross motor and sensory skills.

By age 5, children should be able to:

- Run smoothly, avoiding obstacles
- Stand and hop on each foot
- Grip strongly with either hand
- Climb, slide, swing and dance well
- Hold a pencil well in their preferred hand
- Produce recognisable drawings (people, houses)
- Start to use a knife and fork skilfully
- Manage large buttons and zips (laces are tricky –this skill comes later).

Some activities to try:

- Art and craft: provide lots of paper and crayons for drawing, or set up a backboard or paint easel. Try letting children draw on the path with chalk and then wash it off. Make a monster from old packets and egg cartons held together with tape, string and glue. Kids love hammering large headed nails into scraps of soft wood with a light weight hammer.
- Playdough: This is always a favourite. Make your own! Experiment with different kinds of play-dough and clay (hard and soft) to develop hand strength.
- Sand and water play: Fill a bucket with sand or water for hours of fun. You can buy clean, white sand from gardening suppliers for around \$4.
- Themed play sets: can be used for pretend play and developing fine motor skills (eg. put together some fences for a farm or zoo, make some pretend tools to fix things around the house).
- Outdoor active play: build cubbies, go to the local park and play on the swings, slides, monkey bars and flying foxes, or practice riding scooters and bikes. Parks are also great places to build hand-eye coordination by playing with bats and balls, flying kites, playing skittles and throwing frisbees. Set up an obstacle course with planks and old tyres. In summer, teach your child to swim.
- Dress-ups: Explore pretend play and develop sensory skills by trying clothes of varying materials and textures.

Resources

Learning Insight Blog (by Sonic Learning)

The health and education professionals at Sonic Learning present articles and videos describing the latest research on brain science, learning and education. For example, "How much sleep do kids need?" and "How do ear infections impact language and learning?"

blog.soniclearning.com.au

Parent Smart Blog (by Dr Martha Burns)

Dr Burns, an experienced and highly knowledgeable Speech Pathologist and Neuroscientist, provides practical advice and activities for parents to help prepare their child for success at school and beyond by building their language, play and cognitive skills.

burnsparentsmart.blogspot.com.au

Raising Children Network

A respected source of information for Australian parents. Particularly useful for helping parents deal with social issues and understanding their child's behaviour.

raisingchildren.net.au