

Helping Children Learn®

EARLY CHILDHOOD

Tips Families Can Use to Help Children Do Better in School
Cormier School & Early Learning



April 2025

Help your child learn to think about objects in three dimensions

Spatial reasoning may sound like a complex idea to teach to a preschooler, but there are many simple ways you can use toys and other household objects to introduce your child to this essential skill.

Spatial reasoning is the ability to think about how objects exist, move and relate to other objects in space. It is useful in everyday life to put items away, for example, and your child will need it in school when working with shapes and volumes.

To develop your child's spatial reasoning skills:

- **Build with cardboard tubes and boxes.** Have your child experiment with combining different-sized elements in a variety of ways. Will a box stand up better on one of its edges or one of its sides?
- **Match lids and containers.** Give your child several empty plastic containers—such as water bottles, coffee canisters, mayonnaise and peanut butter jars, etc. with the lids removed. Challenge your child to put the correct lid back on each container.
- **Make jigsaw puzzles.** Remove the front panels from cereal boxes. Cut them into puzzle pieces and have your child put them back together.
- **Use spatial words in conversation.** These are words that describe shapes, sizes or positions of objects. "Let's walk *across* this *arched* bridge. It goes up at first and then back down."



Source: Z.C.K. Hawes and others, "Effects of spatial training on mathematics performance: A meta-analysis," *Developmental Psychology*, American Psychological Association.



Instill responsibility with 'When ... then'

Children learn responsibility over many years. One responsibility lesson that preschoolers can learn is that *must do's* come before *want to do's*. Using the phrase "When ... then" with your child reinforces this idea.

For example, you might say:

- **"When you pick up** your blocks, then you can get out your instruments."
- **"When you wash** your face, then we can read a story."
- **"When you bring** me your library books, then we can go to the library and get more."
- **"When you put** on your jacket, then we can go out and play."

Use this phrase throughout the day, and in time your preschooler will recognize *When ... then* as a cue to fulfill responsibilities so that enjoyable things can happen. When your child does this responsibly, be specific with your praise. "Thank you for putting your books on the shelf. I bet you feel proud to be able to take good care of them all by yourself."

Source: A. McCready, *If I Have to Tell You One More Time...*, TarcherPerigee.

Give fingers a workout

Your child needs strong, coordinated finger muscles to write, color, button and zip. Try these fun finger-control exercises:

- **Spray watering.** Fill a spray bottle with water and head outside. Have your child squeeze the nozzle to spray water on the grass.
- **Tweezer tongs.** Have your child use tweezers to move cotton balls or raisins from one cup or bowl to another without dropping them.
- **Dig for treasure.** Fill a shoebox half-way with uncooked rice. Bury small items in the rice. Have your child use a spoon to scoop up each treasure.



Source: M. MacDonald and others, "Relations of Preschoolers' Visual-Motor and Object Manipulation Skills with Executive Function and Social Behavior," *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport*, Taylor & Francis.

Read about a special place

Celebrate Earth Day on April 22 by reading with your child about our planet and ways people care for it. Here are a few books to try:



- *If You Come to Earth* by Sophie Blackall.
- *The Earth Gives More* by Sue Fliess.
- *Alba and the Ocean Cleanup* by Lara Hawthorne.

Save goals in a time capsule

Show that education matters by making a time capsule together. Ask your preschooler:

- **"What would you like** to learn in school before you graduate from high school?" Write down the answer.
- **"What do you think** you will look like when you graduate? Can you draw a picture of your future self?"

Seal the keepsakes in a box along with a current photo of your child. Plan to open it together on your child's graduation day!

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My child always wants me to play, too. What can I do?

Q: I spend most of my time on weekends playing with my preschooler. We read, play learning games, build with blocks and go outside. But I'd also like my child to play independently some of the time. How can I encourage that?

A: There is a good reason to teach four- and five-year-olds to play on their own for short periods of time. They often come up with their most creative ideas when adults are not right beside them.

To encourage a little solo play:

- **Provide your attention** when your child really needs it. Focus on your preschooler for a few minutes. Then, suggest a fun activity your child can do alone while you supervise from a distance.
- **Gather some special toys**, games, books and supplies your child can use only during independent play. These might include a puzzle, a favorite book or a box of toy trucks. Put them in a basket and bring it out when you want your child to play alone.
- **Try "working" side-by-side.** If your child really wants to be with you, but you have work to do, suggest that your preschooler do some "work" too. If you are doing paperwork, give your child a notebook and crayons. If you are cooking, give your child some clean socks to match and fold at the kitchen table.



Do you expect your child to follow rules?

When you stick with some basic rules at home, your child knows what to expect and gains a sense of security. This makes it easier for children to follow rules at school. Are you using rules effectively? Answer *yes* or *no* below:

1. **Do you maintain** a short list of house rules that help life run smoothly?
2. **Do you explain** rules to your child in specifics? "Say please and thank you" is clearer than "Be polite."
3. **Do you establish** consequences for misbehavior at the same time as the rules, and enforce them consistently?
4. **Do you review** your rules as your child matures and adapt them as necessary?

5. **Do you create** routines to help your child obey the rules?

How well are you doing?

More yes answers mean you are helping your child learn to behave in expected ways. For each no, try that idea.

"Children should have enough freedom to be themselves—once they've learned the rules."

—Anna Quindlen

Good sports keep practicing

Participating in sports teaches children that when they practice, their skills improve—a lesson that also applies to learning.

Let your child know that it's OK to feel frustrated along the way—but that's never a reason to quit. "Sometimes you catch the ball, and sometimes you don't. You may feel unhappy when you don't catch it, but don't give up! You'll get better with more practice."

When children are learning, having fun and getting exercise, they are winners—no matter what the score.

Enjoy springtime learning

Just like new growth in spring, your child's new skills and talents are emerging. Enjoy these seasonal learning activities together:

- **Go puddle-stomping.** Put on waterproof boots, then see what kind of steps make a big splash or no splash at all.
- **Look and listen** for returning animals. Go outside early in the morning and notice chirping birds, croaking frogs and buzzing insects.
- **Feel the wind.** Show your child how to hold up a wet finger to feel which direction the wind is coming from.



Address 'funny' behavior

A sense of humor is a positive thing, but it's no laughing matter when a child constantly disrupts others with clownish behavior. Take these steps with your preschooler:

- **Look for the cause.** Does your child need more attention? Is your child trying to cover up for insecurities?
- **Talk about it.** Explain when it's OK to joke around and be silly and when being funny is actually being disrespectful.

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