

Connecting with your preschooler

By Raising Children Network

Between the ages of three and five, your child is not a toddler and not yet at school. Stuck in the middle, preschoolers still have the innocent charm of babies, while being determined to show the world that they are their own person.

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In between making sure everybody knows they're not a baby and amusing everyone with hilarious combinations of new words and expressions, preschoolers are watching and listening. This is one of the most important periods in a child's emotional development.

The foundations for confidence and self-esteem are established during this time. The way a child feels about his own rapidly blossoming abilities and the way he deals with more complex emotions have a huge influence on his ability to cope with life's stresses.

The role of a parent during the preschooler years changes dramatically. Suddenly, the bub who made sweet gurgling noises and laughed at funny faces is asking questions you can't answer and telling strangers things you were sure you whispered in private.

Your baby is a little person ready to take on the world and your job is to show him how. Since school hasn't started yet, most of your preschooler's learning will occur through [play](#). This will happen at home and at preschool or kindergarten with other children, where children are encouraged to learn through play, art and storytelling.

One of your most important jobs during this time is helping your child to handle emotions and develop social skills. The development of these skills helps your child to cope with emotional changes, keep going in the face of frustration, have hope, control extreme emotional impulses and feel compassion and empathy. They are very important ingredients for success in life.

[Self-esteem](#)



Read info and watch film clips especially for dads, or meet other fathers in the discussion forum.

For Fathers

Good self-esteem means that you have a positive view of yourself and your abilities. Children who have good self-esteem feel that their parents think well of them and they can manage the world to some degree.

If you have good self-esteem, it affects the way you approach tasks and learning and the way you deal with life's disappointments and problems. Positive self-esteem helps us to understand and accept failure without lasting emotional damage. It makes us less likely to say, 'Of course that bad thing happened to me, my life is a disaster and I'm a bad person', and more likely to say, 'What can I do to fix that bad thing that happened to me?' or 'Bad things happen to everyone. I can get over this'.

Tips to help your child develop positive self-esteem

- Teach him about who he is by explaining who's who in the family, how he's related to others and what you did when you were a child. It will help if you make sure your child feels part of family occasions.
- Make photo albums and provide family treasures (past and present) to help your child have a mental picture of who he is and where he comes from.
- Keep his drawings, letters and photos to help your child build a sense of himself.
- Encourage your child to play with children of a similar age, so he isn't overwhelmed by the abilities of older children.
- Encourage your child to work out problems and make decisions by himself and make sure he knows you are available to help.
- When your child masters a new skill, encourage him to practise it before starting something harder. Repetition helps him to build confidence and understand that after a while, things that were once hard become easy.
- When you feel good about your child, tell him. Say things that make him believe he is capable of achieving, such as 'Thank you', 'That was helpful' and 'You do that really well'. Be generous with praise, but also be genuine – children can tell when you're faking it.
- Actions can speak louder than words. Hug your child, listen to him, make time even when you are busy, let him help you, put his drawings on display and participate in preschool events.
- A child's self-esteem can be easily damaged by put downs. Avoid at all costs saying things that ridicule him or make him feel ashamed, such as 'You make me tired', 'You are silly/a nuisance/lazy/stupid' or 'If we didn't have you we'd be able to take a holiday/work less'.
- Help your child to understand that everyone makes mistakes and that they are good things that help us to learn. It is important that children understand that if they make a mistake in one area, they are not bad at everything.
- Encourage your child to be positive about himself and his future. Psychologists have found that negative self-talk is associated with problems such as depression and anxiety. Encourage such statements as, 'It's OK that my team didn't win today', 'I can work out this problem if I just keep trying' and 'It makes me feel good if I can help someone, even if they don't thank me'.

For more information on building self-esteem in children, read our article [Building good family relationships](#)

Optimism

Optimism is the ability to look on the bright side of life, even when things are going wrong. Having an optimistic view of life helps you to think positively rather than negatively and understand the causes of things that happen to you. There is increasing evidence that an optimistic view on life can make it easier to deal with life when things go badly.

You can encourage your child to have an optimistic outlook on life by helping him to:

- recognise the difference between positive and negative thoughts
- think about whether things are morally right or wrong
- understand why things sometimes go wrong
- look at possible positive outcomes rather than the worst case scenario
- set goals and plan a course of action for achieving them
- look at strategies and see if they worked and why
- make decisions and choices.

Coping

Good coping skills help us to deal with the problems, frustrations, threats and challenges that life throws at us. The way a child deals with these things as a baby and toddler – crying and tantrums – don't go down very well in later childhood or in the office (even though they are still commonly used!).

Preschoolers tend to 'cope' or deal with threatening situations through symbolic play – they create a make-believe situation where they can defeat whatever is frightening them. In this way, your child makes himself feel better by acting out control over a frightening situation. Older children may find it more comforting if you can explain what's going on in a frightening situation.

You can help promote good coping skills in your child in the following ways:

- Teach children to identify and understand their own feelings and capabilities.
- Teach them to recognise their own feelings of distress and discomfort when they first occur.
- Encourage younger children to express feelings through drawings, puppets, playdough and other creative or messy play.
- Use children's stories to help talk about problems.
- Encourage cooperative games with other children, as opposed to competitive games.
- Teach them that while everyone likes to win, doing your best is more important.
- Teach that teasing and name-calling can hurt people.

Problem-solving skills

Problem-solving skills are important for decision making and sorting out conflicts. Through conflict, children learn that people experience different thoughts and feelings and learn the difference between right and wrong. They also learn about how their behaviour affects other people. To help your child develop good problem-solving skills:

- If your child is arguing with other children, encourage him to try and work out a solution to the problem.
- Avoid blaming if children are fighting. When everyone is calm enough to talk sensibly, encourage children to think of different ways of solving the problem and finding agreement on a solution that everyone can live with (even if it isn't the best!).
- See that the solution is followed through, announce when the problem is sorted out and

congratulate everyone on participating in such a grown-up fashion. Then go have a lie down!

Social skills

Having good relationships with a range of people is very important for a person's mental health. To develop these relationships, children must learn social skills, such as:

- communication skills: using the right words for the situation, smiling and facial expressions, using eye contact and listening
- entry skills: knowing how to join a group
- being part of a group: sharing, taking turns, following rules, cooperating, managing conflict, helping others
- being a friend: supporting friends, being kind, helpful and affectionate, being willing to follow requests and participate in group decision-making.

Developing social skills is like any other skill. Children need to practise them, especially since this combination of skills can be quite complex. Sometimes children have no trouble learning some skills and yet struggle with others. Practising these skills helps them to become socially competent – they will be able to make and keep friends and maintain satisfying relationships.

Children of different ages, backgrounds and personalities experience different difficulties in learning social skills. Preschool children often encounter difficulties in controlling impulses – they can find it very hard to take turns, negotiate difficult situations and resolve conflict. Older children may suffer from shyness or feel as though they don't fit in.

Mums and dads tend to have the most influence on how a child's social skills develop, but children learn also from a range of sources including family members, friends, day care and preschool. Unfortunately there's no recipe for teaching social skills – you have to take into account individual differences because what works for one child may not work for another. It's often a case of trial and error, watching how different things work with your child.

To help your child develop good social skills, consider the following:

- Just as with any other skill, children need to be shown what skills look like, and they learn by watching as well as participating. Your child is probably copying the way you behave when you're around other people.
- Encouraging your child by saying something like 'good try' is more effective than punishing him when he gets it wrong.
- Encourage preschoolers to be aware of the feelings of others, even if they can't see the other person's point of view, for example, 'Johnny has been waiting for a go for a while now, I think it is his turn'. Although it might take a while for your child to understand, if you keep repeating your explanations it will help him to understand eventually.
- The way you explain things to children may change over time, depending on their age. However, often the messages are the same: 'Everyone is entitled to a turn' and 'He is frustrated, you know how that feels'. As your child becomes older, your explanations can get more complicated.
- Peer relationships become more important and complicated as your child grows older.
- Preschoolers can learn social skills from imaginary play (including dress-ups), telephone play, playing shop, acting out stories and rhymes, playing with other children, constructing

things with bricks, cut-outs and dough and helping around the house with simple chores.

When your child starts school, social skills can be helped along with games that involve winning and losing (such as 'snap', 'snakes and ladders'), participating in family trips and outings, and encouraging participation in sport and group activities.

Rated ★★★★★ (19 ratings)

More to explore

- ★ Special moments
- ★ Social development
 - ▶ Why talking is important
 - ▶ Praise and encouragement
 - ▶ Social and emotional growth: younger preschoolers
 - ▶ Feelings: preschoolers
 - ▶ Encouraging kids to be active

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References

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