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Six ways young children can help protect our planet

Earth Day is April 22. And while protecting the Earth is a job for everyone every day, you can use this special day to begin or reinforce the habit with your preschooler.

Many activities that help the Earth are educational and free. And they are suitable for young children.

Here are six ideas to try:

1. **Turn off the lights** and television when you leave a room and ask your child to do the same.
2. **Keep a cup** on the bathroom sink. Teach your child to fill it with water before she brushes her teeth. After she brushes, she can use the water in the cup to rinse out her mouth. There's no need to leave the water running during tooth-brushing.
3. **Plant something** with your child. Plant seeds outdoors if you can. If not, plant them in a container. Consider joining a tree-planting activity in your community.
4. **Fill reusable water bottles** with tap water instead of buying bottled water. Unless there is an emergency, such as a flood or other unusual situation, tap water in the United States and Canada is safe to drink.
5. **Recycle.** Have your preschooler help you sort recyclables into special bins.
6. **Participate in a clean-up day.** Many communities plan events to celebrate Earth Day. Rally neighbors to clean up a section of your own neighborhood or block.

Unstructured time benefits preschoolers



Before COVID, many young children's lives were filled with organized activities. Between preschool, soccer practice, art class, etc., families barely had enough time to eat a meal together.

Much of that has changed due to the pandemic. Kids are spending more time at home. The upside is that unprogrammed time is important for learning. Here's why:

- **All children** need time to hang out with family. Spending time with family members helps your child strengthen bonds and feel loved and secure.
- **Structured activities** leave less time for self-directed play. When your child is engaged in hands-on activities that he gets to plan and control, he develops problem-solving skills, self-confidence and a sense of independence.
- **Going from activity to activity** can be stressful for young kids—which can sometimes lead to crying, exhaustion, headaches and stomachaches.

Source: J.E. Barker and others, "Less-structured time in children's daily lives predicts self-directed executive functioning," *Frontiers in Psychology*, Frontiers Media.

Encourage your preschooler to talk about ideas and actions



When your child begins school, his kindergarten teacher will want him to talk about his thoughts, ideas and experiences.

To build these valuable communication skills:

- **Get the story** behind your child's drawings. Ask him to tell you about them, and write his descriptions underneath.
- **Discuss your day.** Say more than, "We're going out." Instead, try, "We are going to take lunch to Aunt Sue this afternoon. What else should we bring her? How about one of your drawings?"
- **Help your child** tell a story in sequence. This helps him learn that one event follows another. For example, ask him, "What are

some of the things you do *after* dinner and *before* bed?"

- **Encourage your child** to provide details. If he tells you that he had fun visiting his aunt, ask questions that will help him recall more of that experience. "What did you talk about? Did you play any fun games?"

Source: N. Gardner-Neblett and K.C. Gallagher, *More Than Baby Talk: 10 Ways to Promote the Language and Communication Skills of Infants and Toddlers*, The University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, FPG Child Development Institute.

"A baby is born with a need to be loved—and never outgrows it."

—Frank A. Clark

Teach your child how students respect and care for property



In school, students are responsible for a lot of physical items—folders, pencils, books, notes from teachers, etc. They have to carry them back and forth between home and school.

Losing or damaging these items means messages do not get delivered, lunches are not eaten, and—as your child advances through the grades—crucial assignments go unfinished.

But when promoting responsibility, your focus should be on more than your own child's property. She will also have to respect the property of others, including school property.

To help your preschooler learn to care for property:

- **Show her the proper way** to use things. For example, she should use

crayons on paper, not on furniture or on the walls. If she plays with a scooter, she should put it away before coming indoors. She should not leave it out where it might be damaged by weather or stolen.

- **Provide a bin for papers.** Even a young child can be taught to open her backpack when she comes home from preschool or day care, pull out the papers and place them in the bin for you to sort through.
- **Teach her to take special care** of things that belong to others. If your child borrows a toy from a friend, for example, have her return it promptly. If she borrows books from the library, show her how to treat them carefully. When the books are due, have her put them gently in the return bin.

Are you teaching your child to be kind to others?



If your preschooler learns to care about people and things, she will be more likely to care about doing well in school, too. She'll also be a better friend and classmate.

Are you helping your child become kind and caring? Answer *yes* or *no* to the questions below to find out:

___ **1. Do you model** caring by thanking, helping and showing respect to your child and others?

___ **2. Do you nurture** your child's sense of appreciation by reminding her to thank others in person and by having her draw thank-you pictures?

___ **3. Do you encourage** your child to do random acts of kindness, such as offering to share a new book?

___ **4. Do you teach** your child how to take care of living things, such as plants or pets?

___ **5. Do you encourage** your child to think about others' feelings?

How well are you doing?

If you answered mostly *yes*, you are promoting caring and kindness in your child. Mostly *no* answers? Try those ideas in the quiz.

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Make the most of read-alouds during family reading time



Experts agree that reading with your child is the best way to prepare her for school success.

And it's something that you and your child can do every day.

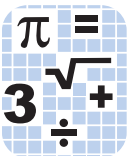
To make reading aloud a great experience:

- **Take a moment** before you start reading to look at the book. Ask your child what she thinks the book is about. Can she get some ideas from the picture on the cover?
- **Read a few pages** and then pause to ask your child a question or two. A great question to ask is: "What do you think will happen next in this story?" This encourages your child to make a prediction. Predicting is an important skill for reading comprehension.

- **Hold your child's interest.** Try using a different voice for each character. Ask your child, "What do you think this character sounds like? Can you make your voice do the character's voice?" Encourage her to act out some of the characters' movements, too!
- **Let her read to you.** If your child is heading to kindergarten in the fall, she may be able to read some of the words in the book. Or, she may know a few sight words. Encourage her to point to a word if she knows it. Then give her the opportunity to read it.
- **Create anticipation.** With a longer book, stop at an exciting place so your child will look forward to reading again the next day.

Source: "Make the Most of Reading Aloud," ReadWriteThink, International Literacy Association.

Show your preschooler that math is a natural part of life



Early childhood is a great time to show your child that math is not only fun, it's a natural part of his daily

life, too. Nearly everything your child does involves math. Each time he gets dressed, for example, he follows a sequence. That's a basic math skill.

Here are some other ways to help your child become aware of the math around him:

- **Look for numbers everywhere.** Search together for numbers your child knows. If he doesn't recognize numbers yet, point them out to him.
- **Estimate.** Say to your child, "I think you can finish your sandwich in 10 bites. Let's see." Then help him count the bites as he takes them.
- **Look for patterns.** Help your child find patterns on sheets, curtains and clothing. "Your shirt has a red stripe, then a yellow stripe, then a red stripe, then a yellow stripe."
- **Have a "shape of the day."** In the morning, show your child a shape. "Look at your plate. The shape of your plate is a circle. We're going to have a circle hunt today!" Throughout the day, point out circles where you see them. Praise your child when he points one out.
- **Sequence.** Preschool children love daily routines and knowing what's going to happen next. Talk about the course of the day. "First, I'll drop you off at preschool. After preschool is over, Dad will pick you up. Then, you will come back to our house to play."

Q: I'm worried about my four-year-old son's writing ability. His older sister started writing her name when she was his age. Meanwhile, my son has not really mastered a stick figure yet. What can I do to help him? He's supposed to go to kindergarten in less than a year.

Questions & Answers

A: Children develop different skills at different rates. It is not unusual for a four-year-old boy to seem a little behind a four-year-old girl in developing fine motor skills. (These are the small hand muscle skills used for writing and drawing.) Girls seem to develop fine motor skills a little sooner than many boys do.

So don't worry too much at this time. Instead, introduce your son to activities that will strengthen his skills. Together:

- **Play with play dough** or clay. Squeezing and rolling dough develops hand muscles.
- **Finger-paint.** You can use real finger paint if you want, but children also enjoy "painting" in shaving cream and pudding.
- **Put together puzzles** to help build hand-eye coordination.
- **Play with building block** toys that snap together. Many children enjoy doing this type of activity for long periods of time.
- **Experiment** with different writing tools. Start with markers, then try chalk, crayons, and finally pencils.

Practical activities like dressing and undressing himself, combing his hair and brushing his teeth will also help your son develop his fine motor skills.

If you still have concerns after a few months, speak with his pre-K teacher or pediatrician.

The Kindergarten Experience

A positive mindset leads to math success



According to research, the brain's "emotion" and "intellect" centers are connected. They are permanently entwined.

What this means for your young student is that her mindset can affect her ability to solve math problems. Think about it: If she's nervous or upset about the worksheet in front of her, she may struggle to answer the questions. But if she's calm and confident, she'll likely do much better.

To encourage a positive mindset:

- **Remind** your child that effort leads to achievement. Does your child claim she can't do math because she's "just not smart"? That implies people are either born intelligent or not. But that isn't true. Buckling down can lead to smarts.
- **Send** the right message. Instead of saying, "That problem looks really hard," say, "That problem looks intriguing." If your child worries about something being too difficult, she may decide she can't do it. But if it's *interesting*—not necessarily hard or easy—she might approach it more positively.
- **Teach** your child to relax. If jitters get the best of her when she's faced with a math problem, have her take a deep breath. Suggest that she picture something happy or fun. Remind her that she knows more than she thinks she does. If you can help her calm her nerves before she picks up her pencil, she'll have a better chance for success!

Source: S. Sparks, "Positive Mindset May Prime Students' Brains for Math," Education Week.

Reinforce the concept of time with your kindergartner

Teachers put a lot of effort into teaching students about the concept of time. And there's a lot for kindergartners to learn. How long is a *second*, *minute*, *hour* and *day*? How about a *week*, *month* and *year*? What are *past*, *present* and *future*?

A real mastery of time doesn't come until later in the elementary years. But the more you can do now to help your child understand time, the better.

Have your child:

1. **Select a task to do.** He could choose to jump up and down 50 times, draw a picture, make his bed, or eat a bowl of cereal.
2. **Estimate how many minutes** it will take him to complete the task.
3. **Use a timer or stopwatch to track** the time it actually takes to complete the task.



4. **Check to see how close** his estimate was to the actual time it took.

If your child does this—estimating and verifying time—for several tasks, his sense of time will improve.

Learning to work with others leads to academic success



There's a lot to be said for encouraging children to show leadership. But, let's face it—some kids are just plain bossy. They won't take turns. They won't share. They won't listen to what anyone says.

Your child will be expected to work with others throughout her school career. She'll be more successful if she knows how to be a team player.

To help your child learn how to be a contributor rather than a dictator:

- **Have family members** take turns making some decisions for the

group—from which movie to watch to what to have for dinner.

- **Establish some basic house rules.** For example, if one child cuts the cake, the other gets to choose the first piece. If one child chooses the game, the other gets the first turn.
- **Teach fair ways** to make decisions. Have your children play "rock, paper, scissors" to see who gets on the computer first. Flip a coin to decide who takes the first bath.
- **Praise your child** when you see her being a team player. "That was nice of you to let your sister pick the cookie she wanted first."