Early Childhood
Parents®
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December 2017
Vol. 22, No. 4
St. Helen Catholic School

Help your child build literacy skills during the holidays

The holiday season creates many opportunities for families to spend time together. Why not weave reading into some of that time?

Here are some effective ways to strengthen your family bond and your preschooler's literacy skills:

- **Blend reading** into your holiday activities, such as cooking and baking. Read part of a recipe to your child. Have him retrieve an ingredient from the pantry. Then read directions, such as, "Stir for one minute." Help your child carry out the instructions.
- **Get cozy with your child.** In many regions, December means cold temperatures. So grab a blanket, bundle up and read several books together. If you're experiencing warm weather, have a reading picnic outdoors instead.
- **Listen to books.** Sometimes your eyes and hands are busy, such as during a car trip to visit family. Why not listen to an audiobook with your child and discuss it?
- **Trade stories with your child.** Tell him a story about how you spent winter breaks when you were his age. Then have him tell you a story about something he would like to do (or has already done) during break. Write down his story and ask him to draw pictures to go along with it.
- **Have a special read-aloud night.** Turn off the TV and other devices. Grab a snack and read your family's favorite holiday books together.

Include your preschooler in family tasks

Most preschoolers love the special activities and events that happen this month. But what they want most of all is to be part of what you are doing. To include your child:

- **Give her a role** in family rituals and traditions. If you always send a card to a relative who lives far from you, forego a store-bought card this year. Instead, let your child decorate a folded piece of construction paper. Then you can write a short note inside.
- **Put her to work!** Remember, preschoolers *want* to help. Your child can stir batter. She can help set the table. She can get the mail from the mailbox. Anytime you are about to do a little task, think to yourself, "Can my child do this instead?"
- **Build in some time for her.** As you do errands with your child, take five minutes to stop and look at a colorful display. Make her favorite lunch and sit down to share it with her. Activities like these let your child know you have time for her—no matter how busy you are.

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Do you know what your child is learning during playtime?

Studies show that preschoolers learn a lot through play. But have you ever wondered just what your child is learning while he's having fun? Consider that:

- **Art inspires** creativity and helps your child coordinate hand muscles. Supervise while he cuts, colors, glues and tapes—and marvel at his masterpieces!
- **Pretending strengthens** your child's imagination. Puppets, dolls, props and costumes prompt him to wonder, "How would someone feel in this situation?" "What might they do or say?"
- **Music draws** your preschooler in, improving his listening, movement and rhythm. Practice singing, playing instruments and moving to the beat.
- **Building things encourages** your child to plan, count and figure things out. Blocks, boxes and puzzle pieces can motivate him to build.
- **Playing games helps** your child to cooperate and learn sportsmanship. It also helps him learn letters, numbers and words.
- **Reading builds** attention span, language skills and imagination. It's a perfect activity to do every day!

"Play is the highest form of research."

—N.V. Scarfe

Too much screen time can delay your preschooler's verbal skills

It's tempting to hand your child your smartphone when you need to get something done. After all, it keeps him entertained and frees you up to take care of your responsibilities. Perfect, right? Not necessarily.

Studies show that young children who spend too much time playing on smartphones or tablets are more likely to have a speech delay than their peers who are less plugged in. Although the research was done on babies and toddlers, the lessons learned may apply to preschoolers, too. In fact, the American Academy of Pediatrics suggests preschool-age children spend no more than one hour per day in front of a screen.

Of course, limiting your child's screen time is easier said than done. Tablets, smartphones, and computers are everywhere, and your youngster likely uses them at home and at preschool or daycare. But there are effective ways to restrict your child's access to screens:

- **Make unplugged playtime** a priority. When your child is bored, go outside and play together! Draw with chalk. Blow bubbles. If it's cold outside, play some games indoors.
- **Keep bedrooms technology-free.** If there's no TV, tablet or computer in your child's room, he won't constantly be tempted by it.
- **Monitor your own screen time.** It's tough enforcing screen-time limits on your child if you're always on your own smartphone. So walk the walk: Try to limit the hours you spend with your devices.

Source: Academy of Pediatrics, "Handheld screen time linked with speech delays in young children," ScienceDaily, niswc.com/ec_noscreen.

Are you building your preschooler's vocabulary skills?

The years between three and five are critical for your child's language development. Are you doing the kinds of things that will develop your preschooler's vocabulary? Answer *yes* or *no* to the questions below to find out:

___**1. Do you use** specific words to name things in your environment when talking with your child?

___**2. Do you build on words** your child already knows by using synonyms—different words that mean the same thing—and descriptive words? When she says "big bird," you could say "large green parrot."

___**3. Do you read aloud** and look at pictures with your child, explaining words and images?

___**4. Do you play word games,** such as showing your child an object and having her name it?

___**5. Do you encourage** your child to use words like *happy* or *angry* to describe her feelings?

How well are you doing?

Each *yes* answer means you're enhancing your child's vocabulary. For *no* answers, try those ideas from the quiz.

Early Childhood Parents make the difference!

Practical Ideas for Parents to Help Their Children. ISSN: 1523-1267

For subscription information call or write: The Parent Institute®, 1-800-756-5525, P.O. Box 7474, Fairfax Station, VA 22039-7474. Fax: 1-800-216-3667. Or visit: www.parent-institute.com.

Published monthly September through May.
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Publisher: L. Andrew McLaughlin.
Publisher Emeritus: John H. Wherry, Ed.D.
Editor: Rebecca Hasty Miyares.

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Research shows that taking naps can improve learning

You're not the only one who could use a nap. Your child could, too! According to research, young kids who take regular naps have an easier time learning new things. Not only that, their memories are stronger, so they retain what they've learned much better. That's because, during sleep, the brain "replays" what it took in that day, creating solid recollections.

Unfortunately, many children stop taking naps once they reach preschool. That's a shame, because kids this age need 11-13 hours of sleep each day, and they may not get it all at night. Naps are a great way to make up for missing shut-eye.

To encourage your child to take naps:

- **Create a routine.** Whether she has preschool every day or not, have your child wake up around the same time each morning and go to bed at the same time at night. Also assign a regular time for her to nap. The more consistent her sleeping habits, the better rested she may be overall.
- **Offer calm surroundings.** Your child may have trouble drifting off if the TV is blaring or all the lights are on. Turn them off and consider playing some quiet music in the background. A soothing atmosphere is ideal for napping.
- **Limit caffeine and sugar.** No, your child doesn't drink coffee. But does she sip soda or iced tea, or eat chocolate and other candy? These are all sources of caffeine, sugar, or both. Don't let these sleep-stealers interfere with her ZZZs!

Source: M. Sandoval and others, "Words to Sleep On: Naps Facilitate Verb Generalization in Habitually and Nonhabitually Napping Preschoolers," *Child Development*, niswc.com/ec_napswork.

Strengthen your preschooler's ability to recall information

The ability to remember as much as possible of what she hears and sees will contribute greatly to your child's success in school. In addition to talking to her about experiences every day, try these simple activities to help strengthen her memory:

- **Read nursery rhymes** and familiar stories. Nursery rhymes are especially effective because they contain patterns. Your child will learn to recognize these patterns which will then trigger her memory.
- **Hide a few items** as your child watches. Then have her retrieve the items from the places you hid them. As she gets better at this, hide more items. Or hide the items and then do another activity. After time has passed, challenge her to find them.
- **Play "I'm going on a trip."** Say to your child, "I'm going on a trip and I'm packing pajamas." Your child must repeat what you said, and then add something. Example: "I'm going on a trip and I'm packing pajamas and a toothbrush." At first your child may be able to remember only one or two items. Expand the game as she gets better at recalling.
- **Ask your child to teach you.** After you teach her a new skill, such as sorting her toys, ask your child to teach *you* how to do it. This will help her remember the steps to follow.

Q: After behaving well all year, my preschooler has suddenly started acting up. His preschool teacher reports he is distracted, chatty and often just "doesn't listen." Could this be in anticipation of the upcoming holidays?

Questions & Answers

A: Certainly! You don't mention other changes in your son's life or in the school routine. So, the short answer to your question could well be: "It's December."

The decorations, parties, TV commercials and other trappings of the holiday season can easily overstimulate a five-year-old child.

Transition is another issue. Your child has been in preschool about four months. Now a break from school looms. Your son will have to adjust to a change in routine, then a change back to his school routine.

You can't "cure" December behavior. But you can work to minimize it. Here are some tips:

- **Keep your regular routine** while preschool is still in session. Resist the temptation to take your child to a holiday event on a school night. Put away, for now, the big tin of cookies from Grandma. Your child needs sleep and regular meals.
- **Find outlets** for physical energy. Unless it's dangerously cold, bundle him up and go outside for a little while each day.
- **Cut way down** on TV time. Screen time can distract your child even more. And he can do without all those holiday toy commercials.

Your son will likely settle right back into a successful routine in January. Consult his teacher or doctor for advice if problems continue beyond that point.

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The Kindergarten Experience

Keep learning alive over the winter break

You and your child deserve a break from the busy school year! But that doesn't mean learning has to stop. You and your child can enjoy building important skills over the winter break if you:

- **Play games.** Sneak learning into activities such as playing store (math), acting out a story (reading) and playing Simon Says (listening and following directions).
- **Explore.** Visit a museum, see a show or take a nature walk. Plan new and exciting adventures.
- **Cook.** Use reading, math and science to follow a recipe.
- **Talk and listen.** This builds vocabulary and communication skills. Discuss daily life and ask questions that require creative thinking, such as, "What would it be like to live in outer space?"
- **Visit the library.** Take note of any special holiday hours so you can be sure to fit in a trip over the break. Set aside time for daily reading.
- **Exercise.** Build your child's muscles and prevent cabin fever by going outside or building a safe, indoor obstacle course.
- **Limit screen time.** Instead of filling your vacation with digital devices, set reasonable limits. Make a list of screen-free ideas.
- **Practice manners.** The holiday season often includes a special dinner or a visit to someone's home. This is a great opportunity for your child to practice polite and respectful behavior.

Boost attendance by keeping your kindergartner healthy

Winter is the season when many children contract colds, flu, strep throat and a host of other ailments. Unfortunately, this often results in missed days of school.

While it is impossible to keep your child from ever getting sick, take steps to give her the best chance of staying healthy—and staying in school.

Here's how:

- **Make sure your child** gets 10 to 12 hours of sleep every night.
- **Have your child** wash her hands as soon as she walks in the door from school. This prevents the spread of many diseases.
- **Make sure your child** wears proper protective clothing if you live in a cold climate. Much of a person's body heat escapes through the head, so wearing a hat is a great idea on a cold day.

- **Keep your child** up-to-date on medical visits and vaccinations.
- **Feed your child** a healthy diet.
- **Avoid exposing** your child to people who are already sick.

A winter poem can boost your kindergartner's writing skills

Looking for a simple project that will give your kindergartner's emerging writing skills a boost? Help him create a winter poem! It's easy with the following steps:

1. **Write five sentences** that begin with, "In winter, I … ." Then add a different sense (*see, hear, touch, taste, smell)* to each sentence and leave space for your child to add a word.
2. **Discuss what each sense means.** Your child may need examples, such as, "Remember when we heard leaves crunching under our feet in the fall?" "Remember when we smelled the grass after it was cut in the summer?"
3. **Spend time observing winter.** What does your child sense inside? Outside? While doing errands? Bring the poem with you, and help him fill in the blanks.
4. **Help your child choose a title** for the poem. Encourage him to add illustrations and his name.

Source: "Instant Poetry! A Writing Exercise," Education.com, niswc.com/winter-poem.