

Stimulating a Child's Mind:

A GUIDE FOR PARENTS





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DEveloping the Cognitive Potential of Preschoolers
from Disadvantaged Backgrounds (DECODE)



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Introduction

Dear Parents,

In today's fast-changing world, understanding your preschool children's cognitive development is crucial. You play a vital role in one of the most important stages of their growth. Preschoolers learn and grow more rapidly than at any other time, with each day offering new chances for development.

This handbook is an informative guide to help you understand how your preschool child learns and grows. It focuses on practical tips and effective strategies to support your child's cognitive development.

Every moment is a learning opportunity for your child, and as parents and caregivers, your role is invaluable. You shape their experiences and are their first teachers. Remember, every small step you take to support their development helps build a better future for them. Your support and guidance are key to creating a positive, healthy future for your children.

1. Cognitive development

1.1 Discovering the world through perception

Author: Alja Krevel

What is perception?

Perception is the complex process by which people organize and make sense of the sensory information they get from their surroundings. We perceive the world around us through five senses: sight, hearing, touch, taste and smell. These multiple sense modalities give us rich perceptual information about the world and things that we are doing.

What are some key concepts of perception?



Visual perception is the process of making sense of what you see. This is crucial for learning, communicating, and navigation. It helps children understand where things are in the room and how they relate to each other, it even helps them use their eyes and hands together, like when catching a ball.



Auditory perception is the ability to understand and interpret sounds, which is important for communication. It helps children recognize a familiar voice in a noisy room and localize a specific sound.



Tactile perception is the process of interpreting information through touch, which is important for physically interacting with the environment. Children use tactile perception to explore textures and temperature. It even helps them to name an object without seeing it.



Olfactory perception is the ability to recognize and interpret smells, which often have emotional and social implications. It can also relate to memory, as children can remember and recognize certain smells.



Gustatory perception is about the sense of taste, which is strongly connected to the sense of smell in creating the overall experience of flavors. With the help of gustatory perception, children can learn to tell special tastes of different foods and tell them apart based on intensity of flavour.

How does perception develop in children?



Birth – 9 Months

Children start using their senses to learn about what's around them. They:

- can see colors and things that are a bit far away
- try to copy sounds they hear
- put toys in their mouth and touch things around them



7–18 Months

Children start using what they sense to change how they play and explore. They:

- start to play with things differently, like squishing play dough or mashing their food
- notice things in the way and move around them, like crawling around the table to get a toy
- change how they walk based on what they're walking on, like stepping carefully on rocky ground



16–24 Months

Children keep getting better at using their senses to figure out how to interact with things around them. They:

- love playing with water and sand
- enjoy tickling games



21–36 Months

Children start to use their senses smarter and change how they behave while playing and exploring. They:

- copy grown-ups while coloring, like drawing lines or circles
- understand and act carefully when holding something delicate, even in pretend play, like tiptoeing with a pretend tea cup.

How can you help your child develop their perception skills?

Giving your child a mix of experiences is like a brain workout – it strengthens and shapes their little minds. Let's take a look at some fun activities that can boost your child's perceptual development.

Birth – 9 Months

Create a captivating space for them by putting up mirrors and colorful toys where they can see them. Sing sweet lullabies or your favorite tunes - your voice is a symphony to them. Introduce them to a variety of objects with different colors, sounds, and textures.

7–18 Months

At this stage, your toddler is ready to dive into sensory play! Create a treasure basket filled with items of different textures, smells, and sounds. Think of soft fabrics, jingling bells, or even a spice sachet.

16–24 Months

Pick a storybook and make it come alive with your voice - whisper like the wind, roar like a lion, or squeak like a mouse. Moving around while you read makes it even more fun.

21–36 Months

Your little one is becoming quite the explorer now. Spark their curiosity by asking exciting questions, for example: "How does the paint feel squishing between your fingers?" or "What shapes can you see in the clouds?"

1.2 Understanding your child's attention

Author: Alja Krevcl

What is attention?

Attention processes are crucial for effective functioning in everyday life. Imagine the countless sounds, sights, and sensations around us - attention helps children to not get overwhelmed and focus on what matters. Attention can be active or passive. When children concentrate because they want to, like when they decide to build a tower with blocks, it's active attention. On the other hand, if something like a loud noise captures their attention without them trying, that's passive attention.

What are some key concepts of attention?



Focused attention: Picture a room full of children talking. If your child hears their name and responds, they're using focused attention. They're able to pick out what's important amongst everything that's happening around them.



Sustained attention: This is the ability to focus on one thing for a continuous period. Research suggests that sustained attention improves to age 10 and then stays more or less the same until it starts to decline in elderly years.



Selective attention: It involves being able to choose to attend to a certain stimulus while tuning other things out, for example reading a book and tuning out noise on the playground.



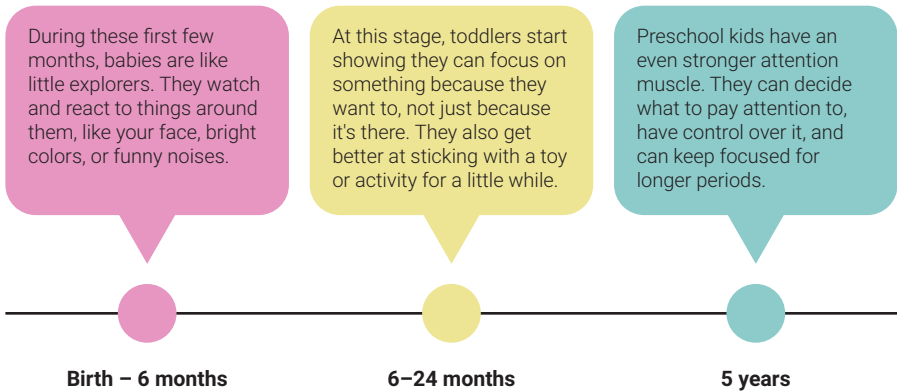
Divided attention: When your child is able to pay attention to more than one thing at a time, like coloring while listening to a story, they are using divided attention.



Joint attention: This happens when you and your child are paying attention to the same thing. For example, if you both are looking at a picture book and talking about the images, you're sharing a focus. This is important because it's connected to how children learn about the world and communicate with others.

It's important to understand that children need to keep their focus for different tasks, and this requires a mix of thinking, feeling, and motivation. Sometimes, if a child is very stressed, it might make it hard for them to pay attention.

How does attention develop in children?



As children grow, their attention becomes more directed, controlled, and lasts for longer periods. They become more systematic in how they use their attention. Understanding attention is key because it's the foundation of learning. If children can pay attention, they can also control themselves better and learn to function in our complex world.

How can you help your child develop their attention?

As parents, fostering the attention skills of your little ones is a remarkable step in laying the foundation for their cognitive and social development. Here are some stimulating activities and supportive strategies to cultivate and enhance attention in preschool children:

Activities for improving attention and focus:

Focus games

Engaging in board games can be an excellent way to strengthen attention.

Controlled screen time

Educators suggest limiting screen time to about 1 hour or less per day for children 2 to 5 years old.

Reading

Sharing a story with your child can be one of the most enriching activities. Ask questions like: „What do you think will happen next?“ or „Can you find the little mouse on this page?“ This not only captivates attention but also nurtures inquisitiveness and comprehension.

Puzzles

Whether it's a 10-piece animal puzzle or a more elaborate jigsaw, this is a sure way to keep young minds engaged.

Additional strategies to increase attention span:

Physical activity breaks

Sprinkle in periods of physical activity throughout the day. These breaks can revitalize their energy and help maintain focus during quieter activities.

Establish routines

Consistent daily routines can immensely benefit children. Knowing what to expect can reduce anxiety and help them concentrate better. Whether it's a set time for reading or puzzles, the predictability can be conducive to attention development.

Remove distractions

Create an attention-friendly environment by minimizing distractions. If your child is playing a focus game or doing a puzzle, turn off the TV or music, and ensure the space is relatively quiet and clutter-free.

1.3 Unlocking the wonders of memory

Author: Sabina Ograjšek

What is memory?

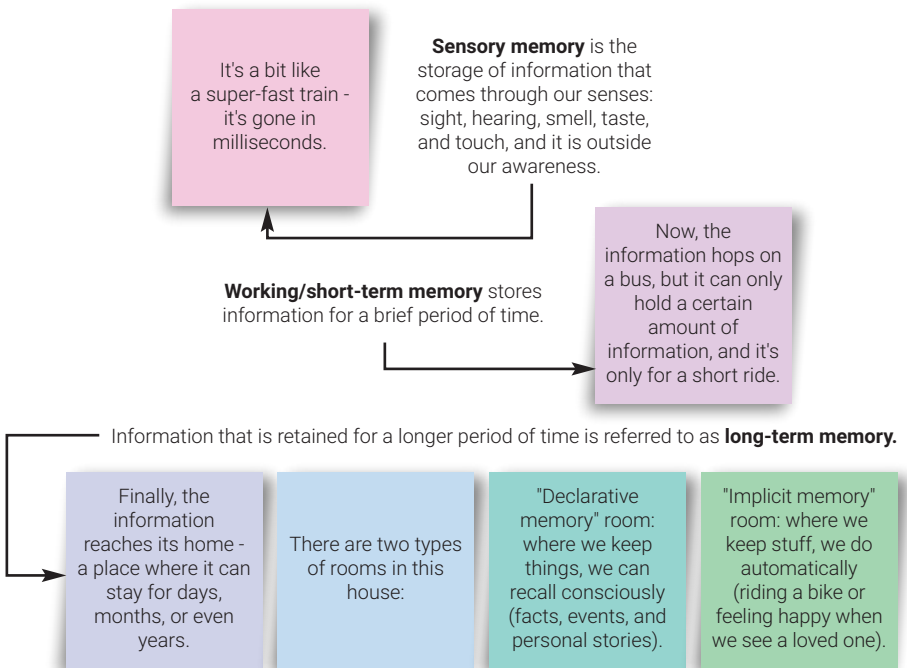
Memory refers to the cognitive processes of collecting, encoding, storing, retaining, and later bringing up information. If I were to ask you a question like „What did you do yesterday?“ or „Where did you go on holiday last year?“ you would probably know the answer, and that's because of memory, an essential cognitive process. Memory defines what we've done, who and what we know, and who we are.

What are some key concepts of memory?

To better understand the memory system is good to know some basic facts related to memory processes. There are three stages in the learning and memory process: encoding, storage, and retrieval:

- **Encoding** is defined as the initial learning of information.
- **Storage** refers to maintaining information over time.
- **Retrieval** is the ability to access information when needed.

Forgetting occurs when our retrieval attempts are unsuccessful. These various processes take place within the memory system. Three essential components of memory processing are:



How does memory develop in children?

Even as newborns, babies already have short-term and long-term memory abilities. Toddlers and preschoolers may use memory strategies unconsciously, but by age three, they become aware of their memory capacity. By age six, children are aware when they need to remember something, but they may struggle with planning to facilitate memory. As your child grows, their memory strategies improve through practice and experience.

How can you help your child develop their memory?

Memory is important for many things in your child's development - from focusing on tasks, reasoning, talking, understanding language, reading, social skills, and math.

As a parent, you play a crucial role in encouraging a child's memory development during the early years. There are several practical strategies that you can employ to support memory development in children:



1.4 Nurturing your child's thinking

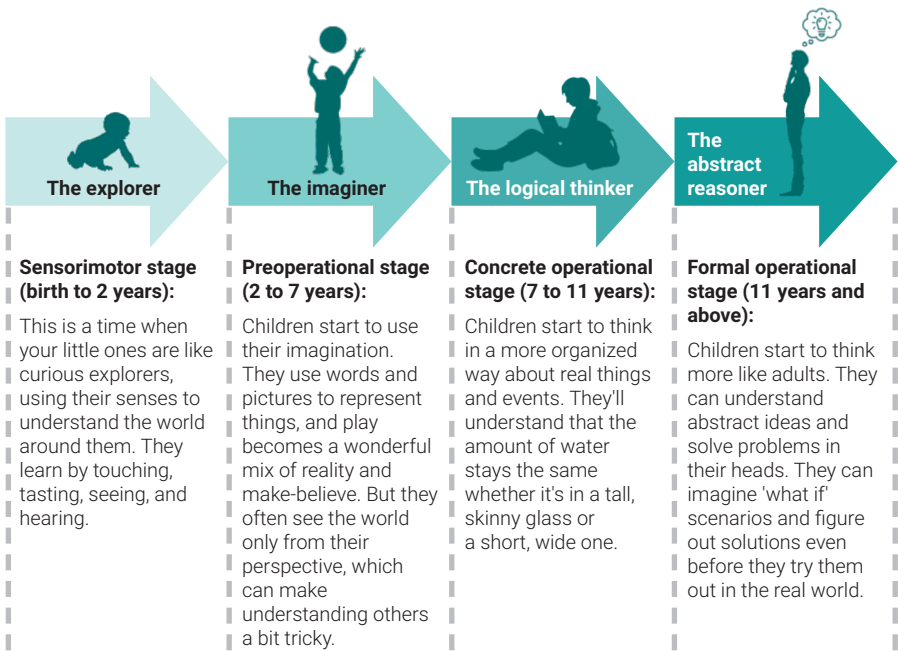
Author: Maruša Laure

What is thinking?

Thinking isn't just one thing. It involves a variety of mental activities like judging, reflecting, problem-solving, and creating. Our thinking allows us to form beliefs and opinions, process information, and interact with the world around us. It's a vibrant and fascinating part of our everyday lives.

How does thinking develop in children?

Children's thinking skills develop over time and are influenced by their experiences and environment. They are like little explorers, constantly constructing their understanding of the world around them. One famous theory of cognitive development was proposed by psychologist Jean Piaget. Piaget saw children as active learners, always building and adapting their knowledge.



What are some key concepts in child thinking?

Children's thought processes might seem like a mystery at times, but there are some key ways they generally approach the world. Understanding these can help you, as parents, better support your child's learning journey. Here's a breakdown of these thought processes:

Thinking of things not in sight

involves a child's ability to picture something in their mind, even when it's not immediately visible. For example, a child might play with a favorite toy car and imagine driving it later.

Focusing on the one thing at the time

A child may mistake a tall, narrow cup for a taller, wider one, as they focus on height rather than width, leading them to believe the tall cup has more juice.

Seeing things from their own point of view

Children often view the world from their own perspective, making it challenging to understand others' viewpoints. For example, in a game of hide-and-seek, children may believe if they can't see you, you can't see them.

How can you help your child develop their thinking skills?

As parents, you can play a significant role in the development of your child's thinking skills. Here are some ways you can support your child's cognitive development:

■ **Play together**

Simple games, like hide-and-seek, help children understand cause and effect. Engage with your child in games that encourage thinking and problem-solving.

■ **Be a role model in thinking**

Talk to your child about your own thought processes. For example, when you think out loud about how to solve a particular problem, you demonstrate how thinking skills are used.

■ **Encourage planning and reasoning**

Involve your child in everyday decisions, such as choosing the route to the store or understanding why some toys need batteries. This will encourage their planning and logical thinking abilities;

■ **Support curiosity**

Respond to your child's questions and encourage their curiosity. Exploration and asking questions are key to developing thinking skills.

■ **Be patient**

Understanding that thinking skills develop gradually is important. Support your child, even if they face challenges in thinking and reasoning.

1.5 Going on a language adventure

Author: Sabina Ograjšek

What is language?

Language refers to the use of sounds, signs or written symbols for the purpose of communication or self-expression. From their very first cries, human beings communicate with the world around them. Infants communicate through sounds (crying and cooing) and through body language (pointing and other gestures). However, sometime between 8 and 18 months of age, a major developmental milestone occurs when infants begin to use words to speak.

What are some key concepts of language?

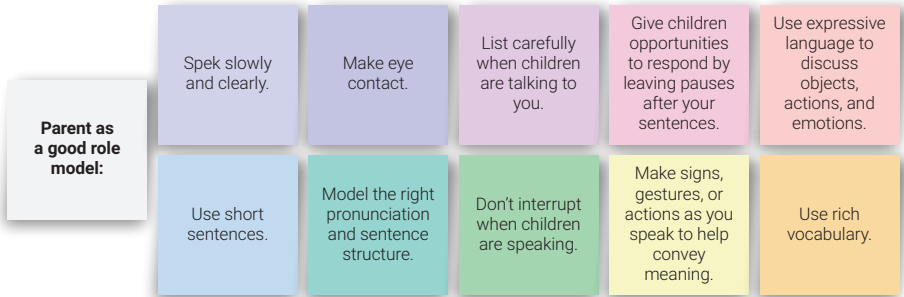
- **Sounds:** Language involves the sounds we make when we speak.
- **Words:** Language is made up of words that have meanings and can be put together to express ideas.
- **Sentences:** Language uses sentences, which are groups of words that convey complete thoughts and ideas.
- **Meanings:** Words and sentences have meanings that allow us to understand and communicate with each other.
- **Communication:** Language allows us to talk and understand each other.

How does language develop in children?

Language development in children primarily occurs during early childhood. All over the world, children learn to speak on roughly the same schedule. They usually produce their first recognizable words between 10-18 months of age and their first multi-word statements between 14-24 months of age. By the age of 3, children are often able to form quite long sentences. Between the ages of 4 and 7, children make significant progress in understanding other people's point of view and expressing themselves in a clear and organized way. They become better at considering how their words and stories are perceived by others and can create meaningful conversations and tell stories.

How can you help your child develop their language skills?

Parents play a crucial role in children's language development and are fundamental in providing opportunities, creating supportive environments, and facilitating interactions to enhance their children's language development and emergent literacy. As children often learn by observing and copying adults, as a parent you need to make sure that you are modelling good speaking and language skills. Here are some tips on how to be a good role model for your child:



Through different behaviours, beliefs, and practices, parents shape their children’s language learning experiences, thereby contributing to their language skills acquisition. As a parent, you can create a language-rich home environment by talking, reading books aloud, singing songs and providing numerous opportunities for your child to explore and communicate. Below are some strategies that can help you create a stimulating environment:

	<p>Conversations</p>	<p>Have frequent, meaningful conversations with the child. Ask open-ended questions. Expand what child says by repeating and building on it. Encourage the child’s communication attempts. Choose different topics for conversations.</p>
	<p>Reading</p>	<p>Make reading a daily activity. Choose age-appropriate books. Talk to your child about words they don’t know and explain the meaning of these words to them. When reading, point to the words in the book as you say them. Engage them in the book by encouraging your child to talk, ask questions, to guess what will happen next. Read books with different themes alongside favourite books to expand their vocabulary.</p>
	<p>Singing</p>	<p>Sing to and with your child. Choose simple and repetitive lyrics. Choose different styles of music. Create songs with personalised lyrics related to the child. Use music to reinforce new concepts (e.g. learning the alphabet). Use music during daily routines.</p>
	<p>Playing and talking</p>	<p>Use new words and ask open-ended questions. Encourage your child to name the objects in the room. Respond to the child’s lead and provide simple descriptions of events that occur during play. Give instructions.</p>

2. Social-emotional development

Author: Alja Krevel

What is social-emotional development?

During their first few years, young children pick up crucial social and emotional skills, such as managing their emotions, sharing with peers, and following directions. These foundational skills are essential for developing literacy, numeracy, and other cognitive abilities critical for academic and lifelong success.

The key social-emotional competencies include:

- Self-awareness**
 - recognizing and understanding one's emotions and how they influence actions
- Self-management**
 - ability to regulate thoughts, emotions and behaviors across different situations
- Social awareness**
 - understanding and empathizing with people from diverse backgrounds and cultures
- Relationship skills**
 - vital for building and maintaining positive relationships with a diverse range of people
- Responsible decision-making**
 - considering ethics, safety, and the potential consequences of one's actions

How does social-emotional learning develop in children?

Social-emotional development in children is significantly influenced by their relationships with family members and caregivers, including those in childcare and preschool environments. Because the brain undergoes rapid development during early childhood, the quality of a child's early experiences can lay either a robust or fragile foundation for their future reactions and responses to the world around them.

How to support social-emotional development?

Supporting your child's social-emotional development is crucial for their overall well-being. Here are some practical ways to foster this development:



Create a safe space and a positive climate

Ensure your child has a special, secure space where they can self-regulate when necessary, giving them a sense of safety and emotional control. Foster open dialogue and active listening.



Model appropriate behaviors

As children often learn by watching their parents, exhibit behaviors such as sharing, expressing gratitude, being considerate, and openly communicating your emotions. Your actions will serve as an invaluable lesson on interacting with others.



Reinforce positive behavior

Offer praise and positive reinforcement when your children display beneficial social behaviors. Recognizing their efforts and good conduct encourages them to continue these behaviors. Give your child specific praise for their actions, e.g. "You did a good job cleaning up after yourself."



Teach empathy

Encourage your child to consider the feelings of others in various situations, which will help them develop a deeper understanding of others' emotions.



Promote cooperation

Provide your child with opportunities to engage and play with other kids through playdates, group activities, and team sports, which will teach them essential cooperation and teamwork skills.

3. Executive functions

Author: Alja Krevel

What are executive functions?

Executive functions are crucial self-regulating skills we utilize daily to accomplish almost everything. These skills and processes help us make plans, manage time, track multiple tasks, incorporate past knowledge in discussions, evaluate ideas, reflect on work, and make adjustments while thinking, reading, and writing.

Children with poor executive functioning may seem more disorganized than their peers, taking an unusually long time to get dressed or feeling overwhelmed by simple household chores. These children may struggle with planning projects, storytelling (verbally or in writing), organizing details sequentially, retrieving information from memory, initiating tasks, generating ideas independently, and retaining information while using it, such as remembering a phone number while dialing.

How do children develop executive function skills?

Children develop executive function skills from birth to adulthood, with positive interactions with adults playing a crucial role. Warm and supportive relationships with important adults can foster a sense of security, helping children develop positive relationships with parents and adults. This confidence is vital for exploring the world, developing independence, and honing problem-solving skills. Executive functioning is integral to academic success, physical and mental health, work productivity, and social competency.

How to support the development of executive function skills?

Here are five areas of executive functioning and some ideas how you can help with the development of executive functioning:

Organizing & prioritizing

Use a family calendar for commitments, organize playrooms with materials in distinct sections, and establish comfortable routines.

Thinking flexibility

When conflicts arise, try to guide your child to find a solution to the problem that is common to all.



Accessing working memory

You can divide an activity into steps and draw them for your child (e.g. steps for dressing up). This will make it easier for them to follow along in the activity, without the need to verbally remind them.

Self-monitoring

Evaluate the emotions the child has (concretely) experienced. You can read together a social story about emotions, challenges, social problems.






Play is also an excellent tool for enhancing executive function skills. Games, puzzles, and imaginative play can improve planning, organization, and decision-making abilities while providing fun and building essential life skills.

4. Unlocking your child's cognitive potential at home

Author: Maruša Laure





Create a nurturing environment

Your home is your child's primary learning space. Ensure it is a safe and nurturing environment that enables curiosity and exploration, balanced with proper supervision for safety.

	Express your love	Creating a warm and loving environment is crucial for your child's cognitive development. Small gestures of love, like a hug, a cuddle, or a comforting touch, can provide your child with a sense of security and emotional stability, fueling their confidence and mental well-being.
	Provide clean and safe environment	Ensure that the objects and toys your child plays with are clean and safe. Regularly check for potential hazards. Clean them regularly to maintain hygiene.
	Create structured personal spaces	Structure is essential for a child's cognitive development, promoting predictability and security. Having their own sleep area helps establish good sleep patterns, crucial for memory and focus. A separate play or learning area reduces distractions and encourages deep learning.
	Establish a routine	Routine and consistency offer a sense of security to your child. Establishing a consistent schedule within your home environment can support cognitive development and enhance their sense of predictability and safety.
	Minimize distractions	Distractions can often be obstacles on your child's path to cognitive development. By minimizing distractions like excessive screen time or noise, you can create a conducive environment for their learning and cognitive development.

Stimulate their minds

Setting the stage for your child's cognitive abilities involves surrounding them with a diverse range of stimuli and fostering their natural curiosity.

	Provide age-appropriate materials	Nurturing your child's cognitive abilities begins with a stimulating environment. Transform everyday items and situations into unique opportunities for learning. Simple toys like puzzles or building blocks can engage their minds and promote problem-solving and creativity.
	Regularly expose the child to reading materials	Ensure that reading materials such as picture books and storybooks are easily accessible in your home. Spend time reading to your child, using different voices and expressions to make the stories exciting and enjoyable.
	Make everyday conversations count	Every chat with your child can be an opportunity to learn and grow. Use your daily interactions to introduce new words, share interesting anecdotes, and foster a culture of curiosity and questioning.
	Play games that require thinking	Engage your child in games that involve thinking and problem-solving. Play puzzles, board games, memory games, or simple card games together. These activities stimulate their minds, enhance their critical thinking skills, and provide opportunities for social interaction.
	Embrace the world of letters and numbers	Incorporate letters and numbers into everyday activities. You can count steps and objects around you, sing the alphabet, spot letters in the environment, or use freely available online resources to enhance your child's learning experience.

Health and nutrition

A strong foundation for children's well-being begins with their health and nutrition. By providing nutritious meals and fostering an active lifestyle, we can support their growth, cognitive development, and overall well-being.



Offer nutritious meals

Provide your child with healthy meals and snacks that support their growth and cognitive development. Include a variety of fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and protein in their diet. Limit sugary snacks and drinks to promote overall health.








Promote an active lifestyle

Encourage physical activities that promote coordination, balance, and concentration. Play outdoor games, ball games, or engage in activities that get them moving. Physical play not only supports their physical development but also enhances their cognitive growth and social skills.

Foster love for learning /Encouraging Learning

Nurturing a love for learning is a powerful gift that can shape a child's future. Through strategies such as making learning enjoyable, following their interests, being a learning role model, embracing mistakes and growth, and encouraging curiosity and questioning, we can inspire a lifelong passion for learning.

	Make learning enjoyable	Create a positive association with learning by making it enjoyable. Incorporate games, hands-on activities, and interactive experiences that make learning engaging and fun.
	Follow their interests	Pay attention to your child's interests and tailor learning experiences accordingly. Encourage exploration of topics they find intriguing and provide resources, books, or materials related to their passions.
	Be a learning role model	Demonstrate your own love for learning by sharing your interests and engaging in intellectual pursuits. Let them see you reading books, seeking new knowledge, or pursuing hobbies that involve continuous learning.
	Embrace mistakes and growth	Foster a growth mindset by emphasizing that mistakes are opportunities for learning and growth. Encourage them to embrace challenges, persist through difficulties, and celebrate their efforts rather than solely focusing on outcomes.
	Encourage curiosity and questioning	Foster a sense of curiosity by encouraging your child to ask questions and explore the world around them. Support their natural curiosity by providing explanations, engaging in conversations, and encouraging them to seek answers through books, online resources, or hands-on exploration.

5. Understanding your child's needs based on assessment

Author: Sabina Ograjšek

Why is it important to assess your child's early development?

Tailoring education to your child

In the early years of your child's life, understanding their unique learning and development needs is key to giving them the support they need. Assessments play an important role in this understanding, offering a clear picture of your child's abilities and challenges. Evaluating your child's development and learning is therefore essential for several reasons:

Measuring progress

Assessing your child allows for the personalization of their learning experience, which means teacher can modify their teaching methods and materials to align with your child's unique strengths, interests, and pace of learning.

Spotting health and development concerns

Assessment shows where your child is excelling or where they might need extra attention, ensuring they don't fall behind and stay on track with their peers and educational milestones.

Identifying early intervention needs

Children's early years are crucial for spotting any developmental delays or health issues. With timely assessments, any concerns can be addressed early, greatly improving the chances of positive outcomes.

Contributing to research and trends

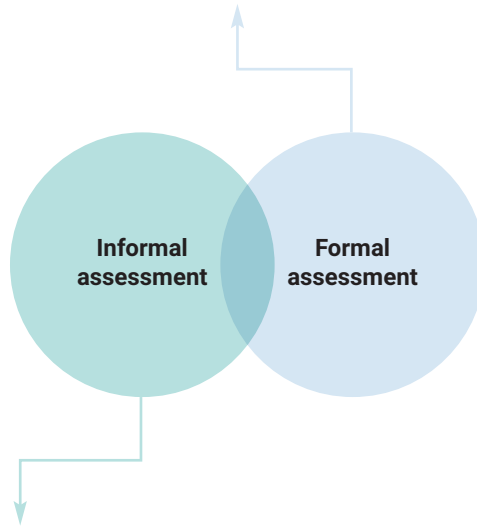
Early assessments can identify if your child is at risk of future academic challenges or if they require special educational support, setting in motion the help they need as soon as possible.

Beyond your child, these assessments help teachers and researchers understand early childhood behavior and learning, leading to improvements in educational practices and environments for all children.

What are the ways to evaluate your child's early development?

In the field of child development, there are two main types for assessment: formal and informal, each offering unique insights into your child's growth.

Formal assessment is structured, made by experts and typically used to measure specific skills or abilities. It helps see if a child is learning and growing the way most kids their age do.



Informal assessment is the less structured, more spontaneous way of understanding your child's development and is typically used to gather information about a child's interests, strengths and challenges. It involves observing your child in natural settings, noting how they interact, solve problems, and navigate their environment.

When assessing, it is crucial to consider the purpose of the testing, the child's age and developmental abilities, and the cultural context.

What is the parent's role in their child's assessment?

As a parent, your insights into your child's development are invaluable during assessments. You see sides of your child that may not be evident in a formal educational setting. By sharing what you know about your child's development, behavior, and learning patterns, you are a valuable source of information. You are also a key collaborator in interpreting and acting on your child's assessment results, playing an essential role in translating insights into meaningful action for their development and learning.

This allows teachers to create a well-rounded view of your child's abilities, paving the way for tailored educational strategies.

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