

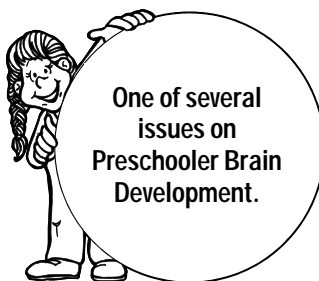
Motivation to Learn

Babies are born “wired to learn” and have inborn motivation to develop competencies. Think about all the learning your preschooler has done since birth. Your child’s early years are a time for extraordinary growth and change. Development during these early years provides the basis for learning and the motivation to succeed in school, work, and life.

A supportive and stimulating environment strengthens and affirms cognitive development, changing the very physiology of the brain, interlocking nature and nurture. A defining feature of a supportive environment is a responsible and responsive adult. Parents and caregivers promote development when they create learning experiences that build on and extend the child’s competence—experiences that are challenging, but within reach.

The vast majority of young children think they are just wonderful, capable of doing almost anything, and headed for success. Even when they approach tasks which they have previously failed, young children usually predict that they will succeed. Why is this so? Ironically, the self-confidence of most preschoolers comes, in part, from their limited ability to distinguish among their strengths and weaknesses—they confuse effort and ability. One reason why young children are so optimistic about themselves is that when they compare what they can do with what they did when they were younger, they can easily see how much more competent they are now. They conclude that “every day, in every way, I am getting better and better!” Despite the

optimistic picture of young children’s motivation, positive beliefs decline upon school entry. Two factors contribute. Children are developmentally better able to make social comparisons with others. And, adults start to compare a child’s performance to identified standards.



Motivating Motivation

We want to avoid “unmotivating” children. We want to encourage exploration, persistence, and enjoyment of mastering behaviors. We want to have children engage in an activity for its own sake, just because of the satisfaction it brings. We want children to expect success, seek challenges, and be self-confident.

When children enjoy learning, they learn more, comprehend what they learn better, and remember it longer. They are also more persistent and eager to do challenging work.

When it comes to maintaining and enhancing your child’s motivation, **how** you do it is more important than what you do. Child motivation is positively affected by:

- minimal pressure to perform
- ample choices
- opportunity to play with others
- warm and nurturing parents and caregivers

Use encouragement instead of praise. Give your child feedback, pointing out your preschooler’s accomplishments. Instead of general praise, which can sound empty and does not provide useful

information, be precise in your encouraging statements. For example, “good job” doesn’t help a child know what has been learned, and it loses its meaning when used for everything. On the other hand, “I can read every letter in your name. Your printing is clear and readable,” acknowledges what the child has accomplished.

Help children when they get discouraged. Build confidence by pointing out previous successes and persistence. If a child gets stuck on a task, help them to return to a part of the work the child is able to do. If a child is struggling to lace a shoe, say, “You got the lace through these three holes. Let’s see if you can get it through the others in the same way.”

Avoid saying, “That’s easy.” It’s tempting to tell a child who is struggling with a task, “That’s easy.” However, it makes a child feel stupid and incompetent. Instead, acknowledge the difficulty and/or offer a constructive suggestion.

Provide learning within a child’s reach. When learning is within reach, it takes a child just beyond existing ability and makes the activity fun. It’s not so easy as to be boring and not so difficult as to be frustrating. It’s fun!

Motivating Young Children’s Emerging Literacy

Here are tips to help you motivate your preschooler to be ready to learn, read, and write.

- Read stories you both enjoy.
- Build on a child’s existing understandings. Find books about familiar topics such as family or animals. To stretch your child, consider learning about families from other cultures or books about both familiar and unfamiliar animals. Let your child’s interests guide you.



- Connect the books you read to your child’s life experiences. For example, if you visit a lake, your child will likely be more interested in reading about lakes (boats, fishing, frogs, swimming) and will understand more of what is read.
- Let your child’s interests guide your choice of books. If your preschooler is interested in trucks, get and read books about trucks.
- While reading ask open-end questions to engage your child. If your child enjoys these questions, let your child become the storyteller.
 - *What would you do if that happened to you? How would you feel?*
 - *Have you ever seen a duck swimming? What does it look like?*
- Talk with your child about things that interest both of you.
- Provide materials for scribbling and “writing” in pretend play.
- Help your preschooler make signs and provide props (tickets or tablets) for dramatic play.
- Most of all, help your child see reading as something fun to do.

Resources:

- Eager to learn report (executive summary). (2003). <http://www.ciera.org/library/instrsrc/eagertolearn/efull.html>
- Eastman, G. (2003). UW-Extension child development seminar.
- Gonzales-Mena, J. (1999). *Learning involves skill and motive*. Minneapolis MN: Family Information Services.
- Seal, Karen. (2003). *Raising self-motivated children*. High/Scope Resources.
- Shonkoff, JP & Phillips, D.A. (Eds.) (2000). *From neurons to neighborhoods: communicating and learning*. Washington: D.C., National Academy Press.

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