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What Your Child Should Learn in Preschool

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Find out what skills you can expect your child to master at 2, 3, and 4 years old.

2-Year-Olds



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anyway)? A lot. Here, a snapshot of what you can expect your preschooler to master at ages 2, 3, and 4.

Preschool is getting plenty of play these days. When most of today's parents were tots, school for the under-5 set was fairly rare, but now you can tote your 2- to 4-year-old to daycare (many of which have preschool-appropriate curricula), Head Start programs, private or parochial preschools, even pre-K programs within the public school system. But what is your child likely to learn (beyond what he'd pick up

2-Year-Olds

You would think "academics" and "2-year-olds" are terms that rarely meet. And you'd mostly be right. School at this age is less about worksheets and lessons than "getting experience with becoming part of a group," says Ann Gorelow, preschool director of the Cliff Valley School, in Atlanta. "Kids should be introduced to sharing and taking turns, making friends, and developing language." That said, there is plenty more the littlest preschoolers can learn. No, your child won't be reading or penning her name, but later literacy has its roots in toddlerhood, says Ashlee Murphree, owner of Carpe Diem preschools in Dallas. Coloring and painting strengthen the muscles she'll later use to write. Exposure to printed material gets her ready to read. And it's not just books; twos love to see their own words written down -- such as when teachers ask a child to narrate what's happening in a picture. "That teaches them the constancy of the written word," a crucial foundation for reading, Gorelow says.

- **Talk to me:** Practicing the art of conversation -- what preschool experts call "cycles of conversation" -- is another goal for the year. Taking turns to talk is about a growing sense of respect for others -- an important piece of the school-preparation puzzle. Same goes for asking for permission before taking that red crayon.
- **Physical gains:** The biggie now is no surprise: toilet training! A preschool teacher's aim this year should be guiding each child, depending on her potty readiness, toward independent self-care (pulling up pants, washing hands). Meanwhile, fine motor skills still need lots of work; most twos use their whole fist to grab a crayon and move their whole arm to make marks

on paper.

3-Year-Olds



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A hallmark of the transition from 2 to 3 is the discovery of the world of friends. Three-year-olds love being with each other now, and caregivers should give them plenty of time for unstructured, imaginative play -- which helps them develop language skills, too, says Lynn Steinmiller, owner of Kids' World Preschool, in Perrysburg, Ohio.

- **The write stuff:** Writing is rudimentary, but practice is key. And not just on paper: "A teacher might pour sugar or sand on a cookie sheet so the children can 'write' with their fingers," Murphree says. Books are big; this is the year it really hits them that the words remain the same every time they're read. Also, at the end of this year, many threes are able to pick out sounds at the beginning of a word and to recognize rhymes, which are critical skills for reading success.
- **Count on it:** Most kids this age can count by rote, at least to 10 if not much higher. "Still, they might not be able to count 10 actual objects accurately," Gorelow says. The aim this year is to help them put numbers into everyday use, such as counting out four spoons for the four friends at their table.
- **I'll help myself, thanks:** By the end of this year, threes should be expected to take out -- and put away -- the items they use. "In an ideal classroom, things are organized in such a way that students can help themselves to what they need to start a game or complete a project," Gorelow says.

4-Year-Olds



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Kindergarten isn't what it used to be; some educators say it's more like what first grade used to look like a generation or more ago. What does that mean to your preschooler? Ratcheted-up expectations for the pre-K year. Preschool teachers have the dual job of continuing to stimulate social growth (and let kids be kids), while also preparing them academically for the

rigors of kindergarten.

- **See Spot run:** Don't panic; your child is not expected to graduate from preschool knowing how to read. But he should show that he's ready to make a start by identifying the starting sounds of words and being able to rhyme easily. And even if your child can't write letters, he should be able to visualize how to do so. This is also the time to introduce him to concepts of handwriting, such as how letters are formed from top to bottom, and how words are written from left to right across the page.
- **Class rules:** In most cases, the kindergarten your child

attends will have more kids and fewer teachers -- and possibly a longer day -- than he's accustomed to in preschool. That's why there's much emphasis in the pre-K year on increasing attention span, understanding rules, and following directions, Murphree says.

- **Playing it up:** Kids are far more adept now at playing cooperatively, which does not mean without conflict! Still, you'll find fours planning out play before they start, creating roles and plotlines, incorporating fairness, and taking turns more easily. Another nice change this year? Increased empathy. "Children are learning to be inclusive, inviting classmates to join them," Gorelow says. "Or, if not, they might let down their friends easily, saying 'I can't play right now, but we're still friends.'" These nuances of kindness and sensitivity will serve them well come big-kid school.

What Kids Learn All Around the Pre-K Room

It may seem like a lot of fun and games, but your child is actually learning important lessons as he plays.

Story corner: Just by listening and watching her teacher read *Go, Dog, Go!* your child is becoming familiar with basic literacy concepts, like reading left to right, and what words and letters are. Sometimes, if you walk by the book corner, you'll see preschoolers "reading" by turning the pages and narrating what they see -- a great precursor to real reading.

Puzzle table: Legos, and puzzles, and beads -- oh, my! Children improve their fine motor skills, concentration, and hand-eye coordination when they play these games. Working independently also gives them practice problem solving.

Sand/water table: The tools and toys help teach science concepts like cause and effect. Since there's no right or wrong with these materials, kids feel a sense of success when they play with them.

Science projects: The class hamster is a great tool for kids to observe living things and learn what they need to grow. Other science tools like scales and magnifying glasses allow kids to examine, experiment, predict, question, and problem-solve.

Circle time: Learning to sit patiently, saying good morning, and talking about the day's events is a key part of your child's day. This preschool town meeting gives her important practice for the skills she'll need to master for kindergarten.

Art area: Crayons, markers, safety scissors, glue, and paintbrushes are all great tools for mastering fine motor skills and hand-eye coordination. And children love to talk about their artwork -- it gives them practice with language and self-expression.

Block area: What isn't your child learning? She's gaining basic math skills when she counts them, identifies their shapes, and compares their sizes. Building houses, roads, and forts helps her hone spatial skills that will be helpful for geometry and physics later on.

Outdoor play: It looks like chaos, but all that activity helps kids learn what their bodies can do. Children need to move and experiment to master balance, improve coordination, and develop their muscles. Group activities on the playground also teach kids cooperation.

Sources: Debbie LeeKeenan, director, Eliot-Pearson Children's

School at Tufts University, in Medford, Massachusetts; Amy Flynn, director, Bank Street Family Center at Bank Street College of Education, in New York City.

The Parent-Teacher Conference



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By now, the teacher should know your child pretty well. This is your chance to tap into her expertise. Parents are often happily surprised to see amazing leaps in progress from the fall to the spring. "We have our kids draw self-portraits at the start of the year, and we save them in a folder," says Steinmiller. The kids then do the same project toward the end of the year, and the results, laid out for the parents at the conference, show just how much more proficient their little darling has become. But parent-teacher conference time is not just for the

teachers to prattle on about your child's progress. It's also a time for you to ask questions. Betty Hall, director of the Minee Subee Early Education & Childcare Center in Mt. Prospect, Illinois, offers these questions parents should ask:

- How does my child interact with other kids? There's no "right" way for children to be social, but you want to get an idea -- is he hanging around the edges? Joining in groups when asked? Is he the one asking others to join him?
- How does my child go about learning? Is she eager and receptive when presented with new tasks and ideas? Or slower and shy?
- How does he stack up developmentally? If the teacher sees evidence that your child is lagging behind in one or more areas, ask whether she's concerned or finds it normal (remember that the range of normal is quite wide).
- What can we do at home to supplement what she's learning here? When we read books, for example, should we ask questions about the story? Spell words? Point out rhymes?

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