

20 Tips for Parents from Preschool Teachers

Five teachers with a combined 90 years of experience share tips for parents of 2- to 5- year olds.

By Marguerite Lamb

Getting the Best from Your Child



I worry that my 3-year-old, Sophie, has a split personality. At school she cleans up her toys, puts on her shoes, and is entirely self-sufficient at potty time. At home, she whines whenever I ask her to pick up anything, insists I join her in the bathroom whenever she has to go, and lately has started demanding that I spoon-feed her dinner. Clearly, her teacher knows something I don't.

But then, what parent hasn't occasionally wondered: Why is my child better for everyone else than for me? The simple answer: Your child tests her limits with you because she trusts you will love her no matter what. But that doesn't mean you can't borrow a few strategies from the preschool teachers' playbook to get the best from your child. We asked educators from around the country for their tips so listen up -- and take notes!

Promoting Independence

While 3- and 4-year-olds still need plenty of parental help, our preschool experts agree that kids are typically able to do more than many of us think. Here's how you can encourage them:

- 1. Expect more.** Most people have a way of living up (or down) to expectations -- preschoolers included. "At school we expect the kids to pour their own water at snack, to throw away their plates, to hang up their jackets -- and they do," says Jennifer Zebooker, a teacher at the 92nd Street Y Nursery School, in New York City. "But then they'll walk out of the classroom and the thumb goes in the mouth and they climb into strollers." Raise the bar and your child will probably stretch to meet it.
- 2. Resist doing for her what she can do herself.** While it may be quicker and easier to do it yourself, it won't help to make your child more self-sufficient. Quick hint: Appeal to her sense of pride, suggests Donna Jones, a preschool teacher at Southern Oregon University's Schneider Children's Center in Ashland, Oregon. "Whenever I'm trying to get kids to dress, put jackets on, sit on chairs during meals and so on, I'll ask them: 'Do you want me to help you or can you do it yourself?' Those words are like magic," promises Jones. "The kids always want to do it for themselves."
- 3. Don't redo what they've done.** If your child makes her bed, resist the urge to smooth the blankets. If she dresses herself in stripes and polka dots, compliment her "eclectic" style. Unless absolutely necessary, don't fix what your child accomplishes, says Kathy Buss, director of the Weekday Nursery School, in Morrisville, Pennsylvania. She will notice and it may discourage her.
- 4. Let them solve simple problems.** If you see your child trying to assemble a toy or get a book from a shelf that she can reach if she stands on her stepstool, pause before racing over to help. "Provided that they are safe, those moments when you don't rush in, when you give children a moment to solve things for themselves, those are the character-building moments," says Zebooker. "It's natural to want to make everything perfect, but if we do, we cheat kids of the chance to experience success."

5. Assign a chore. Putting your preschooler in charge of a regular, simple task will build her confidence and sense of competency, says Buss. A child who is entrusted to water the plants or empty the clothes dryer is likely to believe she can also get dressed herself or pour her own cereal. Just be sure the chore you assign is manageable and that it's real work, not busywork, since even preschoolers know the difference. The goal is to make your child feel like a capable, contributing member of the family.

Winning Cooperation

Walk into almost any preschool class in the country, and you'll see children sitting quietly in circles, forming orderly lines, raising their hands to speak, passing out napkins and snacks. The question is: How do teachers do it? How do they get a dozen or more children under 4 to cooperate, willingly and happily? While there's no secret formula, most say:

6. Praise is key, especially if your child is not in a cooperative phase. Try to catch her being good. Kids repeat behaviors that get attention.

7. Develop predictable routines. Kids cooperate in school because they know what's expected of them, says Beth Cohen-Dorfman, educational coordinator at Chicago's Concordia Avondale Campus preschool. "The children follow essentially the same routine day after day, so they quickly learn what they are supposed to be doing, and after a while barely need reminding." While it would be impractical to have the same level of structure at home, the more consistent you are, the more cooperative your child is likely to be, suggests Cohen-Dorfman. Decide on a few routines and stick to them: Everyone gets dressed before breakfast. When we come in from outside, we wash our hands. No bedtime stories until all kids are in jammies. Eventually, following these "house rules" will become second nature to your child.

8. Lighten up. If your child refuses to do something, try turning it into a game. "Humor and games are two great tools that parents sometimes forget about in the heat of the moment," says Zebooker. When her own son, now 13, was in preschool, she used to persuade him to put his shoes on in the morning by playing shoe store. "I would say, 'Welcome to Miss Mommy's Shoe Store, I've got the perfect pair for you to try on today,' and I'd speak in a silly accent and he loved it." (I've had luck using this strategy with Sophie, who used to clamp her mouth shut whenever I tried to brush her teeth. Now we play the "Let's Guess What You Ate Today" game -- and she willingly opens up so I can search her molars for cereal, strawberries, or mac and cheese.)

9. Warn of transitions. If your child pitches a fit whenever you announce it's time to switch gears --whether that means shutting off the TV, stopping play to come eat, or leaving a friend's house -- it could be that you're not giving enough advance notice. "At school we let kids know when transitions are coming so they have time to finish whatever they're doing," observes Cohen-Dorfman. "If you need to leave the house at 8:30 a.m., warn your child at 8:15 that she's five more minutes to play, then will have to stop to put her toys away. Set a timer so she knows when the time is up."

10. Use sticker charts and rewards judiciously. "If your child is always working for the reward, he won't learn the real reasons for doing things -- that he should pick up his toys because family members pitch in," says Buss. Best bet: Reserve rewards for finite endeavors, such as potty training, but avoid offering them for everyday things, such as dressing himself or brushing his teeth.

11. Give structured choices. If, for example, your 3-year-old refuses to sit at the dinner table, you might offer the choice of sitting and getting dessert -- or not sitting and missing out on a treat. "At first, your child may not make the right choice, but eventually he will, because he'll see that the wrong choice isn't getting him what he wants," says Buss. Just be sure, if you want your child to choose option A, that option B is less attractive.

12 No ifs. Make requests in language that assumes cooperation. "If you finish putting away your crayons, we can go to the park," suggests that perhaps your child won't clean up his crayons. Try instead: "When you put your crayons away, we'll go to the park."

13. Prioritize play. Preschool teachers said over and over that kids today are less able to play imaginatively than kids of a decade or two ago. "Too much of their day is structured in supervised activities," says Haines. The antidote: Get comfortable saying "Go play." It's not your job to see that your child is entertained 24/7. Let her get a little bored. But make sure she has items like dress-up clothes, paint and paper, a big cardboard box, and play dough.

14. Do it to music. There's a reason the "cleanup" song works. "Set a task to music, and suddenly it's fun," says Sandy Haines, a teacher at the Buckingham Cooperative Nursery School, in Glastonbury, Connecticut. If you're not feeling creative, suggest "racing" a song: "Can you get dressed before Raffi finishes singing 'Yellow Submarine'?"

15. Encourage teamwork. If your child is fighting over a toy with another child, set a timer for five minutes, suggests Buss. Tell one child he can have the toy until he hears the buzzer, and then it will be the other child's turn.

16. Let your child work out minor squabbles. Instead of swooping in to settle disputes, stand back and let them work it out (unless they're hitting each other). You won't always be there to rescue your child.

Disciplining Effectively

It struck me recently that I've never met a parent who doesn't use time-outs, and never met a preschool teacher who does. So what discipline strategies do teachers recommend?

17. Redirect. If your preschooler is jumping on the couch or grabbing for her big sister's dolls, distract her by asking if she'd like to draw a picture or read a short story together.

18. Prevent good-bye meltdowns. If your child is nervous about spending time apart, give him something tangible to remind him of you. Let him carry your picture; kiss a tissue or cut out a paper heart and put it in his pocket. Having something physical to touch may help him feel less anxious -- and short-circuit a tantrum.

19. Involve her in righting her wrongs. If you find her coloring on the walls, have her help wash it off. If she knocks over a playmate's block tower, ask her to help rebuild it.

20. Don't delay discipline. If you must reprimand your child, do so when you see her misbehaving, advises Buss. "Sometimes I will hear parents say, 'Wait until we get home ... ,' but by the time you're home, your child has forgotten the incident." Similarly, canceling Saturday's zoo trip because of Thursday's tantrum won't prevent future outbursts; it will just feel like random, undeserved punishment to your child.

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