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Reading Rockets

Physical and Mental Well-Being

By: [The Education Department](#)



How can you help your baby or toddler to learn and to get ready for school? Here are some ways to make sure young children's physical and social needs are met.

The first five years of a child's life are a time of tremendous physical, emotional, social and cognitive growth. Children enter the world with many needs in order to grow: love, nutrition, health, social and emotional security and stimulation in the important skills that prepare them for school success.

How well children will learn and develop and how well they will do in school depends on a number of things, including the children's health and physical well-being, their social and emotional preparation.

Good health and physical well-being

Seeing to it that your preschool child has nutritious food, enough exercise and regular medical care gives him a good start in life and lessens the chances that he will have serious health problems or trouble learning later on.

Food

Preschoolers Require a Healthy Diet

After your child is born, she requires nutritious food to keep her healthy. School-aged children can concentrate better in class if they eat balanced meals that include servings of breads and cereals; fruits and vegetables; meat, poultry and fish and meat alternatives (such as eggs and dried beans and peas); and milk, cheese and yogurt. You should see to it that your child does not eat too many fatty foods and sweets.

Children aged 2-5 generally can eat the same foods as adults but in smaller portions. Your child's doctor or medical clinic adviser can provide you with advice on what to feed a baby or a toddler who under the age of 2. If you need food for your child, federal, state and local programs can help. For example, the federal nutrition program, called the Special Supplemental Food Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC), distributes food to low-income women and their children across the country. Food stamp programs also are available.

If you want more information or want to find out if you are eligible for food stamps, call or visit your local or state health department. Your local librarian can help you find names, addresses and phone numbers.

Exercise

Preschoolers Need Opportunities to Exercise

To learn to control and coordinate the large muscles in his arms and legs, your child needs to throw and catch balls, run, jump, climb and dance to music. To learn to control and coordinate the small muscles in his hands and fingers, he needs to color with crayons, put together puzzles, use blunt-tipped-safety-scissors, zip his jacket and grasp small objects such as coins. If you suspect that your child has a disability, see a doctor as soon as possible. Early intervention can help your child to develop to his full potential.

Medical Care

Preschoolers Require Regular Medical Checkups, Immunizations and Dental Care

It's important for you to find a doctor or a clinic where your child can receive routine health care as well as special treatment if she becomes sick or injured. Early immunizations can help prevent a number of diseases including measles, mumps, German measles (rubella), diphtheria, tetanus, whooping cough, hib (Haemophilus influenzae type b), polio and tuberculosis. These diseases can have serious effects on your child's physical and mental development. Talk to your doctor about the benefits and risks of immunization. Beginning by the age of 3 at the latest, your child also should have regular dental checkups.

Social and emotional preparation

Children start school with different degrees of social and emotional maturity. These qualities take time and practice to learn. Give your child opportunities at home to begin to develop the following positive qualities.

- **Confidence:** Children must feel good about themselves and believe they can succeed. Confident children are more willing to attempt new tasks-and try again if they don't succeed the first time.
- **Independence:** Children must learn to do things for themselves.
- **Motivation:** Children must want to learn.
- **Curiosity:** Children are naturally curious and must remain so to get the most out of learning opportunities.
- **Persistence:** Children must learn to finish what they start.
- **Cooperation:** Children must be able to get along with others and learn to share and take turns.
- **Self-control:** Children must learn that there are good and bad ways to express anger. They must understand that some behaviors, such as hitting and biting, are not acceptable.
- **Empathy:** Children must have an interest in others and understand how others feel.

Here are some things that you can do to help your child develop these qualities.

Show Your Child That You Care About Him and That You are Dependable

Children who feel loved are more likely to be confident. Your child must believe that, no matter what, someone will look out for him. Give your baby or toddler plenty of attention, encouragement, hugs and lap time.

Set a Good Example

Children imitate what they see others do and what they hear others say. When you exercise and eat nourishing food, your child is more likely to do so as well. When you treat others with respect, your child probably will, too. If you share things with others, your child also will learn to be thoughtful of others' feelings.

Provide Opportunities for Repetition

It takes practice for a child to crawl, pronounce new words or drink from a cup. Your child doesn't get bored when she repeats things. Instead, by repeating things until she learns them, your child builds the confidence she needs to try new things.

Use Appropriate Discipline

All children need to have limits set for them. Children whose parents give them firm but loving discipline generally develop better social skills and do better in school than do children whose parents set too few or too many limits. Here are some ideas:

- Direct your child's activities, but don't be too bossy.
- Give reasons when you ask your child to do something. Say, for example, "Please move your truck from the stairs so no one falls over it"-not, "Move it because I said so."
- Listen to your child to find out how he feels and whether he needs special support.
- Show love and respect when you are angry with your child. Criticize your child's behavior but not the child. Say, for example, "I love you, but it's not okay for you to draw pictures on the walls. I get angry when you do that."

- Help your child make choices and work out problems. You might ask your 4-year-old, for example, "What can we do to keep your brother from knocking over your blocks?"
- Be positive and encouraging. Praise your child for a job well done. Smiles and encouragement go much further to shape good behavior than harsh punishment.

Let your Child Do Many Things by Herself

Young children need to be watched closely. However, they learn to be independent and to develop confidence by doing tasks such as dressing themselves and putting their toys away. It's important to let your child make choices, rather than deciding everything for her.

Encourage Your Child to Play with Other Children and to Be with Adults Who Are Not Family Members

Preschoolers need social opportunities to learn to see the point of view of others. Young children are more likely to get along with teachers and classmates if they have had experiences with different adults and children.

Show a Positive Attitude Toward Learning and Toward School

Children come into this world with a powerful need to discover and to explore. If your child is to keep her curiosity, you need to encourage it. Showing enthusiasm for what your child does ("You've drawn a great picture!") helps to make her proud of her achievements.

Children also become excited about starting school when their parents show excitement about this big step. As your child gets ready to enter kindergarten, talk to him about school. Talk about the exciting things that he will do in kindergarten, such as making art projects, singing and playing games. Be enthusiastic as you describe all the important things that he will learn from his teacher-how to read, how to count and how to measure and weigh things.

[References](#)

References

Click the "References" link above to hide these references.

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