MIND IN THE MAKING

PRESCRIPTIONS FOR LEARNING
FOCUS AND SELF CONTROL
The American Academy of Pediatrics says a young infant cannot be “spoiled” by holding and cuddling. It is important to respond to your baby’s crying now because it actually will decrease clingy behavior later on.

1. See if your baby needs something. Babies communicate their basic NEEDS by fussing—they are too young to communicate their wants. To figure out what your daughter needs, become a detective. Ask yourself:
   - “Can I figure out WHAT she needs by watching?” Are there clues? For example, eye rubbing and glazed eyes probably mean your baby is tired. Rooting (trying to suck something) probably means your baby is hungry. Squirming may mean your baby needs changing.
   - “WHEN is my daughter most likely to get fussy?” Which situations tend to make her most upset (for example, loud noises, bright lights, lots of other people in the room)? Are there times of day when she is fussier than other times (after she has been awake for a few hours, before meal time)? When you understand what prompts fussiness, you can do your best to prevent these from getting out of hand (such as giving your baby a nap before he or she becomes exhausted).

Jack Shonkoff from Harvard Center for the Developing Child says, “There is no learning without relationships.”

2. Respond to your baby’s needs. You are building a trusting relationship with her where she learns she can count on you to take care of her. Trusting relationships help children feel secure and safe, and studies have found this leads to less fussiness later on.

On the other hand, you don’t want to respond to every cry as if something terrible is about to happen because children can sense adults’ feelings of anxiety. This is where promoting the skill of Focus and Self Control comes in. You ultimately want to help children learn to manage their own upset feelings. While that’s a learning process that takes place throughout childhood and beyond, it begins in infancy.

Pediatrician T. Berry Brazelton of Harvard Medical School developed The Brazelton Neonatal Behavioral Assessment Scale to help parents and pediatricians understand the language of the newborns’ behavior—including how they calm themselves down. In this assessment, a doctor or nurse shines a flashlight on the newborn or shakes a rattle above them to see how they react. The babies typically get upset by the noise or light and then find a way to recover—by sucking a finger, shutting their eyes or turning away from the commotion. Each baby has a different way of calming down, which is what the assessment is aimed at understanding. It is the beginnings of the skill of Focus and Self Control!
3. **Figure out what helps your baby become less fussy.** As a first step in promoting Focus and Self Control, become a detective again to pay attention to what you do to help your daughter calm down. For example, does she calm down when being held and rocked or when swaddled? Does listening to you sing help? Does playing with her help? For example, when you stick out your tongue, does your baby stick out her tongue, copying you and calming down in the process?

4. **Watch what your baby does to calm down and build on “what works” in helping your baby learn self control.** When you have figured out what works, build on these strategies to help your child manage. In the beginning, you are important in helping your child calm down (by holding and rocking your child, for example). Ultimately, you want your child to learn to calm herself down, so foster ways that don’t just depend on you. You may notice your baby calm herself down by putting her hands in her mouth or sucking her fingers, thumbs and pacifiers or by looking at something new or interesting.

Berry Brazelton says:

> Every time babies put themselves together in the face of stress or stimulation, they’re getting internal feedback that says, ’You learned. You just did it!’ And if they do it over and over, it becomes part of the equipment. When the adult reinforces these internal feedback systems, but doesn’t take them over, we are giving that baby not only the chance to learn, but also a chance to experience the excitement of learning.

**These four strategies will promote Focus and Self Control in your baby and move from managing children’s behavior to promoting life skills in ways that build a trusting relationship with you.**

**Focus and Self Control** involves paying attention, remembering the rules, thinking flexibly and exercising self control (not going on automatic, but doing what you have to do in order to pursue a goal). Children need this skill in order to achieve their goals, especially in a world that is filled with distractions and information overload.
The Seven Essential Life Skills Every Child Needs

PRESCRIPTIONS FOR LEARNING

Enjoying Tummy Time
Promoting Focus and Self Control in Infants
Three Strategies That Work in Moving from Managing Children’s Behavior to Promoting Life Skills

Question: I have tried giving my two-month-old baby “tummy time” by laying him on his tummy with some of his favorite toys, but he just doesn’t like it. He starts screaming after two minutes. How can I make it more enjoyable for him?

Since pediatricians recommend that children be put on their backs to sleep to help prevent Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS), they also recommend that infants have some awake time on their tummies to strengthen their neck and back muscles and to learn to turn their heads. But not all children like tummy time, especially at first.

Dr. T. Berry Brazelton of Harvard Medical School observed that infants—right from the moment of birth—are communicating. Your baby is certainly communicating by screaming when you put him on his tummy. But Brazelton also observed that babies’ communications can be complex. Not all screams are the same and there may be moments when your baby is acting differently. When adults learn to “read” the language of infants’ behavior and better understand what they are trying to communicate with us, we can parent them better. So, a key to helping your baby learn to like tummy time more is to read his behavior and figure out what works for him.

1. **Be present and watch for signals from your baby.** Ask yourself when your baby seems to like tummy time more than others. Are there things that you can do that help your baby enjoy tummy time? Is it when you:
   - “Sing, smile, and talk while he is on his stomach?”
   - “Touch his hand or pat his back to let him know you are there?”
   - “Show your baby toys?”

Some babies may get interested in looking at toys while others may prefer looking and making noises back and forth with you. In each of these examples, you are helping your baby learn to pay attention—to focus.

**Brazelton says,** “Every time babies put themselves together in the face of stress or stimulation, they’re getting internal feedback that says, ‘You learned. You just did it!’ And if they do it over and over, it becomes part of the equipment. When the adult reinforces these internal feedback systems, but doesn’t take them over, we are giving that baby not only the chance to learn, but also a chance to experience the excitement of learning.”
2. **Provide time for practice and acknowledge your baby's successes.** Focus and Self Control includes being able to work toward a goal. This is an example of an Executive Function skill, which are driven by goals. Learning a new skill takes time and practice.

You can:
- Give your baby a chance to practice for a very short period of time and then lengthen the time as he becomes better able to enjoy tummy time.
- Start him on the back and give him a few minutes on his tummy. By giving your baby the chance to work and use different muscles in different positions, you are helping your child grow stronger and have a better sense of physical control over his or her own body.

3. **Create a team.** Older siblings or other friends and family can help your baby get used to tummy time by lying down with him and playing, such as singing a song or talking with him. These interactions help babies develop the ability to pay attention and build trustworthy relationships.

**These three strategies will promote Focus and Self Control and move from managing children's behavior to promoting life skills in fun and doable ways.**

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Prescriptions for Learning is supported by the Popplestone Foundation.

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Toddler Hitting
Promoting the Life Skill of Focus and Self Control in Toddlers
Six Strategies That Work in Moving from Managing Children’s Behavior to Promoting Life Skills

Question: How can I stop my toddler from hitting?

There are many reasons that your toddler may be hitting. You can figure out why and how to help your child learn other ways to express himself or herself by promoting the life skill of Focus and Self Control.

1. Remember that it’s normal for toddlers to hit or to show some form of aggressive behavior. Toddlers typically have limited ability to talk about what is making them upset and to come up with more acceptable solutions to solve their problems. This is a normal part of children’s development. The knowledge that it is normal—that there’s not something wrong with your child—however, doesn’t mean that you should let it go. It’s a great time to begin helping your child learn new ways of controlling his or her feelings and behavior.

   Jerome Kagan of Harvard University suggests you think like scientists in understanding children’s behavior. He says, “The behavior you see in a child is like observing the sky without a telescope. You just see a little. You’ve got to peer deeper.”

2. Figure out when and why your child seems to hitting. Think like a scientist when you’re observing your toddler. Ask yourself:
   - “What is making my child upset right now?”
   - “What is my child trying to tell me?”

   When you’re observing your child, you’ll likely notice patterns—situations that tend to lead to hitting. For example, young children may become angry when they are hungry or tired, when they get frustrated that they can’t do something or want something but don’t have the words to say so. This scientific work will help you identify situations that lead to hitting and set you on the path to coming up with new ways to promote self control.

   In studies of aggression, Larry Aber of New York University found that once children have learned how to step back in an emotional or frustrating situation, “you’ve opened the gate to their using problem-solving skills.”

3. Anticipate problems and help your child step back before the hitting begins. Once you see some of trigger points for aggression, you can help your toddler step back and notice them too. For example, you can:
   - Acknowledge that your child gets upset at certain times and try to prevent them from happening: “I know that you get angry when you are really hungry so I am going to give you a healthy snack before that happens.”
   - If there is no getting around the problem, be ready with a solution or a diversion: “I know you don’t like getting into the car seat, but I am going to give you this plastic bottle filled with things that make noise so you can shake it while I strap you in.”

4. Problem solve to arrive at solutions. You want to set limits so your child uses other ways of expressing himself or herself. Again, think like a scientist and see what works best. Ask yourself:
   - “What do I do that helps my child really calm down?”
   - “What does my child do to calm himself or herself down?”

   Use that knowledge in setting limits that help your child control himself or herself.
5. **Set reasonable and consistent alternatives to hitting.** Tell your child in a firm but caring voice that you aren’t going to allow hitting, but there are other ways for your child to deal with things.

- Act like a sports announcer and narrate what your child is doing like, “You don’t want to get your diaper changed, so you are hitting me but I don’t like it and I am not going to let you do it.” This helps your child connect his or her feelings to his or her actions and to your reaction.
- Ask your child to show you what he or she wants or needs. You can say, “I am not going to let you hit me but you can show me what you want. Do you want something to eat? Do you want to see what’s over there?”
- Meet your child’s needs when it is reasonable to do so. Yes, if your child is hungry or tired, you want to do something about those needs. But no, your child can’t have something in the kitchen that’s dangerous.
- Provide alternatives. You can say, “I am not going to let you play with that pot from the cabinet. It is too heavy. But you can play with this smaller pot.” Or, “You can’t hit me but you can hit that pillow.”
- Offer your child real and reasonable choices. When you let your child choose, he or she feels a sense of control that helps him or her cope. You can say things like, “It’s time to leave the park. Would you like to walk or ride in the stroller?”
- Use diversion but remind your child of the limit. You can say, “You are getting ready to hit me and I am not going to let you do it, but we can dance to the music on the radio because you love dancing.”

**Martin Hoffman of New York University has found that children are more likely to listen to their parents and respond positively if the adults briefly share the reasons behind their discipline as well as share their own feelings—except when they do so in a harsh way.**

6. **Share your reasons and feelings with your child, while trying to maintain your own self control.** You can tell your child why you are stopping his or her behavior by saying things like, “I am not going to let you take your friend’s things. She doesn’t like it.” Or, “I am not going to let you hit me. It hurts and I don’t like it.”

The hardest part is that children’s hitting does affect adults and can make you feel like losing it. Yet, when you get aggressive it leads to more aggression in children.

**Joseph Campos of the University of California at Berkeley has found that adults’ facial expression affects children reactions in uncertain situations. He says:  

*By 11 to 12 months of age, the baby is already doing what all of us do when something unusual happens—we look around to figure out how other people are reacting.*

**Even a very angry tone of voice affects children, as the research of Anne Fernald of Stanford University has found.**

Ultimately, you are a role model for your child’s learning self control. So if you need support when your child angers you, try to have someone who you can call on to help you.

**These six strategies promote the life skill of Focus and Self Control and move from managing children’s behavior to promoting life skills in fun and doable ways.**

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The Seven Essential Life Skills Every Child Needs

Learning how to play independently is a valuable skill that involves Focus and Self Control. There are ways you can help your child develop this life skill as you support her in playing on her own.

Alison Gopnik of the University of California at Davis says: “Children possess an “inborn imagination and a passion to explore and learn.”

1. Support your child's interests. Caring strongly about interests beyond oneself engenders true focus. Children are more likely to spend time immersed in play when they are deeply interested in or passionate about what they are doing.
   • Watch your child or talk with her about what she is interested in. Look for books, toys or other materials that could spark her imagination and extend her play. Your encouragement is crucial to your child's move toward independence.

Laura Schulz of MIT conducted an experiment with preschoolers to investigate the role of curiosity in learning by giving children pop-up toys where it wasn’t clear which handle made which little toys pop up. She finds that children are more likely to stick one of these toys instead of moving on to something new when adults don't show them how the toy works, but let them explore. Schulz observes:

   [Children] keep playing until they discover how it really works.

2. Encourage your child to ask her own questions and explore. Curiosity is powerful. When you child is curious, she is motivated to wonder and learn more. There are many ways for you to foster curiosity in your child.
   • Use open-ended questions and comments to focus your child's attention and extend her play. You can say things like: “I wonder where your train is going?” Or “Yum, I see you’re cooking something. What will you put in it?” Try not to take charge; you are helping your child learn to take the lead in managing herself.
   • When your child shows genuine interest in something, no matter how incidental it may seem to you, take the time to acknowledge her curiosity. Engage her in conversation about it. You are modeling focused attention for your child, while demonstrating that her ideas are valuable to you.

Maureen Callanan of the University of California at Santa Cruz studies parents and their role in promoting children's learning in everyday activities. She says:

What I think is important about the way parents tend to respond is that they are usually encouraging the kids to do this kind of questioning, guiding them in thinking about how [to find their own] answers to questions.

3. Help your child develop her own ideas for playing independently. You can help your child become more independent in her play by coming up with practical ideas to set up some times she will play on her own.
• Make a plan. Explain that you are going to have some time where your daughter plays by herself. Ask her what she would like to do during that time so she makes a plan, even if it is for a few minutes.
• Evaluate how the plan worked. After she has tried out this plan, ask her how it worked. What made it work well? What didn’t work and needs to be changed?
• Create an activity list together. As your child becomes more comfortable spending small amounts of time playing by herself, then make a list of activities with her that she can do on her own. Post this list where she can see it, using pictures or words to help her remember and “read” the list.

By giving your child some control over how to spend her time and encouraging a system with plans that are later reviewed, you are helping your child develop independence. Further, you are helping your child develop working memory skills, which are involved in creating and following through with plans.

4. Engage your child in games that promote the life skill of Focus and Self Control. Your child learns from trial and error. In fact, when you react to your child’s mistake as simply a normal part of learning, you are doing more than helping your child become toilet trained. You are teaching your child a fundamentally helpful approach to life.
   • Guessing games and puzzles require your child to pay attention.
   • Games that have rules and sorting games build working memory, self control and thinking flexibility when the rules are changed.

These four strategies will promote the life skill of Focus and Self Control and move from managing children’s behavior to promoting life skills in fun and doable ways.

Focus and Self Control involves paying attention, remembering the intended rules, thinking flexibly and exercising self control (not going on automatic, but doing what you have to do in order to pursue a goal). Children need this skill in order to achieve their goals, especially in a world that is filled with distractions and information overload.
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Adele Diamond of the University of British Columbia is a pioneer in studying the executive functions of the brain. These are the functions that we use to manage our attention, our emotions and our behavior in pursuit of our goals. Diamond says:

"If you look at what predicts how well children will do later in school, more and more evidence is showing that Executive Functions—working memory and inhibition—actually predict success better than IQ tests."

There are many things you can do at home with your child that will help him get ready to enter school while also promoting the life skill of Focus and Self Control. Here are a few suggestions:

1. Play games with your child.
   - **Simon Says, Do the Opposite.** In this game, your child must pay attention and not go on autopilot. The aim is to do the opposite of what the leader says. For example, if you say, "Simon Says, 'be noisy,'" then your child would stay quiet. If you say, "Simon says, 'move fast,'" then your child would move slowly.
   - **Red Light/Green Light, Freeze Dance, Musical Chairs.** These games all require children to use self-control to Stop and Go.
     - You can challenge your child and change the rules to these games. For example, in Red Light/Green Light, change the colors to purple and yellow lights. Have the purple mean Stop, then change it so it means Go.
   - **Guessing games.** Listening games encourage children to focus, remember and practice self-control. For example, you could say, "I am thinking of an animal with a name that sounds like a rat." Ask your child to guess what it is.
   - **Sorting games.** When you ask your child to sort objects or pictures into different groups according to a set of rules, your child uses his working memory and ability to make connections. When asked to sort according to new rules, your child engages his cognitive flexibility and self-control.

2. Be creative and promote pretend play.
   - **Pretend play.** When children play "baby," "house," or other pretend scenarios, they are using themselves to represent other people and using objects to represent something else. For example, you might pretend to be the baby and your child would act as the parent, perhaps using a block or other item as a baby bottle. Expand on the play scenario by introducing a new idea like, "I'm feeling tired. Let's get ready for bed."

**School Readiness**

Promoting the Life Skill of Focus and Self Control in Preschoolers

**Five Strategies That Work in Moving from Managing Children’s Behavior to Promoting Life Skills**

**PRESCRIPTIONS FOR LEARNING**

**Question:** I have decided not to send my three-year-old to preschool. What activities can I do at home to prepare him for school later so that he’s not behind children who went to formal preschool programs?

**Answer:**

1. **Provide a structured environment.** Children learn best when they are engaged socially, emotionally, intellectually and physically.
2. **Be creative and promote pretend play.** When your son plays pretend or invents stories, he is developing what researchers call "cognitive flexibility." This requires being able to readily adapt to changed circumstances and flexibly switch perspectives or focus of attention.
3. **Play games with your child.** Children learn best when they are engaged socially, emotionally, intellectually and physically.
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5. **Use a variety of activities.** This includes activities that require your child to pay attention, remember the rules, respond to changing circumstances and resist the temptation to go automatic. These skills help him thrive now and in the future. Some of these brain-building games include:
   - **Simon Says, Do the Opposite.** In this game, your child must pay attention and not go on autopilot. The aim is to do the opposite of what the leader says. For example, if you say, "Simon Says, 'be noisy,'" then your child would stay quiet. If you say, "Simon says, 'move fast,'" then your child would move slowly.
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This symbolic thinking lays the foundation for learning how to read and comprehend more abstract concepts. These experiences not only expand your child’s thinking, but also promote another life skill, Perspective Taking, essential to social and emotional development.

- **Pretend stories.** When children use their imagination to make up their own stories, they are thinking flexibly. You can take turns creating a story: one person starts and then passes it to the next person who adds on to it. This game requires your son to use his working memory and attention while not going on autopilot.

**Jerome Kagan of Harvard University performed an ongoing study of children who were shy as babies but didn't turn out to be shy or inhibited as older children. Kagan found that a number of these children had a special talent or interest.**

3. **Foster your child’s interests.** Caring strongly about interests beyond oneself engenders true focus, as children are motivated to learn when they are interested and curious. Your child’s budding interests can become a launching pad for you to help elaborate and extend your child’s learning. When you support the things your child really cares about, you encourage him to take risks and try harder. Some ways you can do this are:
   - selecting books and play materials related to your child’s passions;
   - encouraging pretend play that involves topics that your child cares about; and
   - planning experiences that build on your son’s existing knowledge and pushing him to ask more questions.

4. **Help your child become familiar with literacy, math and science concepts.** There are many opportunities throughout the day to promote these concepts. For example:
   - tell stories or read books with your son;
   - help him enjoy the sounds of words, through making up rhymes;
   - talk about science concepts at the grocery store, like: “Is this box bigger or smaller than that box?”; and
   - have your child estimate numbers in the number of steps in a staircase or steps to reach the corner of the street.

For everyday brain building activities, download [http://joinvroom.org](http://joinvroom.org) on your iPhone or Android. It will provide age-appropriate things that you can do daily to promote learning in the moments you are with your child.

**The American Academy of Pediatrics suggests that if your child is not yet in a child care or preschool program, you consider organizing play dates or playgroups to help him or her get experience socializing with other children.**

5. **Create time for your child to be with other children.** In addition to play dates or playgroups, you can arrange visits to other places where children go, like parks or children's museums or libraries. These experiences not only provide learning activities, they also help your child learn how to be with other children, negotiate when both want the same toy or piece of equipment and to understand the perspectives of others.

**These five strategies will promote Focus and Self Control and move from managing children’s behavior to promoting life skills in fun and doable ways.**

**Focus and Self Control** involves paying attention, remembering the rules, thinking flexibly and exercising self control (not going on automatic, but doing what you have to do in order to pursue a goal). Children need this skill in order to achieve their goals, especially in a world that is filled with distractions and information overload.

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Michael Posner and his colleagues at the University of Oregon designed several video games for four and six year olds to promote focus and self control. One game involves a cartoon cat and mud. The children are given a joystick to move this cartoon cat around on a computer screen. At first, the cat is surrounded by grass, but patches of mud begin to appear on the screen. The task is to keep the cat away from the mud. In another game called Chase, the task is to control a cartoon umbrella to keep the cat dry. To be successful in these games, the children need to pay attention to what is happening, remember the rules for moving the object or character, respond to changing situations and use self control, so they don’t go on automatic. The results? Even with brief training, the children had less trouble with self control. Not surprisingly, the six year olds learned more than the four year olds. The researchers also found that when children’s ability to pay attention improved, their reasoning and thinking skills also improved.

So, computer or video games can be helpful. Here are some tips for ensuring that they promote learning and life skills.

1. **Select games that promote life skills.** When choosing video games for or with your child, look for games that promote the life skills, such as Focus and Self Control. Games like these involve tasks that require paying attention and remembering rules while adapting to changing situations.

Examples include games that:

- use a variation of the classic “shell game,” where a small object is hidden beneath one of three cups that are then moved repeatedly;
- require children to control the speed or movement of a character;
- involve counting or sorting the objects amid many distractions;
- promote the use of self control; and
- help children learn to anticipate and be ready for what is going to happen next.

Consider whether the games improve thinking skills rather than rote drills of academic skills.

Daniel Anderson of the University of Massachusetts at Amherst studies the effects of television on children's attention.
He says,

Watching aggression begets aggression. It’s very clear that children, at young ages, will imitate aggressive acts that they see on television. It’s also clear from a lot of research that children will learn the way of thinking that leads to violence—retaliation, categorizing people as good guys and bad guys.

2. Avoid games that include violence. Video games can promote destruction and violence or they can promote amazing thinking skills. Many electronic games available promote aggressive behavior and are not appropriate for young children.

Take a strong role in selecting video games—and television shows—that reflect the values you want your child to learn and that help, not hinder, his growing ability to focus. When you select games for your child, review them carefully. Are they helping your child improve his thinking skills in constructive ways? For reviews of children’s media, you can check out Common Sense Media: https://www.commonsensemedia.org.

The American Academy of Pediatrics suggests that, for every half-hour that your child watches TV or plays video games, he or she match it with a half-hour of active play and that you limit the amount of screen time.

3. Provide many opportunities for physical activity. While technology is an integral part of life today, it is essential to balance sedentary and physical activity, for the mental and the physical benefits. Children learn Focus and Self Control by being active and playing games that require some degree of attention and flexible thinking.

The research of Megan McClelland of Oregon State University has found that children improve their skills and learning by playing such games as:

- Red Light, Green Light;
- Freeze Tag;
- I Spy; and
- Simon Says.

4. Take time to unplug as a family. Gil Gordon, an expert on telecommuting, calls for having times when you are unplugged—turning off the TV, not answering the phone, turning off the computer. When you “unplug,” you are modeling to your child the importance of taking breaks and the value of giving your full attention. According to writer Maggie Jackson, when you take the time to give your full attention, you are giving a gift to yourself and others.

These four strategies will promote Focus and Self Control and move from managing children’s behaviors to promoting life skills in fun and doable ways.

Focus and Self Control involves paying attention, remembering the rules, thinking flexibly and exercising self control (not going on automatic, but doing what you have to do in order to pursue a goal). Children need this skill in order to achieve their goals, especially in a world that is filled with distractions and information overload.

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The Seven Essential Life Skills Every Child Needs

There is no universal “right” time, place or way to do homework. Here are some suggestions drawn from the American Academy of Pediatrics and the Mind in the Making research:

• **Find out what works best for your child.** After school, does your child do his best work right away or after some free time? Does he respond well to a strict schedule or to guidelines like: “No TV until your homework is done”? Find out what works best for your family as a whole and stick with it.

• **Work with your child.** Rather than battling with your child, help your son set goals about his schoolwork and then come up with a plan for achieving these goals. This process works best if he makes a list of all of his ideas for getting homework done effectively, evaluates what would work or not work about each of these ideas and then, with you, selects one strategy to try. After you have time to see how this plan works, talk your son about it and, together, make changes as necessary.

• **Create a routine.** Based on the plan you have developed, establish a regular location and time to work on daily assignments.

• **Limit distractions.** No matter what place you choose, it needs to be well lit and as quiet as possible. Research has shown that background noise from the television can disrupt children’s focused attention. If your child wants to listen to music, try it as an experiment and see if it works.

• **Be prepared.** Keep your child’s materials (paper, pencil, dictionary) nearby so he can get started quickly and independently.

• **Remember the importance of play and time off.** While encouraging your son to complete assignments, keep in mind that he has had a lengthy day of learning at school and may need some free time. Play is a big part of your child’s social, emotional and physical development.

If your child is not doing well in school, you can ask his teacher about special help or tutoring that may be available.

**Being able to pay attention to tasks and to stick with them until they are complete are important life skills for children to develop—skills that influences their success later in life. Megan McClelland of Oregon State University and her colleagues found that “attention-span persistence” in four year olds was strongly predictive of whether or not these same children graduated from college when they were 25 years old.**

Helping children develop good homework habits involves providing a routine and a setting where distractions can be managed and work can be done. You can further help your child learn the life skill of Focus and Self Control in ways that don’t directly involve homework, but have been found to improve cognitive achievement. Here are a few suggestions:
1. Play games. Many simple games help children to develop the skills of Focus and Self Control in fun ways. For example:
   - Guessing games and games like “Red Light/Green Light” require your child to pay attention.
   - Board games or other turn-taking games help your child practice self control.
   - Games like “Simon Says” ask your child to follow simple rules while using his working memory and self control.
   - Games that promote flexible thinking, like “Simon Says Do the Opposite” prompt your son to inhibit his initial impulse (self control), as well as to use cognitive flexibility to follow the changing rules of the game. In this game, the task is to do the opposite of what the leader says. If you say: “Simon says, ‘sit,’” children are supposed to stand. If you say: “Simon says, ‘wave your right hand,’” children are supposed to wave their left hand. If you say, “Simon says, ‘be noisy,’” children are supposed to be quiet. You can play this game alone with your child or with a group of children. If a child doesn’t do the opposite, he or she is out. The child left at the end becomes the winner and can become Simon for the next round.

2. Strategize with your child. Work with your child to come up with strategies to resist the temptation to procrastinate. Being able to work toward goals, even when it is hard, is an important part of learning Focus and Self Control. For example, your child might try taking a short break in between assignments or switching to a different task if he begins to feel bored or distracted.

   In the Marshmallow Test, a classic study conducted by Walter Mischel of Columbia University, children were given a choice between one marshmallow now or two marshmallows later. Some could wait for the larger treat and some just couldn’t. Those who could wait were more likely to do better later in life, including pursuing academic and personal goals with less distraction and frustration, but, as Mischel says: “Children can always learn self control.”

3. Be a role model. Parents teach by doing as much as saying. Your child takes cues from watching you, so try to model the skills of Focus and Self Control in your daily life. One of the most important ways you can role model this for your child is by paying attention to him—resisting distractions—when he needs it.

These three strategies will promote Focus and Self Control and move from managing children's behavior to promoting life skills in fun and doable ways.

Focus and Self Control involves paying attention, remembering the rules, thinking flexibly and exercising self control (not going on automatic, but doing what you have to do in order to pursue a goal). Children need this skill in order to achieve their goals, especially in a world that is filled with distractions and information overload.

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The Importance of the Arts
Promoting the Life Skill of Focus and Self Control in School-Agers
Four Strategies That Work in Moving from Managing Children’s Behavior to Promoting Life Skills

**Question:** My daughter loves her ballet class, but now that she is getting older, I want to make sure she focuses on her schoolwork. How can I encourage her interest in dance without it distracting her from her school responsibilities?

Does involvement in the arts promote schoolwork or distract from it?

That was one of the questions that the Dana Foundation pursued by assembling a task force in the late 2000s. Michael Gazzaniga of the University of California at Santa Barbara, the task force chair, shares its conclusion:

> An interest in a performing art leads to a high state of motivation that produces the sustained attention necessary to improve performance and the training of attention that leads to improvement in other domains of cognition.

Here are some suggestions for maintaining your daughter’s interest in ballet without hurting her school responsibilities.

1. **Do foster your child’s creative interests.** As the Dana Foundation Task Force found, when a child, like your daughter, really cares about something, she is more likely to pay very close attention, work hard, deal with and overcome challenges, and practice, practice, practice. These skills can positively affect school work.

   **Larry Schweinhart of the HighScope Educational Research Foundation was involved in the HighScope Perry Preschool Project in the 1960s. This program’s aim was to help children take increasing responsibility for their own learning—to become more goal directed—through daily routines. Schweinhart says:**

   > The reason we want children to be involved as initiators is because it works better for their education and, in fact, it makes them better citizens in the long run. The basic cornerstone of that daily routine is children making plans, then carrying out the plans, and then getting back together and reviewing the plans.

2. **Help your child set goals about how much time she is going to devote to ballet and how much time to school work.** The lessons of the HighScope project—which have positively affected children—can be used in your home. Rather than your organizing things for your daughter, she is old enough to take some responsibility for organizing her commitments to ballet and to school. There is the issue of the larger schedule and her schedule at home.

   - You and she can discuss how many times a week she will pursue ballet after school and whether that schedule is working or not.
   - She can use a planner or other tool to stay organized and keep track of events and tasks.
   - You can think about how she works and learns best and whether it is better to work on ballet or schoolwork first at home or to go back and forth.
   - She can set her own short-term goals, like: “I will work on reading or spelling as soon as I get home.”
Consider her schedule with ballet and at home as an experiment. If you find that it’s not working, it is time to sit down with her, nonjudgmentally map out the problems, and look for solutions. Mid-course corrections are always a part of setting and achieving goals.

The American Academy of Pediatrics notes that many children and their families get overscheduled with multiple activities that fill children’s “free time.” All children—and adults—need some down time.

3. **Build some downtime into the schedule.** Your child is more likely to take in and make sense of new information and experiences when she has time to process and reflect. Make sure your child has room somewhere in her daily life for some unstructured free time.

The research of Carol Dweck at Stanford University has shown that the children most willing to take risks, to feel comfortable making mistakes, and to take on learning that is hard for them are those who are praised for their effort, not for their intelligence or inborn skills.

4. **Because your child has a special talent, it is important to remember to praise her efforts and strategy.** Instead of praising your daughter’s skill in dancing or in schoolwork, praise her efforts and strategies. Rather than saying, for example, “you are so smart,” or “you are so gifted,” tell your child things like:
   - “You worked so hard to get ready for your ballet recital.”
   - “It must feel good to get your homework done before dance class.”

This doesn’t mean that you should never tell your child that she looks nice or is talented but the focus of your attention should be on what she is **doing to use her talents**, not who she is.

**These four strategies promote the life skill of Focus and Self Control and move from managing children’s behavior to promoting life skills in fun and doable ways.**

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PERSPECTIVE TAKING
1. You are your child’s best teacher. Children learn best through relationships, not through television.

Georgene Troseth from Vanderbilt University conducted an experiment with 24 month olds. She had children, one at a time, sit in front of a TV and watch a video of an adult putting together unfamiliar toys. Other children saw the same adult put together unfamiliar toys, but, in this case, this adult was sitting in the room with the child. After seeing how the toy was put together, children in both groups had the chance to imitate—to put together the toys on their own. Children were twice as likely to learn from the person in the room than from the person on the TV, even though it was exactly the same person doing exactly the same thing.

The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that children under two years old not watch television.

2. Limit television and DVDs when your child is an infant or toddler and be selective of the programs you share with older children.

It is clear that television and screen time are a part of our lives, but it is best to limit TV for young children and be selective with older toddlers and preschoolers, who can learn from good television. When choosing TV or video programs for young children, it is best if you:

- choose television programs or videos for your children that have good stories that you and your children find engaging and positive;
- have interactive stories, where the children can participate in the TV or video story—by singing along or answering questions posed by the TV characters;
- watch the programs together with your child as much as you can; and
- ask your child what the characters in the program might be feeling or thinking by raising questions, such as: “What is the person in the show doing?” Why do you think he is doing that? What do you think he is feeling? Remember when you felt that way?

These conversations can help your child to understand how others think and feel, promoting the skill of Perspective Taking.

Daniel Anderson of the University of Massachusetts at Amherst conducted a study on the effect that background TV has on children, using the TV show Jeopardy! He found that having the TV on in the background disrupts preschool children’s focused attention, play and learning. Even if young children don’t seem to be paying attention to the TV, it can be disruptive.
If the TV in the background is showing bad news—a world event that is scary and affects you negatively—the impact could be even stronger. Children react to what you are feeling.

3. **Be aware of the noise and the impact of television on your child.** Be sure to turn off the TV if you are not watching it, and if you are watching it, try to have something positive on. Use your own Perspective Taking skills and try to think about what your child might be feeling and hearing.
   - You can play soft music for background noise.
   - You can talk and sing songs as you go about your daily activities.
   - Try replacing TV with books or quiet time.

Judy DeLoache from the University of Virginia had 12- to 18-month old infants watch a best-selling video aimed at teaching children new words in their own homes, either with a parent or alone. Another group of infants had no exposure to the video, but instead, their parents were told to teach the children the same words as in the video in whatever ways was natural to them. A third group of young children (the control group) didn’t see the video or have parents use the words with them. At the end of the month, the children who watched the video knew no more new words than the children who were in the control group. Only the children whose parents were using the new words with their children learned them.

4. **Focus on talking with your children of all ages.** You can use every day moments to promote Perspective Taking with your child that will help them to learn much more than if they are watching TV.
   - You can describe what you are doing and how you are feeling throughout the day. “I am getting ready to make dinner, and I feel hungry since I haven’t eaten in a long time.”

Studies have found that children are much more likely to learn words if you talk in a back and forth way, using what Jack Shonkoff and his colleagues at Harvard University call “serve and return.” Megan Gunnar of the University of Minnesota says:

> “Serve and return” forms the platform for early learning. Children learn by reaching out, and then having someone respond. Like a game of ball, the child serves and a responsive adult returns the serve. The baby’s brain that organized the serve is rewarded by the response and the connections.

These four strategies will promote Perspective Taking and move from managing children’s behavior to promoting life skills in fun and doable ways.

**Perspective Taking** goes far beyond empathy; it involves figuring out what others think and feel and forms the basis for children’s understanding of their parents’, teachers’ and friends’ intentions. Children who can take others’ perspectives are also much less likely to get involved in conflicts.

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The Seven Essential Life Skills Every Child Needs

Alison Gopnik of the University of California at Berkeley is a leader in understanding how we develop what is called theory of mind—becoming aware that others have different beliefs, desires and intentions from our own. One of Gopnik’s first questions was: when do children understand that one person might want one thing and another person might want something else? By conducting a series of experiments, she has found that toddlers can understand that though they might like crackers, but not broccoli, for example, someone else might like broccoli, but not crackers. Understanding that others may think and feel differently than they do is critical to the life skill of Perspective Taking and to making friends. Here are some strategies you can use to help your child learn this skill.

1. Pretend with your child and role play. Pretending is an important way that children learn to take the perspectives of others and how to be together.
   - As you play, you can explain what you are doing. For example, “I want to play with you so I am going to give you one of my toys to play with. Do you like playing with this toy with me?”
   - You can also ask your child to switch roles with you. You can act silly like a baby and your child can act like the adult. This is an important way to teach your child to see how it feels to be another person and how to interact with others.
   - You can also pretend to have conflicts, “How would you feel if I grabbed the toy you are playing with? What can you do if that happens? How can we solve the problem if we both want the same toy?”

2. Be a coach. Perspective Taking involves developing the self control to put aside one’s own thoughts and feelings in order to understand the viewpoints of others. You can help guide your toddler when he is playing with peers or siblings by helping him understand what another child is trying to communicate, either with their words or actions. For example:
   - “I think she wants to play with that truck.”
   - “I don’t think he liked it very much when you walked away.”
   - “Let’s find a way to take turns with that toy because it looks like you both want to play with it.”

3. Talk about your feelings, their feelings and others’ feelings. When you talk about your feelings, your child’s feelings or others’ feelings you are teaching your child about the perspective of others. It is important not to over talk or to share too much information that young children may not understand or be able to handle, but you can share everyday feelings. For example:
   - “I feel tired today. I didn’t sleep well last night.”
4. **Ask questions.** You can also help your toddler develop the skill of Perspective Taking by asking questions that help him understand how another person might be feeling or what they might be thinking. Reading books together provides a great opportunity for this. Parents can ask:

- “What do you think the character was thinking when she did that?”
- “Why do you think she said that?”
- “How would you feel if that happened to you?”

The Academy of Pediatrics notes that toddlers are still learning how to get along with others. Rather than truly sharing, they engage in parallel play alongside others.

5. **Remember that relationships take time to develop.** The depth and quality of friendships during the toddler years are only a fraction of what they have the potential to become as your child grows. Toddlers often have interest in playing near other children, but they are only beginning to have the ability to share toys, talk about their feelings and ideas, and resolve conflicts that arise. They will need adult supervision and support.

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**Perspective Taking** goes far beyond empathy; it involves figuring out what others think and feel and forms the basis for children’s understanding of their parents’, teachers’ and friends’ intentions. Children who can take others’ perspectives are also much less likely to get involved in conflicts.
The Seven Essential Life Skills Every Child Needs

Begin with prevention. Studies, including those by Larry Aber of New York University, have found that children who understand their own thoughts and feelings as well as those of others are less likely to get into conflicts.

1. **Talk about feelings and thoughts—beginning with YOURS.** You can help your son be less aggressive when you help him understand the perspectives of others beginning with simple statements about what you are feeling and “why:”
   - “I feel happy today because it is such a beautiful day.”
   - “I feel so tired from work today.”

In doing so, it is important not to “blame” your child for how you are feeling.

2. **Help your child express and understand HIS OWN thoughts and feelings.** Try to translate or label what you think your child is thinking or feeling:
   - “I think you are fussy.”
   - As your child grows up, ask questions that help him or her identify feelings, especially aggressive ones: “You seem upset. Are you?”

When your child is being aggressive, teach your child other ways to manage. The American Academy of Pediatrics advises not to allow your child to hit, bite or use other violent behavior.

3. **Try to anticipate problems and get involved early.** If you see a situation about to blow up, do something as soon as you can. You can say:
   - “I can see that you are about to get upset at the restaurant. We are going to take a walk outside until you can calm down and can manage.”

When you can prevent aggression, you are teaching your son how to recognize warning signs and begin to control his own behavior.

4. **Stop aggressive behavior.**
   - “I am going to help you use safe ways of telling us how you feel.”
   - “I am not going to let you hit someone.”

5. **Provide other non-hurtful strategies for expressing aggression.**
If your child is being hurtful, give your child different ways to express anger. You can ask:

- “What can you do to express your feelings without hurting someone?”

**Studies find that teaching problem solving is effective in combination with helping children learn about feelings and how they can be expressed.**

6. **Help your child begin to come up with his own solutions to handle conflict.** Once your child is calm, you can say:

- “What ideas do you have for handling this situation? I will write down your ideas, and we will try them next time you are feeling angry.”

When you encourage your child to think of new ways to handle anger, you are helping your child learn to take responsibility for handling conflicts.

7. **Share your own strategies.** For example:

- “I get angry, too. When I am angry, I need time to myself to calm down.”

When you share your own strategies, your son is learning things from you that he may not have noticed without your sharing them.

**Studies by Martin Hoffman of New York University studied the concept of discipline techniques and found that “other-oriented discipline” is most effective. This means that you make your son aware of the impact of his behavior on others.**

8. **Help your child understand how others feel and respond when he is aggressive.** For example, you can say:

- “When you hurt someone, that person gets angry and wants to hurt you back.”

9. ** Pretend with your child.** Pretending is an important way children learn to take the perspectives of others. You can ask questions to help your son pretend or you can re-enact a time when there was a conflict and ask your child to think of other ways to deal with this situation.

10. **See discipline as teaching.** Hoffman found that children were more likely to listen to others and be more considerate if parents weren’t harsh or didn’t use physical force. When you need to say no to stop a child from misbehaving or set a consequence, do so as firmly, but as non-aggressively, as you can. Think of this as teaching a skill rather than managing difficult behavior.

**These ten strategies help your child learn the skill of Perspective Taking.**

**Perspective Taking** goes far beyond empathy; it involves figuring out what others think and feel and forms the basis for children’s understanding of their parents’, teachers’ and friends’ intentions. Children who can take the perspective of others are also much less likely to get involved in conflicts.

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The Seven Essential Life Skills Every Child Needs

At its core, knowing how to play with others involves understanding what others’ think and feel. When a child can understand and empathize with other children, she can read their cues and clues and get along with them much more effectively. This is the life skill of Perspective Taking.

There are many ways you can help your child learn this skill, whether your child is in a preschool program or whether it is with play dates or with family members.

Ross Thompson of the University of California at Davis emphasizes how Perspective Taking helps children make sense of their own and others’ experiences. Studies have found that young children who learn Perspective Taking have a better adjustment to kindergarten. It helps them understand what their teachers and other children want and expect.

You already provide opportunities for your daughter to play with others, which is crucial! Now you can use these times to promote the skill of Perspective Taking with your daughter.

1. **Talk about your feelings, your child’s feelings and the feelings of others.** Talk about your own feelings in certain situations. Help your child come up with a vocabulary of feelings words to label her own experiences. For example, you could say:
   - “I’m feeling pretty grumpy right now after being stuck in traffic. I just need a couple of minutes to unwind before I’m ready to play with you.”
   - “You seem frustrated that you can’t find where that puzzle piece fits.”

   Alison Gopnik of the University of California at Berkeley has been a leader in studying how people develop what is called “theory of mind”—becoming aware that others have different beliefs, desires and intentions from our own. She has found that this understanding develops over time. By around a year and a half, young children can understand that someone else might like something that they don’t like. When they are preschoolers, they can understand that someone else might know or believe something that you don’t know. This type of understanding continues to develop over our lifetime.

   Alison Gopnik and others have found that the more children hear adults talk about others’ perspectives, the more likely they are to learn this skill.

2. **Use everyday moments to talk about other people’s perspectives.** Perspective Taking involves developing the self control to put aside one’s own thoughts and feelings in order to understand the viewpoints of others. In everyday
situations, talk with your child about how other people might be feeling or thinking and why. For example, you could say,

- “Your baby cousin doesn’t understand that this toy is yours. She just sees something colorful and interesting and wants to explore it.”
- “He didn’t like it when you grabbed his banana. It made him feel angry.”

3. **Stay tuned into your child.** Children are often their “best selves” when they feel understood by others. But, as we promote Perspective Taking in our children, we have to practice it. You can model this life skill by putting yourself in your child’s place and trying to understand what the world looks and feels like to her. Children who feel known and understood are likely to have an easier time connecting with others.

4. **Pretend with your child.** During pretend play, use words and actions to act out and talk about how your characters are feeling, what they’re thinking and why. When your child pretends to be someone else, he or she is practicing the life skill of Perspective Taking in a way that is fun and comfortable.

5. **Talk about the characters in books and stories.** When reading books or telling stories with your child, ask her about what the characters might be thinking and feeling in the story and why. You can say things like:

- “Why do you think the boy is crying?”
- “What could his friend do to help him feel better?”
- “What do you do when you feel sad?”

Stories are great tools with which to explore the world of emotions in a safe and pleasurable way.

The American Academy of Pediatrics also recommends encouraging interactive play between your child and other children and helping your child understand the importance of taking turns. Some ways to do this might be during pretend play with your child or when playing games. **These five strategies will promote Perspective Taking and move from managing children’s behavior to promoting life skills in fun and doable ways.**

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The Seven Essential Life Skills Every Child Needs

Children who understand their own thoughts and feelings as well as those of others are better able to deal with challenging or frustrating social situations. You can help your child learn to get along with his classmates by promoting the life skill of Perspective Taking.

Alison Gopnik of the University of the University of California at Berkeley explains why Perspective Taking is fundamental to children’s future:

*If we want to be successful and deal with other people, [we need] to understand the people around us—particularly what’s going on in their minds.*

1. **Make sure it isn't a bullying situation.** Even though the teacher does not think this is a bullying situation, you might want more information. Ask the teacher to describe exactly what is happening in school, using specific examples. See if your son can tell you the situation from his perspective. Knowing the details will enable you to help your son more effectively. If you think it is bullying after hearing the details, you may want to get further help from a counselor in the school or outside.

Larry Aber or New York University has been studying aggression in children for many years. Children were more likely to behave aggressively if they had what Aber called a *hostile attribution bias*. In other words, some children jump to the conclusion that someone is being hostile (or “mean”) towards them even when there isn’t enough information to be certain of the other person’s intention. In his studies, he and his colleagues have found that when they helped children understand others’ feelings and behavior, the children were much less likely to act mean, to get into the conflicts, and to fight with each other.

2. **Help your child see the whole picture.** Learning to step back from a situation and make sense of it is an important part of Perspective Taking. You can help your child learn how to evaluate and interpret complex social situations by:
   * encouraging him to think about people’s responses to everyday situations by asking questions like, “Why do you think your aunt got upset when her friend said she looked tired?”; and
   * asking your child to think about characters’ intents in books, movies and television shows. You can prompt your child to think about what the characters do and how the characters are feeling and ask questions like, “I wonder why the main character yelled at his little sister? How do you think he was feeling?”

You can then have your child apply this kind of thinking to what is happening at school.

3. **Practice developing social skills by role playing with your child.** When children pretend, they are “trying on” different perspectives and experimenting with how others think and feel.
   * Try re-enacting a time when there was a conflict or making up a scenario like one your child might face at school.
   * Ask your child to switch roles with you. You can be your child and he can be you.

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**PRESCRIPTIONS FOR LEARNING**

**Getting Along with Classmates**
Promoting the Life Skill of Perspective Taking in School-Agers
Six Strategies That Work in Moving from Managing Children’s Behavior to Promoting Life Skills

**Question:** My six-year-old son has some trouble getting along with his classmates. He complains that other kids are “mean” to him, and sometimes he hits them when he feels that he has been treated unfairly. His teacher does not think that he is being bullied, and she suggested that he might just need some time to mature. How can I help him deal with his friends more successfully?
• After pretending together, brainstorm with your child to think of other possible ways to deal with this situation beside hitting back—thus, promoting problem solving and conflict resolution skills.

The goal of this kind of play is to help your child see experiences from new perspectives, while helping him problem solve the situation at school. Keep it fun!

Ross Thompson of the University of California at Davis concluded through his and others’ research that how children gain insight into “what goes on in people’s hearts and minds” depends on how parents interpret “the everyday events of their lives.”

4. Continue to talk about others’ feelings and thoughts—beginning with yours. You can promote the skill of Perspective Taking every day by talking about thoughts and feelings. Your child looks to you to show him how to label his emotions and how to respond to the world around him.

• Let your child in on your feelings without burdening him. You can say things like, “I had a hard day so I am feeling grouchy.”

• Then share your strategies for coping like, “I am not going to yell at people but wait until I calm down and then talk with my boss about what is bothering me and see if we can come up with a better solution.”

• Use movies and television shows to discuss characters, their feelings and the situations they are in. Try to tie the conversation back to your child’s life.

The American Academy of Pediatrics makes several suggestions of ways to help your child manage difficult emotions. You can let him know:

• “Everyone gets angry at times, but if you hit others rather than solving the problem, it just makes them want to hit you back.”

5. Help your child understand the impact of his or her behavior on others. Parents’ use of discipline strategies influences the types of behaviors children show, as well as their ability to understand others’ perspectives.

Martin Hoffman of New York University studied discipline techniques and found that what he called other-oriented discipline was most effective. This means that parents make the child aware of the impact of his behavior on others. For example, if you see your child hit another child, an other-oriented approach would be: “I bet when you hit your classmate he gets angry and doesn’t want to hang out with you. What other ways could you work things out with him?”

6. See discipline as teaching. Hoffman also found that, with other-oriented discipline, children were more likely to listen to others and be more considerate. When children learn about the impact of their behavior on others, they begin to make connections between actions and the meanings behind them.

However, if parents combined the other-oriented discipline with harsh discipline (threats or physical force), the other-oriented discipline was not effective. The power of harsh discipline blocks the lessons of other-oriented discipline. When you need to say no, to stop a child from misbehaving, or set a consequence, do so as firmly but as calmly as you can.

These six strategies will help you move from managing children’s behavior to promoting life skills in fun and doable ways.

Perspective Taking goes far beyond empathy; it involves figuring out what others think and feel and forms the basis for children’s understanding of their parents’, teachers’, and friends’ intentions. Children who can take others’ perspectives are also much less likely to get involved in conflicts.

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While it's normal for there to be some sibling rivalry, there is a lot that parents can do to help their children get along. In fact, conflict can be an opportunity for parents to promote the life skill of Perspective Taking, or learning to see another person's point of view. This skill is essential to relating to others and to reducing conflict.

Rebecca Saxe of MIT uses fMRI technology to study the brain region used when children think about others' thoughts and feelings. She says:

*In order to predict what somebody else is going to do if they know different things than you do, if they believe different things than you do, or if they see different things than you do, you have to be able to step out of your own perspective and step into their perspective.*

*Another way to say that is, you have to be able to inhibit your own knowledge … [T]hat's an incredibly important accomplishment, and it's developing a lot, changing a lot, between ages two and six.*

1. **Help your children learn to understand their sibling's perspective by stepping back and asking questions.**
   
   Suggest to your children that they try to imagine what their sibling might be experiencing. You can use questions like:
   
   - “What are the things that might be annoying/bothering him or her?”
   - “How might he or she be feeling?”
   - “What might he or she be thinking?”

   They can do this in private or directly ask each other.

2. **Share your understanding.** Talk with your children and express what you see as each child’s experience in the disagreement. Often this type of communication goes best during a quiet one-on-one time with each child. When you talk about your observations, be open to hearing what your child thinks of your hypotheses.
   
   - “Does it make sense to him or her?”
   - “Does your child have other ideas about what might be going on?”

   The important message for both you and your children to keep in mind is that not everyone experiences the same situation in the same way.
Larry Aber of New York University has studied the connection between perspective taking and aggression and has found that children who can understand others have less of a need to strike or hurt others. According to Aber, when you help teach your children how to gain perspective on a situation, “you’ve opened the gate to their using problem-solving skills.”

3. **Use a problem- or dilemma-resolving technique.** Just as with adults, when children come up with solutions on their own, they’re more likely to try to make them succeed. With your children:
   - identify the dilemma, problem, or issue;
   - determine the goal;
   - come up with alternative solutions that might stop a fight or mediate a conflict;
   - consider how each solution might work. Discuss the pros and cons;
   - agree on a solution to try; and
   - evaluate the outcome, and if the solution isn’t working, try something else.

Through this process, you are helping your children get along better and you are encouraging problem-solving and cooperation—vital skills for navigating the social world.

The American Academy of Pediatrics suggests that you set guidelines on how children can disagree and resolve conflicts. You can have regular family meetings to express thoughts and feelings, as well as to plan the week’s events and to give positive recognition. Avoid taking sides on sibling conflicts and/or making comparisons between your children. Each child is unique and has different needs.

In the words of Daniel Stern, a pioneer in the field of child psychiatry, the process of growing up is “learning to BE (or get along) with others.”

**These three strategies will promote Focus and Self Control and move from managing behavior to promoting life skills in fun and doable ways.**

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Getting Along with Friends
Promoting the Life Skill of Perspective Taking in School-Agers
Six Strategies that Work to Move from Managing Children's Behavior to Promoting Life Skills

Question: My six-year-old son has some trouble getting along with his classmates. He complains that other kids are “mean” to him, and sometimes he hits them when he feels that he has been treated unfairly. His teacher does not think that he is being bullied, and she suggested that he might just need some time to mature. How can I help him deal with his friends more successfully?

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If we want to be successful and deal with other people, [we need] to understand the people around us—particularly what's going on in their minds.

1. Make sure it isn't a bullying situation. Even though the teacher does not think this is a bullying situation, you might want more information. Ask the teacher to describe exactly what is happening in school, using specific examples. See if your son can tell you the situation from his perspective. Knowing the details will enable you to help your son more effectively. If you think it is bullying after hearing the details, you may want to get further help from a counselor in the school or outside.

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2. Help your child see the whole picture. Learning to step back from a situation and make sense of it is an important part of Perspective Taking. You can help your son learn how to evaluate and interpret complex social situations by:
   - Encouraging him to think about people's responses to everyday situations by asking questions like: “Why do you think your aunt got upset when her friend said she looked tired?”
   - Asking your child to think about characters’ intents in books, movies and television shows. You can prompt him to think about what the characters do and how the characters are feeling and ask questions like: “I wonder why the main character yelled at his little sister? How do you think he was feeling?”

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   - Try re-enacting a time when there was a conflict or making up a scenario like one your child might face at school.
   - Ask your child to switch roles with you. You can be your child, and he can be you.
   - After pretending together, brainstorm with your child to think of other possible ways to deal with this situation beside hitting
You can promote the skill of Perspective Thinking back—thus, promoting problem solving and conflict resolution skills.

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   - Let your child in on your feelings without burdening him. You can say things like: “I had a hard day, so I am feeling grouchy.”
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COMMUNICATING
In a landmark study, Catherine Snow of Harvard University and her colleagues, followed a number of families over several years to determine which experiences provided to children made the biggest difference in their language, literacy and reading skills. One of their most significant findings was the importance of family support of children’s literacy. Snow explains:

These were [families] that had bought children’s books; that ensured that children [were] read to regularly by parents and by other adults; that had pencils, paper, and crayons around and encouraged children to write. [These were] homes in which the parents themselves also engaged in regular reading, got a daily newspaper, or read magazines and books regularly.

There are many things you can do to develop your toddler’s interest in reading while also promoting the life skill of Communicating.

1. **Be a role model.** Children learn what they see and live. It is powerful to show your child that you enjoy reading, too. To help encourage your child’s interest in reading, books need to be part of his or her daily life. You can create family traditions around story time, like always reading the same book at a particular time of year or telling stories at meals.

2. **Create a reading together routine.** Toddlers do well when things are predictable. You can create an interest in reading by making it a predictable part of your day. It is a good idea to set aside a regular time for reading together. Reading before naptime or bedtime creates a comforting routine that can help with the transition to sleep, while also supporting your toddler’s language development.

3. **Offer choices and embrace repetition.** Toddlers love to have control through choices. You can offer two or three books and let them choose. Children learn also through repetition so it is a good sign if your child always picks the same book. Go ahead and read it over and over again.

Talking with your child about what you are reading is what’s most important, says Snow:

*The book creates a platform on which the conversation takes place. [The adult is there to] interpret, to name the pictures, to describe the action, to explain what’s going on.*

This is one of the reasons why research shows that families in which children are read to regularly are families whose children are more likely to arrive at school ready to learn, with bigger vocabularies and a greater capacity to participate effectively in classrooms. [It’s] because they’ve had this kind of focused conversation with adults.

4. **Talk about books.** Reading books provides an ideal opportunity to have conversations, which is what really prompts literacy.

- Start a conversation about what’s going on in the story by naming the pictures you are looking at together. Take turns pointing at what you see.
- Asking “what” and “why” questions are great conversation starters. They help your child talk through his or her understanding of the story. For example, questions like:
  - “What sound does the animal in this picture make?”
  - “Why is that doggie hiding?”
5. **Make it fun.** It can be more fun for both of you if you read stories in a dramatic way. If a cow is going “moo,” or a car is going “beep, beep,” you can make that sound. Or if a gorilla is thumping its chest, you can imitate the action. And if you see something in your everyday life that reminds you of the book, talk about that too: “Look the fire engine is going “Whirrr,” just like in your book. Can you make that sound?”

The American Academy of Pediatrics suggests helping children make connections between their own lives and the stories you read. You can ask questions like, “That girl in the picture is laughing; she looks happy. Do you remember when you laughed so hard?”

6. **Go back and forth in talking together.** The best conversations for learning involve what researchers call “serve and return”—you or your child does something (serves) and the other responds (returns), back and forth like a game of ball. “Children learn language in a situation where they talk to you about what they’re interested in and you respond,” says Catherine Snow.

   - Use books to watch your child’s response to the words and pictures. Build on what your child says (with sounds, with looks, with words or movements) and extend it.
   - Listen and be responsive to your child, with or without books. If your toddler talks about a stuffed animal, play along: “Does your bear want to go night-night? Let’s give your bear a nap.”
   - A central purpose of literacy is communicating and communicating centers on conversations—with sounds, with words, with movements and with facial expressions. Explore various ways to communicate with your child. Use gesture, facial expressions, words, songs, or silly sounds to encourage his or her interest in sounds, words and language.

7. **Use rich and expressive language in talking with your child.** In taping family dinnertime conversations over the course of several years, Catherine Snow and her colleagues found that parents who used a large vocabulary in conversations with their children had children with better literacy skills later on.

**Catherine Snow explains:**

“[I]n some of the families… there’s wonderfully interesting conversation about how the construction of the expressway is going to influence the neighborhood. And these conversations are full of wonderful words like budget and proposal and neighborhood—words that children might not use [and] probably don’t understand fully. We found that families that used words like that in their dinner table conversations had children with much larger vocabularies two years later.

- Make sure to use new words, as well as different ways of saying familiar words.
- Use a variety of verbs, nouns and adjectives.

**These seven strategies will promote Communicating and move from managing behavior to promoting life skills in fun and doable ways.**

**Communicating** involves much more than understanding language, speaking, reading and writing—it is the skill of determining what you want to communicate and realizing how your communications will be understood by others. It is the skill that teachers and employers feel is most lacking today.

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**Understanding NO**
Promoting Communicating in Infants
Seven Strategies That Work in Moving from Managing Children’s Behavior to Promoting Life Skills

**Question:** How can I get my baby (12 months old) to understand “no?”

Babies are born primed to communicate. The way we talk, the expressions on our faces and in our eyes, what we look at, and our gestures influence how our children learn to understand what we want to communicate, which, in turn, help them learn to communicate in the future.

1. **Be clear about what you want to communicate.** Helping your child learn to understand the word NO starts with understanding what YOU want to communicate and how you want to communicate it. If you say NO, but don’t really mean it, your child will be able to sense that. So, make sure you only say NO when you mean it.

Babies can tell the difference between a stern tone of voice and a pleasant, soothing one. In one experiment, Anne Fernald of Stanford University tape recorded parents saying things that conveyed approval or disapproval in several different languages—French, German, Italian, Japanese, British English and American English. She and her colleagues then tested five-month-old American babies with these “messages” in unfamiliar languages. Even when they didn’t understand the language, the babies could understand the difference between a positive and a negative tone of voice:

> These American babies would hear the praise and they would smile and relax; they would hear the [disapproval] and they would stiffen a little and their eyes would widen. These sounds—in a different language, from a total stranger—had predictable effects on babies’ behavior.

2. **Use your tone of voice to help your baby understand.** Given how sensitive babies are to adults’ tone of voice, it isn’t necessary to overdo it. You can say NO in a firm tone of voice, but not overly stern. The time for using a louder tone of voice is if you need to protect your child from an immediate danger—like touching a hot stove or running into the street. There is no reason to be harsh, however.

3. **Give the reasons for NO.** Even if baby doesn’t fully understand your words, follow up the NO with a short explanation.
   - “Touching something hot will hurt.”
   - “If you hit your sister, it hurts her.”

This kind of discipline (called other-oriented discipline by Martin Hoffman of New York University) helps build cooperation because children begin to learn how their actions affect themselves and others.

Susan Goldin-Meadow of the University of Chicago has found that when parents gesture, children are more likely to gesture, and they learn more words.
4. **Use body language.** You can use hand gestures to help your baby understand your meaning. For example, you can point to a particular object with your NO, such as pointing to the hot stove.

5. **Say YES when you can.** Save NO for the situations that you are serious about. Most of the time, be positive or redirect your child so he or she isn’t always hearing NO. Saying YES makes your job more fun and saves NO for when it really matters.

**The American Academy of Pediatrics suggests the following:**

6. **Don’t punish your baby with spanking, shouting or overly long explanations.** A firm “No!” is the best way to deal with minor irritations (just as “Yes!” is a great way to reward good behavior).

7. **Distract your child with something new.** Get your child’s attention or direct her to a new activity to reduce unwanted behavior.

**These seven strategies will promote Communicating and move from managing children’s behavior to promoting life skills in fun and doable ways.**

**Communicating** involves much more than understanding language, speaking, reading and writing—it is the skill of determining what you want to communicate and realizing how your communications will be understood by others. It is the skill that teachers and employers feel is most lacking today.

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The Seven Essential Life Skills Every Child Needs

There are plenty of things you can do at home to help your child become a lifelong reader by promoting the life skill of Communicating.

Kathy Hirsh-Pasek of Temple University says that literacy—learning to talk, learning to read and then reading to learn—is an ongoing process:

*It's a process that starts with the very first smiles, the very first gaze, the very first back and forth [connection]. That turns into an opportunity for us to label words and for children to map those words together with their ideas, to understand the intents and minds of others and to express what they want to say.*

1. **Have back and forth conversations with your child.** Exposing your child to language begins in infancy when you communicate with sounds, words, movements and facial expressions. You can use what child development researchers call “serve and return”—you or your child does something (serves) and the other responds (returns), back and forth, back and forth, like a game of ball. It’s important to remember that a central purpose of literacy is to communicate.

   - Comment on what your child is doing: “You kicked that ball very hard and it went rolling across the floor.”
   - Talk about feelings—yours and your child’s: “You are rubbing your eyes and seem tired. I am tired too. We had a busy day.”
   - Ask specific, not general, questions: “Are you pretending that that paper towel tube is a car? Is it driving on the road? Wonder where it is going?”
   - Always listen to your child’s ideas and respond back: “Is the car going to the store? What do you think will be at the store when the car gets there?”
   - Remind your child of past experiences you have shared: “Remember when we went to the store and bought lots of bananas? Now we have eaten them all up, and we need to go get some more.”

In The Home-School Study of Language and Literacy Development, Catherine Snow, David Dickinson and Patton Tabors, then of Harvard University, found that when parents use what is called extended discourse with their children, they increase their children's language and literacy skills. Snow says:

*Extended discourse means talk about topics that goes on longer than just a sentence or two. So, for example, when families read books, they didn’t just read the book and then ask questions like: “What's that?” or “What color is it?” They asked questions like: “Why do you think [the character in the story] did that?” [They asked] questions that involved the children in analysis, in an evaluation of the book, but also questions that gave them a chance to talk through their understanding of the story.*

*They [also] often encouraged children to tell stories about their own lives that mirrored the stories in the book like: “The little bear is scared. Do you remember when you were scared?”*

2. **Read interactively with your child.** Catherine Snow calls books a platform for conversations to take place. Create family traditions around story time and the conversations that the books make possible. Asking “what” and “why” questions are great conversation starters. You can:

   - Have your child guess what happens next and then see if it comes true.
Judy DeLoache of the University of Virginia and Roberta Golinkoff of the University of Delaware have found that:

“Learning takes place best when young children are engaged and enjoying themselves.”

3. Help children listen for the sounds in words and recognize letters in playful ways. You can encourage your child’s love for word sounds by singing and dancing together. You can also play sounds and word games like:

- If you see a cat, point to it and ask: “What else sounds like cat? Does rat sound like cat? Yes! Does bird sound like cat? No!”
- When you are shopping, say you are looking for something that begins with the sound “aaa.” Help your child figure out what food begins with that sound—apple, apricot, avocado, for example.
- Look for signs and letters. Ask: “What letter does your name begin with? Can you find that letter somewhere on this cereal box?”

Although learning to read involves recognizing the sounds of words and the sight of letters, don’t turn this into a performance where your child is reciting letters to please you. You want to keep the passion for learning alive!

Judy DeLoache of the University of Virginia notes the importance of reinforcing the notion that pictures “stand for” objects and that the squiggles on a page “stand for” written words.

4. Help children understand concepts of print. Dorothy Strickland of Rutgers University points to helping children acquire a concept of print—that pages are read from left to right, that there is a beginning and an end of books, a top and a bottom of pages, and space around each written word.

You can help your child do this by:

- using your finger as a pointer to show the words going from left to right;
- holding the book upright and turning the pages from left to right; and
- reading the title and the author’s name, while pointing to the words on the cover.

5. Make writing down words an everyday part of what you do. You can encourage reading with your four year old by taking down what he says. Here are some suggestions:

- Children are always interested in their names. Write down your child’s name on a piece of paper and invite your child to draw on that paper.
- If you make a list for the market, talk to your child about what you are writing, such as: “We need milk. This is the way I write milk” or “Here is a big ‘M’ to remind me that I need to buy some milk.”
- Write down what your child says. If your child draws a picture, ask: “Is there something you want to say about this picture?” Don’t assume that your child is necessarily drawing a picture of something, so better to ask the question this way rather than to say: “What did you draw?” Write down your child’s words to go along with the picture.

These five strategies help move from managing children’s behavior to promoting life skills in fun and doable ways.

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The American Academy of Pediatrics suggests that family meals are an excellent way to support language and social development in young children. There are many strategies you can use to help your daughter sit with the family during meals and help her be involved in learning at the same time.

1. **Wait until you are ready to serve the meal before you bring young children to the table.** Children tend to have more patience for family meals if they haven’t spent a long time waiting beforehand.

2. **Create positive routines.** You can create traditions that everyone enjoys, such as each person sharing a memory from the day. You can change the questions for sharing—the funniest thing that happened today, the most surprising thing, the most exciting thing, etc.

Catherine Snow of Harvard University and her colleagues taped family meal times and playtimes to determine how these experiences are linked with children’s competencies in language, literacy and the skill of Communicating later on. She found that conversations and the use of language make a big difference in how well children learn.

3. **Involve everyone in the conversation.** Your child will be more likely to want to stay at the table if the conversation involves her. The most effective conversations go on for more than a few sentences. Snow found that the most effective conversations engage children by asking them to think about what the family is discussing.

   For example, you can ask:
   - “Why do you think that happened?”
   - “What do you think will happen next?”

   Ask your child to talk about her experiences and to tell stories about her own life.

4. **Use rich and diverse language and ask questions in engaging back and forth conversations.** Another key finding from Snow’s research is that some families have wonderfully interesting conversations that include rich and diverse language, even when children don’t understand every word the adults are using. So, just by hearing your conversations, she is learning.

5. **Play games at mealtime.** Word games also promote communicating skills. For example:
   - **Play guessing games with the first letters of words.** Ask, “How many foods can we think of that start with the letter ____?” All family members can take turns giving answers.
• **Word of the day.** Ask family members to find a new word to share with the rest of the family.
• **Rhyming games.** Ask the youngest child at the table to say a word. Then each family member goes around the table saying a word that rhymes with it until no one can think of any more.
• **Play tongue twisters.** Use traditional tongue twisters such as, “Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers” or create your own. For example, have your child name one food on the table. The next person would repeat the word and add another word that starts with the same sound (e.g., “milk, meatball”) continuing around the table.

Anne Fernald of Stanford University and her colleagues found that the way mothers spoke with their children at 18 months helped their children have larger vocabularies and were able to process words faster at 24 months. As Fernald puts it, these “little differences can add up to a big effect.” She says:

> For the young child, there are always new things to be learned in almost every sentence they hear. So, that advantage [of processing language more quickly], small as it is, can add up to a big advantage later on because the capacity for learning is then increased.

6. **Speak often, use different words for the same object, use different types of words and use long phrases.**

In a study of children’s memories, Robyn Fivush and her colleagues at Emory University taped conversations between mothers and children. This and other studies have found that the children of mothers who speak in more elaborative ways (the same would be true of fathers) are more likely to have strong memories, better language and literacy skills, and a better understanding of the perspectives of others. In other words, they have better Communicating skills.

7. **Elaborate.** You can use the following strategies to keep the conversation going with your daughter:
- discuss past experience in rich detail;
- ask lots of open-ended questions or “wh” questions: why, what, where, or who questions;
- repeat back what she says, thus encouraging her to say more;
- provide more feedback as the conversation goes back and forth; and
- show a genuine interest in what she is saying.

8. **Share your own stories.** Mealtimes are a great time to share your own stories with your daughter. When you talk with her about your childhood and family history, you are passing down traditions and memories that will bind your family together.

**These eight strategies will help promote Communicating and move from managing children’s behavior to promoting life skills in fun and doable ways.**

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Having Family Conversations with Preschoolers
Promoting Children's Communication Skills
Seven Strategies that Work in Moving from Managing Behavior to Promoting Life Skills

Question: I have heard that it’s very important to have dinner together as a family, so that we can have time for family conversations. Unfortunately, in my family, it is rare that we are all home for dinner at the same time. What are some other ideas for family conversations outside of dinnertime?

Kathy Hirsh-Pasek of Temple University says that adults can promote talking together in everyday ways: “It’s through conversations, it’s through questioning, it’s [through] being responsive to what a child is interested in.”

There are many simple and fun things you can do—wherever you are—to have family conversations. These activities will also help your child develop the life skill of Communicating.

1. **Use everyday moments.** Every experiences you have together provide an opportunity to talk together.
   - What are the times that a few—if not all—of you are together as a family? Is it breakfast? Sunday morning? Trips to run errands? Shopping? Use whatever moments you have together to talk. Even if it is just two of you, these conversations are important.
   - Think of those in-between moments as times to talk. For example, studies show that children are more likely to ask questions when there is time to reflect, like riding in the car. Take advantage of times like this to encourage your child to share with you what’s on his or her mind.

Susan Goldin-Meadow of the University of Chicago has found that talking without words—using gestures and touch—are crucial to Communicating. She says: “I like to say that children enter language hands first!”

2. **Use touch and facial expressions.** Sometimes you or your child may not feel like talking. There are many other nonverbal ways to communicate with your child.
   - Be aware of your facial expressions. Make an effort to smile or wink at your child.
   - Come up with a special gesture with your child that only the two of you know and use it to connect with each other without words.
   - Make sure to give hugs or pats on the back or a soft squeeze on the arm to let your child know you are there and you love him or her.

Sometimes these small actions are just what’s needed to communicate your love and positive feelings to your child, especially as he or she grows older and is less likely to sit on your lap or hold your hand.

In a study designed to identify the ingredients of “quality” conversations (the kind of conversations that promote literacy and communication skills), researchers Kathy Hirsh-Pasek of Temple University, Roberta
Golinkoff of the University of Delaware, Lauren Adamson of Georgia State University and their colleagues found that three things are especially important: 1) being engaged together; 2) having rituals and traditions; and 3) keeping the conversation going.

3. **Talk about things you care about.** If the conversation is one that your child begins, pay attention and listen. If you start the conversation, make sure that it is something that you care about, such as telling stories.

- Share your stories. You can help your child develop the life skill of Communicating by telling stories about your life and asking your child to tell stories about his or hers. Stories are what bind us together; they are what tell us that we are part of a family or community. They convey our traditions and our favorite memories. Family stories are often connected in our experience with laughter or other emotions and, thus, become more strongly embedded in our memories.

4. **Create family traditions around talking together.** You can start a tradition while in the car, before bed or anytime you are usually together, by using conversation starters that everyone, including you, answers. For example:

- “What was best thing that happened today?”
- “What was the worst thing that happened today?”
- “What are you most excited about today?”

You can also start conversations with other prompts like,

- “Once upon a time …”
- “If I had one dream come true, it would be …”

Let your child have a turn at choosing the questions and prompts.

5. **Keep the conversation going.** The best conversations and interactions involve what researchers call “serve and return”—you or your child does something (serves) and the other responds (returns), back and forth, back and forth like a game of ball. Researchers call these conversations “fluid and connected,” meaning that the ideas being discussed build on each other.

- You can play a game with your child called Ping Pong. The goal of the game is to keep the back and forth conversation going for a determined amount of time (a few minutes) without “dropping the ball.” Use a real ball if you need to. You or your child can pick a topic to talk about. This game offers great practice in communicating and is lots of fun.

**In a study of the role of families in children's literacy and language development, Catherine Snow, a renowned expert on language development and professor at Harvard Graduate School of Education, notes:** “[F]amilies that used words ... that children might not use [and] probably don’t understand fully ... had children with much larger vocabularies two years later.”

6. **Use rich and diverse language.** Children learn words from listening to and watching adults. When you model rich language, you are helping expose your child to the joy of language. Use new words as well as familiar words in new ways.

7. **Play word games.** Word games make language fun and contribute to your child’s “phonemic awareness,” or his understanding of the sounds of letters. Games like these also encourage conversation and introduce new vocabulary. After all, as Kathy Hirsh-Pasek, Roberta Golinkoff and their colleagues say: “Learning takes place best when young children are engaged and enjoying themselves.”

- Play rhyming games or try tongue twisters.
- Learn new words together with the Dictionary Game. One of you picks a letter and then you both find words you don’t normally use. Then give the other person a turn.
- Play the Definition Guessing Game where one of you chooses a word and the other guesses the definition. Then check the answer. Were you right or wrong?
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Making Reading Interesting
Promoting the Life Skill of Communicating in School-Age Children
Five Strategies That Work in Moving from Managing Children’s Behavior to Promoting Life Skills

**Question:** My six-year-old hates reading. How can I make it more interesting for him?

1. **Find out why your child isn't interested.** If you can, try to figure out why your child hates reading. Is reading too difficult, too pressured, or too quiet when your child prefers being active? You can:
   - Have a non-judgmental conversation with your child. Can he tell you what he doesn’t like about reading. Knowing what’s wrong is a good place to start in trying to turn this around. Can he tell you anything he does like about reading? That gives you something to build on, to do more of.
   - You may want to speak with your child's teacher to see if your child needs any extra help with reading skills. However, there is much you can do at home to help your child.

   Many children have what Judy DeLoache of the University of Virginia and her colleagues call “extremely intense interests”—which they define as a long-lasting passionate interest in a category of objects or activities.

   Children's interests are the launching pads for your helping your son enjoy reading.

2. **Let your child select books and/or magazines that extend his interests.** Your child is more likely to spend time reading if the material reflects things that are important and meaningful to him.
   - If your child is interested in sports, for example, guide him to choose stories that relate to sports. You can even teach him how to read and understand the statistics reported in the sports section of the newspaper.
   - Whatever your child's interest, choose a variety of fiction and nonfiction books. You can also use toys, dolls and figurines that reflect this interest in pretend play.

   According to Catherine Snow of Harvard University, a renowned expert on language development, “research shows that families in which children are read to regularly are families whose children are more likely to arrive at school ready to learn, with bigger vocabularies and a greater capacity to participate effectively in classrooms.”

3. **Make reading a family tradition and share stories.** You can read stories aloud as a family; these times will become treasured memories. Bedtime reading with a parent does not have to end when your child is capable of reading on his or her own.
   - Be a role model. As your child grows, he is watching and learning from you. Show your child that reading is important to you. Share what you are reading with your child and have conversations about each other's books or magazines.
   - The best conversations and interactions involve what researchers call “serve and return”—you or your child does something (serves) and the other responds (returns), back and forth like a game of ball.
• When reading with your child, watch and listen to your child’s response to the words and pictures. Build on what your child says and extend it with open-ended questions and comments. Children learn Communicating by asking and responding to questions.

4. **Use reading in your everyday life and see if your child can begin to identify sounds, letters and words.** When out and about with your son, bring identifying letters, words, and sounds into your everyday conversations. You can say:

  • “I see something that begins with the same letter (or sound) as your name. What do you think it is?”
  • “I see something that sounds like (or rhymes with) fall. Do you know what it is? It's a ball!”
  • “What do you think that sign is telling us to do? It says, ‘Stop,’ so we'd better stop up ahead.”
  • “Can you help me find the kind of spaghetti we want on the shelf? I cut out the label from the last box and it looks like this.”

You can apply these same strategies to books you are looking at together, asking your child to find a letter or a word on a page that is familiar.

5. **Help your child make personal books.** You can use photos from one of your son’s special experiences and write about them together. Your child can also illustrate his own story. This activity promotes the life skill of Communicating by helping your child think about the story he wants to tell.

As the researcher Kathy Hirsh-Pasek from Temple University says, “Books can take us to worlds well beyond their covers.”

These five strategies will help your child with the life skill of Communicating and help you move from managing your child’s behavior to promoting life skills in fun and doable ways.

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MAKING CONNECTIONS
Playing with Household Items Instead of Toys
Promoting the Life Skill of Making Connections in Infants and Toddlers
Four Strategies That Work in Moving from Managing Children’s Behavior to Promoting Life Skills

Question: My baby has no interest in regular toys and prefers to play with household objects. Should I be worried? What can I do to help make sure she is learning while she is playing?

There are a number of reasons that young children prefer household objects to many commercial toys:

- Household objects are what is called “open ended,” meaning that they can be used in many different ways, whereas some commercial toys are limited in their use (you turn them off or on, etc.). Even the toys that children most prefer over long periods of time are open-ended, such as blocks or other building materials, small cars or trucks, little animals or people, and drawing materials.
- Household objects represent the adult world and children are trying to figure out the adult world.
- Household objects give children a chance to test their ideas about how things work. For example, when your child drops a spoon from the highchair, he or she might be testing out the many ways the spoon can fall and the different sounds it makes. This kind of play with everyday objects can promote the life skill of Making Connections.

According to Alison Gopnik of the University of California at Berkeley:

Children are using the same kinds of processes as scientists. They’re making up theories about what’s going on around them; they’re checking to see if those theories fit what they see and what other people are telling them. And they’re testing those theories by asking questions and making predictions. You [can] see this in their play.

Here are some strategies you can use to promote your child’s learning when playing with household objects:

1. Keep it fun. Here are some things your child can do with household objects:
   - An empty plastic bottle can become a pretend spaceship or boat in the bathtub.
   - A plastic bottle with things inside can become a musical instrument.
   - A pot with a wooden spoon can also become a musical instrument.
   - An empty cardboard box can become a hiding place for your child or for playing, “Where are my socks? They’re there.”

Play does need not be expensive! What matters is that the things your baby plays with promote your child’s imagination and learning. For other ideas of everyday things you can do to promote learning, download the free app on your iPhone or Android phone for Joinroom.org.

Kathy Hirsh-Pasek of Temple University and her colleagues conducted an experiment in which researchers evaluated how children’s learning changed when their parents helped. Hirsh-Pasek says:

When a parent joins in, we call it “guided play”, and it always elevates the level of play. So parents shouldn’t feel like they have to stay out and let the kids play on their own—they should join in, but they can’t be the boss. They have to follow the child’s lead and talk about the kinds of things that the child is interested in.
2. **Join in.** Play interactively with your child and follow her lead. Try to act as a guide, not the boss. You can do this by:
   - describing what your child is doing and if your child is older, asking questions that don’t just have yes and no answers;
   - imitating her actions; and
   - adding on to her ideas.

When you join in with your child in her play with household objects, you are helping her bridge (or make connections among) experiences and the larger ideas behind them.

**The American Academy of Pediatrics notes that play is a critical part of development, and toys are a critical part of play.** Avoid household objects or toys that make loud or shrill noises, toys with small parts, loose strings, cords, rope, or sharp edges, and toys that contain potentially toxic materials.

3. **Select items and toys carefully.** Infants explore with their eyes, by putting things in their mouths as they grow, to feeling and touching and trying out how things work. You can play with your baby with simple cause-and-effect household objects or toys. Some suggestions include:
   - items you can roll back and forth;
   - things your baby can push; and
   - objects that can be put into a container and dumped out.

Karen Wynn of Yale University finds that you promote learning on the deepest level when you tap into children’s passion and enthusiasm and build on it. She says:

> Babies are deeply driven and passionate about understanding the world and understanding the people around them. A baby’s whole essence is about plugging into the world.

4. **Use your imagination.** Making unusual connections is at the core of creativity. Introduce your child to new ways of using familiar objects. For example:
   - Your baby can bang on a variety of kitchen pots and plastic containers as drums, using different utensils as “drum sticks.” Point out the different sounds that these objects make.
   - You can also set up an area for water play. You can do this outside in nice weather, on top of a plastic sheet or tablecloth indoors, or at the kitchen sink with a safe stool. Your baby can explore filling and pouring with different containers and using different utensils.

In these simple and fun ways, your child is beginning to explore basic ideas of science and math while learning about concepts like cause and effect, size and shape. You are encouraging your child to explore the endless possibilities in the world and paving the way for lifelong learning.

**These four strategies will promote the life skill of Making Connections and move from managing children's behavior to promoting life skills in fun and doable ways.**

**Making Connections** is at the heart of learning—figuring out what’s the same and what’s different, and sorting these things into categories. Making unusual connections is at the core of creativity. In a world where people can google for information, it is the people who can see connections who are able to go beyond knowing information to using this information well.
You can change clean up from a time you and your toddler hate into a time where she or he is learning and having fun.

1. **Turn clean up time into a game.** Here are some suggestions:
   - “I am going to pick up two toys, can you pick up one?”
   - “I will look for red toys. Can you look for blue ones?” Even if your child doesn’t know her colors or numbers, you can guide him or her.
   - You can also play racing games. “Let’s see how fast we can pick up the books.”
   - You can play a guessing game: “Guess what I am going to pick up next? It is round and red and bounces.” If your child is too young to guess then say the answer, “It’s a ball.”
   - Singing makes pick up time interesting.

Kathy Hirsh-Pasek of Temple University and Roberta Golinkoff of the University of Delaware have found that “learning takes place best when young children are engaged and enjoying themselves.”

When you play these games regularly, you are not only getting things cleaned up, having fun, and teaching your child about words and what they mean, you are also promoting the skill of Making Connections among objects, words, numbers, time and colors. When children make these connections, they are learning that one thing can “stand for” something else, like the word “two” stands for two objects. This is referred to as symbolic representation.

Judy Deloache of the University of Virginia says, “There’s nothing that sets human beings apart from any other species on the planet more than our symbolic capacity. If you think about what you know about the world, a vast proportion of what you know comes through symbolic representation.”

2. **Create a helper and be a team.** If presented positively as working on something together, many children enjoy being helpful and doing adult things. Toddlers are not grown up enough to fully help with cleaning, but they can definitely participate and learn from the process of cleaning up after play. Invite your child to help you. Let her or him know you are a team, and that he or she is an important member. For example:
   - During clean up time you can give your child a specific job as a helper. “You are in charge of cleaning up the blocks. I will be in charge of cleaning up the books.”
   - You can let your child choose which job to do. “Would you like to be in charge of cleaning up the cars or the stuffed animals?”
In asking these questions, you are helping children see what things go together to form categories. Alison Gopnik of the University of California at Berkeley says, “Children are learning what categories things fit into ... what makes a cat a cat? Or what makes a dog a dog? And it turns out that that’s a very important thing to understand. If you can sort the world out into the right categories ... then you’ve got a big advance on understanding the world.”

3. Create doable tasks. If you say, “Clean up your room,” that can feel overwhelming to a young child. Instead, give your toddler specific things to do, “Put your books in the basket of books.” In doing so, you are also helping your child “make connections” between one book and a basket of books.

4. Create clues that help your child know where things go. For example:
   • You can draw a picture of a shirt and tape it to the drawer where shirts go if your child is helping you put away her laundry.
   • You can also put different colored dots with magic markers on the back of each piece of a puzzle—blue dots on one puzzle, red dots on a different puzzle so if you have a jumble of puzzle pieces, you can figure out which pieces go with which puzzles.

5. Mix things up as your child learns. You can also help your toddler learn to make new or unusual connections by changing up how you group toys together. For example:
   • On some weeks, toys can be sorted by category (e.g., stuffed animals together, books together, etc.) and on other weeks toys can be sorted by color (e.g., red things together, blue things together, etc.).

This kind of game helps your child learn to think flexibly.

These five strategies with help your child Make Connections and move from managing children's behavior to promoting life skills in fun and doable ways.

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Children have what researchers call a number sense from early infancy on: they can tell the difference between large and small numbers of things. We can build on this early ability in positive or negative ways. Susan Levine from the University of Chicago says:

*What we’re finding in our studies is that early input plays a role in whether children are good at math. Whether people consider themselves a math person or not a math person may be related to the teaching they receive.*

1. **Use “math talk” often.** One of the best ways to help your son become a “math person” is by helping him *make connections* between his experiences and math ideas—numbers, quantities and shapes—in everyday ways. For example, you could say:
   - “How many people will be here for dinner? Let’s count the people, so we put out enough forks.”
   - “Do you think this old shirt still fits you? Let’s measure it against the shirt you wore yesterday to see if it is the same size, bigger or smaller.”

2. **Reinforce words with objects or gestures.** Susan Levine found that when you point or use objects, it will make a difference in how your child learns math. For example, you can say:
   - “We need to push the number three on the elevator.” Hold up three fingers and then count the floors as you pass them in the elevator.
   - “We have five people eating with us, let’s count five spoons.” Point to each spoon as you count to five.

3. **Think of math as a language that you want your child to become fluent in.** You can think of math as a “language” that helps your son make sense of his everyday experience instead of thinking of math as memorizing how to count to five and other facts and figures (typically taught through math exercises, flashcards, videos, etc.). It is useful to imagine learning a new language other than the one you typically speak—a language that has unfamiliar symbols for letters. If you were presented with a list of these symbols to memorize, it would probably be harder than if you were around others who use this language and symbols in their everyday life. The same is true for helping your son with math. If you use math ideas as a part of everyday experiences, your son is less likely to resist learning math and more likely to become fluent.
Children learn math concepts through play. Roberta Golinkoff of the University of Delaware and Kathy Hirsh-Pasek of Temple University compared the play of preschool-aged children in three groups. The first group was given a prebuilt block structure and invited to play with it. The second group was given blocks and told what to build. The third group was given blocks and simply invited to play. They found that the children in the third group were more likely to use words and concepts related to space and math ideas (e.g. next to, behind, biggest and littlest) than the other two groups.

4. Encourage play with building materials. Making Connections is learning what symbols represent; these connections are the basis for learning math. You can use anything that children can build with, such as old boxes or pillows.

5. Give children family work that involves counting, categorizing and sorting. For example have your son help you:
   - measure ingredients as you cook together;
   - sort laundry by colors; or
   - arrange canned goods by categories (soups, vegetables, beans, etc.).

In one experiment, Geetha Ramani of the University of Maryland and Robert Siegler of Carnegie Mellon University had four-year-old children play a board game based on Chutes and Ladders. When they spun the spinner to move forward, the researchers asked the children to count the numbers on the spaces out loud. For example, if a child landed on a five and the spinner said to move ahead two spaces, the child was to count, “six, seven.” This game proved effective in improving children's ability to count, to understand which numbers are bigger or smaller than others, and to read numbers.

6. Play games. When children play games (board games and card games), they are gaining information and getting better at the skill of Making Connections.

These six strategies will help promote math skills and Making Connections and move from managing children's behavior to promoting life skills in fun and doable ways.

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Cheating and Games
Promoting the Life Skill of Making Connections in Preschoolers
Four Strategies That Work in Moving from Managing Children’s Behavior to Promoting Life Skills

Question: Our four-year-old son tends to cheat when he plays games. What should we do?

You can address the issue of cheating and games with your child while also promoting the life skill of Making Connections. Making Connections is at the heart of all learning—from math and science to language and the arts and is also critical in playing games. In order to make connections, however, children need practice and guidance in following rules.

Making Connections is a life skill that involves the Executive Functions of the brain. These are the skills used to manage our attention, our emotions, and our behavior in order to reach our goals. Phil Zelazo of the University of Minnesota has found that this higher level of thinking becomes possible with children during the preschool years and older.

1. **Be aware of your child’s development.** The part of the brain dedicated to Executive Function does not really start to mature until children are preschoolers. This means that your child is still working on developing his understanding of rules. It’s important not to push children beyond their developmental capacities in game playing, while you work on helping your child understand the rules. This could make the experience frustrating instead of fun. Games should be fun to be most effective!

The American Academy of Pediatrics suggests that children tend to cheat, or set their own rules, when they are engaged in games that are too complex for them to handle.

2. **Ask questions to help your child connect his feelings to the game and help him reflect on the rules.** It is important to take the time to see and understand the connections your child is making. Your child may be seeing the game differently, using his imagination or misunderstanding the rules. To help your child begin to make connections between his thoughts, feelings and actions, ask questions like:
   - “I noticed you spun the wheel and got a four, but you moved ahead three spaces. I wonder why you did that?”
   - “I wonder how you feel when you roll a small number.”

**Phil Zelazo has also found that it is important to help children “reflect on the rules,” by repeating them and giving them feedback.**

You can remind your child of the rules:
   - “Remember, in this game, the rule is to move the dice ahead the number of spaces that it says on the spinner.”

It isn’t helpful to call your child a “cheater”—which can trigger bad feelings about himself. Continuing to help your child reflect on the rules is what matters. Having these conversations can help him figure out the difference between the rules and what he wants and/or his interpretation of rules.
Games are often based on promoting math ideas. Susan Levine of the University of Chicago emphasizes the importance of talking about number and quantity in everyday ways beyond playing games. Her studies have shown that using the “language of mathematics” or adult use of math talk in everyday, real-life conversations and situations makes a big difference in children’s learning.

3. **Talk about math ideas in everyday life.** There are so many opportunities to reinforce the ideas behind games in everyday life, such as:
   - “Let’s count to see how many people will be here for dinner so we know how many forks to get.”
   - “Can you guess how many steps there are to the corner of the street?”
   - “When we put away the laundry, let’s find the socks that match each other.”

By asking these questions, you are helping your child make connections between the ideas in the games and what is happening all around him.

4. **Practice winning and losing when you play games.** When you play board games with your preschooler you can also practice social skills:
   - Help him to practice valuable skills of social learning, like how to take turns.
   - Model what it means to be a “good loser” and a “good winner” by saying things like, “Oh well, maybe I’ll win next time” and “It was fun to play together.”
   - Show your child strategies for counting and keeping track of his place. For example, “I rolled a six. Now I’m going to touch each space on the Board as I count.”

**These four strategies promote the life skill of Making Connections and move from managing children’s behavior to promoting life skills in fun and doable ways.**

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Researchers Robert Siegler of Carnegie Mellon University and Geetha Ramani of the University of Maryland found that children entering kindergarten differed on their ability to understand mathematical ideas and wondered if playing board games might help. In one experiment, they created a simple game based on Chutes and Ladders in which they asked children to spin a spinner and say the corresponding number names in order to advance on the game board. For example, if a child is on space number five and is going to advance two spaces, she has to say “six and seven.” This game proved effective in increasing children’s ability to count, to understand which numbers are bigger or smaller than others and to read numbers. Children playing the same game—but with colors, not numbers—didn’t make the same advances in their ability to understand these mathematical ideas.

1. **Play board games.** By playing board games, children gain information about numbers, but they’re also promoting the skill of Making Connections. They’re learning math concepts. For example, that:
   - the number on the spinner or dice *stands for* a rule—whether to advance one or two or more spaces;
   - each space on the board *stands for* one number—that is, there is one-to-one correspondence between the number name and the number on the board;
   - each number is *connected* to the next number in a sequence, from small to large numbers; and
   - there is a *linear relationship* between the numbers from one to ten; that is, each number in the sequence is one larger than the previous number.

Michael Posner of the University of Oregon found that when children have training in the arts, they learn to pay attention, to stay focused and to resist distraction, noting that these skills lead to improvements in “fluid intelligence and in IQ.”

2. **Let your child explore the arts.** The Dana Foundation convened a group to investigate the connections among learning, arts and the brain. In their report of their findings, they stated:

   *There is growing evidence that learning of the arts—whether it be music, dance, drama, painting—has a positive impact on cognitive life.*

Specifically, they reported:
   - links between the practice of music and skills in geometry;
   - correlations between music training and learning to read, perhaps through an increased ability to differentiate sounds; and
   - connections between training in acting and improvements in memory.
3. Provide opportunity for practice by asking your child to help with everyday activities that involve math concepts.

Kurt Fischer of Harvard University says:

*When we look at how people build knowledge in the short term, one of the most basic processes we see is that people need to build knowledge over and over and over and over in order to get more stable knowledge.*

4. Practice in using mathematical ideas at home can be fun as well as useful. There is no end to the things you can count or sort—the number of steps to the front door, the number of times you need to twist the can before it opens, the number of minutes until it is time to leave home, the number of white socks versus blue socks. In addition:

- ask your child to help keep track of costs at the grocery store or plan and budget a meal; and
- let your child help you measure ingredients as you cook together.

5. Encourage your child to set goals and make a plan to achieve them. You can help your daughter make connections by setting a goal, something that she wants to achieve and breaking it down into concrete steps to achieve this goal. By spelling out these steps, math skills are being developed. For example:

- if she wants to purchase something, help her set up a savings plan by calculating how much she needs and developing a work plan; or
- if she wants to learn something new, set a timeline and create action steps with her.

It is always a good idea to discuss your concerns with your child’s teacher.

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TAKING ON CHALLENGES
Toilet Training
Promoting the Life Skills of Critical Thinking and Taking on Challenges in Toddlers/Preschoolers
Five Strategies That Work in Moving from Managing Children’s Behavior to Promoting Life Skills

**Question:** How will I know when my child is ready to learn how to use the toilet?

Toilet training is one of the necessary life skills you need to teach your children as they grow up. Learning how to use the toilet can also be an opportunity for you to promote the life skills of Critical Thinking and Taking on Challenges with your toddler or preschooler.

The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that you wait for several developmental signals that indicate your child may be ready to begin the toilet training process.

1. **Make sure your child is developmentally ready.** There is so much involved in learning how to use the toilet. Watch for the following clues:
   - Your child shows an interest in the potty and talks about going to the bathroom.
   - Your child is able to recognize what it feels like to have the physical urge to go to the bathroom.
   - Your child is able to pull his or her pants up and down independently and be aware of when he or she is going to have a bowel movement, in addition to figuring out the right amount of time to get to the toilet before going in his or her diaper.
   - Your child should be able to remain dry for a period of about two hours and knows the difference between being wet and being dry.

Your child is learning Critical Thinking skills in this kind of awareness.

2. **Think of this development milestone as an opportunity to teach your child skills not as an upsetting or stressful time.** Even so, mastering a developmental milestone can cause stress. The difference between it being normal or difficult stress is YOU!

Study after study reveals that children who have warm, caring, and trusting relationships with the adults in their lives are less prone to stress. Megan Gunnar of the University of Minnesota says:

> [S]tress is when challenge overwhelms your capacity to manage it. With a trusting relationship with a parent who’s been there for you and [who’s] accessible, you’re not overwhelmed.

3. **Provide support for your child’s learning.** Your child is better able to learn the skill of Taking on Challenges when he or she feels supported and encouraged by you and other important adults.
   - Make sure to praise your child’s efforts, successful or not. You can say things like:
     - “You worked so hard to make it to the potty in time. We’ll try again next time.”
     - “You did it! You used the toilet!”
Researcher Nathan Fox and his colleagues at the University of Maryland have found that parenting styles make a difference in how children respond to stress. Fox differentiates between parents who are guiding their children's behavior and those who are interfering.

4. **Have your child come up with his or her own strategies to try to use the toilet.** Studies have found that one of the best ways to guide children is to give them practice in coming up with their own solutions. You can ask your child:
   - “What ideas do you want to try in learning to use the toilet?”
   - “Tell me when you want to try to wear big boy/big girl pants for a little while?”

Even young children can become part of the solution by being given opportunities to suggest ways to take on this challenge.

5. **Acknowledge that mistakes are part of learning.** Your child learns from trial and error. In fact, when you react to your child's mistake as simply a normal part of learning, you are doing more than helping your child become toilet trained. You are teaching your child a fundamentally helpful approach to life.
   - Rather than being judgmental or critical when your child has an accident, talk to him or her the way you would like to be talked to when you make a mistake. You can say things like:
     - “Everybody has accidents when they're learning to use the toilet. Keep practicing and you’ll get it!”
     - “Maybe next time we will try to go to the bathroom after you drink your water.”

Children take their cues from what you do, not just what you say. They pay close attention to your facial expressions, gestures and tone of voice to gain information about what's happening and to learn how to manage challenges.

**These five strategies promote the life skills of Critical Thinking and Taking on Challenges and move from managing children's behavior to promoting life skills in fun and doable ways.**

**Taking on Challenges:** Life is full of stresses and challenges. Children who are willing to take on challenges (instead of avoiding them or simply coping with them) do better in school and in life.

**Critical Thinking** is the ongoing search for valid and reliable knowledge to guide beliefs, decisions and actions.
Life usually goes more smoothly when you and your child work together on problems. Creating a morning routine WITH your child is a great opportunity to form a team effort by using a problem-solving process and at the same time, promote your child’s Critical Thinking skills.

In the words of Frank Keil of Yale University, “Critical thinking is the ability to step back and look at what you’re doing, to look at the dimensions of the task, and to evaluate.”

Phil Zelazo of the University of Minnesota has described this as a process that uses Executive Functions of the brain, which come into play whenever we engage in behavior that is deliberately goal directed.

1. **Identify the dilemma, problem or issue.** To clarify the problem from each of your perspectives, have a frank but not judgmental discussion with your child about:
   - “What does our morning routine feel like now to each of us?”
   - “How each of us would like our morning routine to feel like in the future?”

   This conversation will be a starting point in identifying a mutual goal.

2. **Determine a mutual goal.** You can continue the conversation by stating each of your goals:
   - “I’d like you to be dressed, with your teeth brushed, and hair combed by 7:30 AM so we can enjoy each other and not have to rush.”
   
   Next, restate your child’s goal:
   - “You want mornings to be more peaceful with us not fussing at each other.”

   Then summarize what you both want that’s the same:
   - “We both want mornings to be calmer with less fighting.”

The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that when disciplining your child, you give her opportunities to make real choices.

Having your child work with you on solving this problem does provide an opportunity to give her some control and choice over how the morning goes.
3. **Come up with alternative solutions.** When you and your child come up with new solutions that you haven’t already tried, you are encouraging her to think flexibly. Ask your child to think of ALL of the ideas she has to make the mornings better.

It is a good idea to write down all of these ideas without judgment. Include your own needs too, such as a visual checklist of the required morning tasks.

**Phil Zelazo** notes that considering alternative solutions requires inhibiting “the tendency to do what one has done before in that situation.” In order to consider alternative solutions, you must use the skill of self control rather than going on automatic pilot and taking the easy way out.

4. **Consider how these alternative solutions might work.** Go through each of the ideas your child has suggested with an open mind, discussing:

- “What would work for you if we tried out this idea? What wouldn’t work?”
- “What would work for me? What wouldn’t work?”

These questions help your child take your perspective, another important life skill.

If your child hasn’t come up with any acceptable ideas, you might suggest some:

- “I know a child who had better mornings when there was a to-do list. I know of another child who liked a timer.”

Alternatively, you can ask your child what someone she admires might do:

- “What do you think your cousin would do if she had this problem?”

**Phil Zelazo** also says, “Critical thinking is closely related to reflection ... Reflection results in and makes critical thinking possible.”

5. **Select a solution to try with consequences if it doesn’t work.** After discussing and evaluating several options for a new morning plan, select one together to try out. This process involves reflection and critical thinking.

Talk with your child about the consequences if the solution doesn’t work. Enlist her in deciding on a consequence that she really cares about, one that will motivate her to make a real effort to carry through the new approach you have mutually decided upon to make mornings calmer and more peaceful.

6. **Evaluate the outcome over time, and if the solution isn’t working, problem solve again.** If you’re not getting the results you want, be willing to change your plan or the way that your plan is being carried out. Involve your child in your evaluation of how it’s going and what changes could be made by going through the problem-solving process again.

**These six strategies will promote the life skill of Critical Thinking and move from managing children’s behavior to promoting life skills in fun and doable ways.**

**Critical Thinking** is the ongoing search for valid and reliable knowledge to guide beliefs, decisions and actions.

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The Seven Essential Life Skills Every Child Needs


Craig Ramey of Virginia Tech Carilion Research Institute says:

We think of explorers as the people who get into spaceships and go into outer space or the people who generations ago got into boats and went across the ocean. Well, every child is an explorer because children always have first experiences with the most [basic] things in the world. [These] may be old hat to us, but [they’re] brand-new to them. The parents who can keep that enthusiasm for discovery [alive], who say, “Go ahead and try something a little bit more—take the risk,” [have children who] later in life are likely to come up with novel insights, new ways to do things and solve problems.

1. **Encourage your child to explore, to ask questions, to be curious.** When your child asks questions she is trying to figure things out. You can keep the back and forth conversation going by asking her questions and by drawing her attention to things that she may be curious about. For example:
   - “What do you think would happen if you pushed that toy under water in the bathtub?” or “What do you think the dog is trying to tell us by barking?”
   - “Your question is interesting. What are your ideas about what the answers might be?”

2. **Be a role model of curiosity.** Children have a drive to understand the world around them—to figure things out. If you show that you are interested in learning new things, in figuring things out and in wondering, then your child is likely to follow your lead.

Laura Schulz of MIT has found that children lose interest more quickly when adults tell them the answers to their questions than when they let them continue to explore.

3. **Don’t answer your child’s questions too quickly or do things for your child.** When your daughter asks a question, see if she could figure out the answer by herself, acting like a scientist and conducting an experiment. For example, if she notices that butter melts on the toast, ask whether that is always true, and see if butter melts on toast that is cold or just on toast that is hot.

Question: I notice that when my preschooler comes up against a challenging task, like completing a difficult puzzle, she tends to want to walk away and give up or to try to get me to finish her work for her. How can I help her to be curious, stay engaged and not give up so easily when she has difficulty figuring something out?

**PRESCRIPTIONS FOR LEARNING**

**Not Giving Up When There Are Challenges**

Promoting Critical Thinking in Preschoolers
Six Strategies That Work in Moving from Managing Behavior to Promoting Life Skills
4. **Work up to harder problems—stretch your child, but not too far.** Give your daughter easier puzzles, at first, and, as she succeeds in doing those, make the puzzles a little bit harder. Think of this as stretching your child just a little above what she has done before.

If your child is cautious or shy in a new situation, introduce new experiences slowly. Jerry Kagan of Harvard University says:

*For the shy child, the advice is very simple. Don’t overprotect. Gradually expose the child to the events he or she is afraid of.*

If you take over and do things for your child (like finishing the puzzle), the message to your daughter is that you can do the puzzle, but she can’t. Instead, help her figure out how to do the puzzle.

5. **Provide clues when your child is trying to figure out something.** In helping your child figure out how to do the puzzle, provide clues such as,

- “This part of the picture is blue. Do you see other puzzle pieces that are blue?” or
- “This shape is curved. Do you see any places on the puzzle where a curved shape might fit?”

Carol Dweck of Stanford University has found that if adults praise children’s efforts—“You are working hard!”—rather than their intelligence—“You are so smart!”—children are more likely to try hard things, or, in Dweck’s words, “love challenge.”

6. **Praise children for their efforts or strategies, not their personalities.** When your child is working hard, you can say:

- “You are using many different ways to figure out how to do this puzzle, like finding colors that go together.”
- “When something you try doesn’t work, you keep trying. That is the way you learn new things.”

*These six strategies will promote Critical Thinking and move from managing children’s behavior to promoting Life Skills in fun and doable ways.*

**Critical Thinking** is the ongoing search for valid and reliable knowledge to guide beliefs, decisions and actions.

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Television presents many opportunities for you to help your daughter be aware of the influence of commercials and other programs while also promoting the life skill of Critical Thinking.

David Anderson of the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, a researcher on children's television, emphasizes the importance of using television to trigger conversations:

_If a parent is wise, they can use a television program as a launching point for an important discussion about the world, about the child or about how the child is interpreting the world._

1. **Watch television as much as possible together and have “just in time” conversations about the commercials you watch together.** As an adult, you know that the purpose of commercials is to sell you something, but children need help in recognizing that purpose—commercials can seem like entertainment, just like the shows. As you watch commercials with your child, talk about the products and the strategies the advertiser is using. You can ask her things like:

- “What is this ad trying to sell?”
- “How is this ad trying to sell things to children?”

These conversations, as we describe in greater detail below, will help develop your child’s awareness of the impact of commercials as well as help her to improve her ability to take in information, think about it, reflect on it and analyze it.

According to a study conducted by Judy DeLoache at the University of Virginia, young children tend to believe much of what adults tell them, even if it differs from their experiences in the real world. But, as they enter the school-age years, they can make even greater use of Critical Thinking skills.

2. **Encourage your child to question and think scientifically about the ads and products.** You can model and promote scientific thinking by asking your daughter to question the claims, uses and purposes of products. This will also encourage her to pursue the truth and find out more, an essential building block for later learning. Ask her:

- “How can you find out if this information is true? What are the advertisers trying to make us feel or do with this commercial?”

David Considine, writing for the Center for Media Literacy, suggests that when parents view television with their children, they can guide their children to think about the content, the presentation, the external forces shaping the ads and their connection with reality.
3. Turn your child's requests into games and activities that will promote critical viewing skills. Children progress in their ability to evaluate the accuracy of information from others, moving from an understanding that others might not know something to an understanding that others may be intentionally or unintentionally deceitful. You can help your child hone these abilities by promoting critical viewing skills in fun and engaging ways.

- Pros and Cons. While watching television, ask your child to create a list that includes the pros and cons of the products she wants. This strategy promotes Critical Thinking as it asks her to reflect on the difference between her wants and her needs. She must also think about the effect of outside sources on what she wants.
- Commercial Critic. Your child can be a commercial critic and ask questions that promote the skills of analyzing and evaluating like:
  - “Why did the advertising company choose that way of selling the product?”
  - “How were they doing it? Were they trying to say all the cool kids wear this brand of clothes? Were they trying to use peer pressure or sex or adventure or humor to sell this product?”
  - “Does this ad work? Does it make you remember the name of the product?”
  - “Do you want to buy it? Why or why not?”
- Facts versus Opinion. Encourage your child to be a detective and find out what is true and what is only opinion within the commercial asking questions like: “Is this ad accurate? Are the claims they are making true?”

These three strategies promote the life skill of Critical Thinking and move from managing children's behavior to promoting life skills in fun and doable ways.

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Relationships with friends become increasingly important in your child’s life as she gets older. She may have a best friend or group of friends, an important milestone in her social development. All children are influenced by what their friends say and do.

There are two complementary approaches you can take to help your daughter become “her own person.”

• One approach involves helping your daughter evaluate what her friends tell her, so she doesn’t just do what they do or believe what they say. This calls on the life skill of Critical Thinking.

• The second approach involves providing her with opportunities to lead, calling on the life skill of Taking on Challenges.

Critical Thinking involves “thinking about our thinking” by reflecting, analyzing, reasoning, planning and evaluating.

1. Keep your child’s development in mind. Critical Thinking develops rapidly during the school-age years. Children progress in their ability to evaluate the accuracy of information from others, moving from an understanding that others might not know something to an understanding that others may be intentionally or unintentionally deceitful.

According to Frank Kiel of Yale University: “Critical thinking is the ability to step back and look at what you’re doing, to look at the dimensions of the task and to evaluate.”

2. Help your child learn to evaluate information received from others. You can help your daughter evaluate what she hears—whether from her friends or from others—thus increasingly gaining the ability to tell the difference between fact and fiction. You can:

• Ask your child questions that help her think about what she has been told, whether by her friends or even something she sees on television, by asking her questions such as: “Do you think this information is true? Why or why not? How can you find out more?”

• Engage your child in looking at the reasons behind why people behave in certain ways: “Do you think that she wants you to like her or to be impressed?” Having this kind of discussion around books you read or movies and TV shows you see together, provides non-threatening ways to sharpen her thinking about why people behave as they do.

3. Help your child role play how to handle situations where she might be included to go along with the group. Again, this role playing may be most effective at first if it is not about her own situation, but she is thinking about others. Ask her:

• “What could this character in the story have done not to go along with the group?”

Brainstorm as many possible approaches as you can and then evaluate what might work and what wouldn’t, so we can
4. **Give your child opportunities to lead in different kinds of groups.** In doing so, you are helping your daughter learn the life skill of Taking on Challenges, as she moves into other groups.

Think about your daughter’s interests and see if you can find groups where she might be with other children with similar interests or help her create a new interest, such as:

- Is there a sports, art, singing or church group where she could shine?
- Could you work together as a family on a volunteer activity, such as bringing food to shelters?
- Could she work with younger children, sharing a talent or an interest or helping them with school work, such a learning to read? Older children can feel much more competent when they can lead younger children.

**Carol Dweck from Stanford University and her colleagues conducted a study where she gave fifth grade children tasks (like those found on intelligence tests) that became increasingly difficult. In this study, she found that the children in the study who “wilted” in the face of stress or a challenge saw their abilities—their intelligence—as something that can’t be changed. They believed that people are born smart or not. She called this view of the world a “fixed mindset.” In contrast, the students who continued to pursue the challenge saw their abilities as something that they could develop and change—they had a “growth mindset.”**

Carol Dweck and her colleagues then found that the way adults praise children affects their mindsets or beliefs about the world. Children who are praised for inborn characteristics like: “You are so smart!” are likely to have a fixed mindset. Children who are praised for their effort or strategies are more likely to have a growth mindset.

5. **Praise your child’s efforts and the strategies she uses in becoming her own person.** Each step your daughter takes in becoming her own person can be acknowledged. You can say things like:

- “You didn’t go along with your friends when they wanted to do something you thought was wrong. I know that took courage, and I am so proud of you!”
- “You helped the young child you are working with feel good about herself and be her own person! That is such an important thing to learn in life.”

**These five strategies will help you move from managing children’s behavior to promoting life skills in fun and doable ways.**

**Critical Thinking** is the ongoing search for valid and reliable knowledge to guide beliefs, decisions and actions.

**Taking on Challenges:** Life is full of stresses and challenges. Children who are willing to take on challenges (instead of avoiding them or simply coping with them) do better in school and in life.

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Jack Shonkoff at Harvard University says, “There is no learning without relationships.”

1. **Make sure the time is right.** Taking on Challenges involves helping your child learn how to try something that is new or difficult. Giving up the pacifier can be a challenge for you and for your child. Sucking is one way that young children calm THEMSELVES down. If your child has used a pacifier and you now want to help him or her “break the habit,” there are a number of questions you can ask yourself:
   - “When is the right time to begin the process?”
   - Whether or not you are getting pressure from others, it is important that YOU really feel that it is the right time for you and your child to find other ways to calm down. If you aren’t convinced, then you need to wait until you are sure of yourself.

2. **Learning to take on a challenge is not deprivation and is easier when a trusting relationship is present.** If it is the right time, recognize that you are teaching your child a skill—rather than depriving your child. Teaching young children constructive ways to manage stress can benefit them throughout their lives. Remember your toddler's secure relationship with you offers a lot of support in handling challenges. Sometimes knowing that you are there with a hug will be just what your toddler needs to get through the challenge of the moment.

Studies by Heidelise Als at Harvard Medical School have found that building on what children are already doing is one of the best approaches to learning to take on a challenge.

3. **Observe what else your child does to calm down and help your child find other strategies to use.** Taking on Challenges triggers many different emotions and the need to cope with them. Ask yourself if your child developed other ways of soothing himself or herself. All of us need ways to calm down—think about what works for you. It is much easier to move away from pacifiers if there is a substitute—something else that comforts your child, such as a favorite stuffed animal or a blanket or music. You will need to play detective to figure out what your individual child does to self soothe.

Once you have some ideas of alternatives to pacifiers, then talk about it with your child: “I notice that when you can calm yourself down, you hold your soft toy. Let’s try that today.” Other suggestions to try are:
   - distraction to a new activity;
   - a blanket to rub or hug;
   - dim lights; and
   - soothing music or singing to your child.

**Questions:** How can I help my toddler stop using the pacifier?
4. **Remember: it is a process.** Taking on Challenges involves having others be helpful to us. It doesn’t have to be an all or nothing process. Your toddler can give up a pacifier first when he or she goes out, but still have one at naptime or bedtime, moving later to giving that up. Older children can be even more active in taking on the challenge of giving up the pacifier. Ask your child for ideas of how he or she can do this and agree on a sensible idea to try out.

**These four strategies will promote Taking on Challenges and move from managing children's behavior to promoting life skills in fun and doable ways.**

**Taking on Challenges:** Life is full of stresses and challenges. Children who are willing to take on challenges (instead of avoiding them or simply coping with them) do better in school and in life.
MIND in the Making
The Seven Essential Life Skills Every Child Needs

PREScriptions FOR LEARNING

Separation Anxiety
Promoting the Life Skill of Taking on Challenges with Infants
Four Strategies That Work in Moving from Managing Children’s Behavior to Promoting Life Skills

Question: My eight-month-old baby becomes very upset whenever I leave her with her grandparents. How can I help her calm down?

In their guidebook *Bright Futures*, the American Academy of Pediatrics writes, “Infants as young as four to five months may be anxious when they are separated from their parents, to meet strangers or even familiar relatives. Even grandparents need to allow the infant to warm up to them before taking the infant ... This anxiety peaks at about eight months. This is not a rejection, but a normal developmental phase.”

1. **Remember this is a normal part of your child's development.** Anxiety in the face of separation from a parent, no matter how brief, is a typical reaction for an 8-month-old. This emotional response is actually a good sign that your baby feels secure and connected with you and knows the difference between you and other people.

Babies will differ in the intensity of their reactions and in the amount of time it takes for them to calm down and return to normal. So, you need to pay attention to whether your baby is enthusiastic or cautious about new experiences. You will want to provide more support to a baby who tends to be cautious.

Babies also differ in the intensity of their reactions as they get older. As they gain more experience in being away from you and in calming themselves down, they are less likely to get upset.

Instead of thinking of separation in a negative way, think of it as an opportunity to teach your child to venture out into new experiences and to learn skills in Taking on Challenges.

2. **Create support for your baby in learning to calm down.** The key is to recognize your baby’s natural tendencies and to build on these. Look for ways that your baby already tries to calm down by asking yourself what is helpful to her.
   - “Does your baby use a pacifier or suck a finger?”
   - “Does your baby calm down when you sing or hold her?”
   - “Does your baby respond to new people better when they approach slowly and quietly? Or is she ready for active play right away?”

You will help your baby through this transition by doing what helps best.

In an experiment, Joseph Campos of the University of California at Berkeley found that when a parent looks fearful, a baby will not try something new; but if the parent smiles or shows that trying something new is okay, the child will venture out. As Campos puts it, “By 11 to 12 months of age, the baby is already doing what all of us do when something unusual happens—we look around to figure out how other people are reacting.” Adults' nonverbal reactions determine how babies react in uncertain situations.
3. **Send messages of confidence.** Taking on Challenges includes believing that you can do things even when they are hard. Your child is looking to you for signals on how to respond based on your actions, words and non-verbal communication. Be reassuring by showing confidence in your child’s ability to make the separation.

For example, you can say:
- “You can do this. I will come back and pick you up.”
- You can also remind your baby of the skills that she has: “Grandma is here to take care of you. You have your blanket, and I will come back to pick you up.”

Even at a very young age, your child can understand the message you are sending with all of the things you say (and don’t say).

4. **Be clear.** It is best to be clear. For example, give a kiss, assure your child that you will come back, and then leave. Although it’s hard, it works best to leave once you have said goodbye and not to linger. When the transition is prolonged, it is often more difficult on both you and your baby. If babies are with loving and sensitive adults, they typically calm down soon after their parent leaves.

**These four strategies will promote the life skill of Taking on Challenges. When you help your child be with other loving adults, you are modeling a skill you want your child to learn and giving her a skill for life.**

**Taking on Challenges:** Life is full of stresses and challenges. Children who learn to take on challenges (instead of avoiding them or simply coping with them) do better in school and in life.
The Seven Essential Life Skills Every Child Needs

Toilet training is one of the necessary life skills you need to teach your children as they grow up. Learning how to use the toilet can also be an opportunity for you to promote the life skills of Critical Thinking and Taking on Challenges with your toddler or preschooler.

The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that you wait for several developmental signals that indicate your child may be ready to begin the toilet training process.

1. **Make sure your child is developmentally ready.** There is so much involved in learning how to use the toilet. Watch for the following clues:
   - Your child shows an interest in the potty and talks about going to the bathroom.
   - Your child is able to recognize what it feels like to have the physical urge to go to the bathroom.
   - Your child is able to pull his or her pants up and down independently and be aware of when he or she is going to have a bowel movement, in addition to figuring out the right amount of time to get to the toilet before going in his or her diaper.
   - Your child should be able to remain dry for a period of about two hours and knows the difference between being wet and being dry.

Your child is learning Critical Thinking skills in this kind of awareness.

2. **Think of this development milestone as an opportunity to teach your child skills not as an upsetting or stressful time.** Even so, mastering a developmental milestone can cause stress. The difference between it being normal or difficult stress is YOU!

   Study after study reveals that children who have warm, caring, and trusting relationships with the adults in their lives are less prone to stress. Megan Gunnar of the University of Minnesota says:

   \[
   \text{[S]tress is when challenge overwhelms your capacity to manage it. With a trusting relationship with a parent who's been there for you and [who's] accessible, you're not overwhelmed.}
   \]

3. **Provide support for your child's learning.** Your child is better able to learn the skill of Taking on Challenges when he or she feels supported and encouraged by you and other important adults.

   - Make sure to praise your child’s efforts, successful or not. You can say things like:
     - “You worked so hard to make it to the potty in time. We’ll try again next time.”
     - “You did it! You used the toilet!”
• Provide your child opportunities to practice toilet training in his or her play. You can encourage sitting on the potty anytime, even with your child’s clothes on, or to letting a stuffed animal use the toilet and do all of the steps.
• Read books or tell stories with your child about using the toilet.
• Provide your child with visual reminders in the bathroom like pictures or drawings of the steps

Researcher Nathan Fox and his colleagues at the University of Maryland have found that parenting styles make a difference in how children respond to stress. Fox differentiates between parents who are guiding their children’s behavior and those who are interfering.

4. Have your child come up with his or her own strategies to try to use the toilet. Studies have found that one of the best ways to guide children is to give them practice in coming up with their own solutions. You can ask your child:
• “What ideas do you want to try in learning to use the toilet?”
• “Tell me when you want to try to wear big boy/big girl pants for a little while?”

Even young children can become part of the solution by being given opportunities to suggest ways to take on this challenge.

5. Acknowledge that mistakes are part of learning. Your child learns from trial and error. In fact, when you react to your child’s mistake as simply a normal part of learning, you are doing more than helping your child become toilet trained. You are teaching your child a fundamentally helpful approach to life.
• Rather than being judgmental or critical when your child has an accident, talk to him or her the way you would like to be talked to when you make a mistake. You can say things like:
  – “Everybody has accidents when they’re learning to use the toilet. Keep practicing and you’ll get it!”
  – “Maybe next time we will try to go to the bathroom after you drink your water.”

Children take their cues from what you do, not just what you say. They pay close attention to your facial expressions, gestures and tone of voice to gain information about what’s happening and to learn how to manage challenges.

These five strategies promote the life skills of Critical Thinking and Taking on Challenges and move from managing children’s behavior to promoting life skills in fun and doable ways.

Taking on Challenges: Life is full of stresses and challenges. Children who are willing to take on challenges (instead of avoiding them or simply coping with them) do better in school and in life.

Critical Thinking is the ongoing search for valid and reliable knowledge to guide beliefs, decisions and actions.

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The Seven Essential Life Skills Every Child Needs

Many children find the transition from one activity to another, like playing with friends to going home, to be stressful and difficult. The things that happen during daily life are often the best opportunities to help promote life skills in your child. You can lessen the stress of ending play dates for you and your child by promoting the life skill of Taking on Challenges.

Megan Gunnar of the University of Minnesota is one of the foremost authorities on stress and coping in children. She notes:

A childhood that had no stress in it would not prepare you for adulthood. If you never allow your child[ren] to exceed what they can do, how are they going to learn to manage adult life—where a lot of it is managing more than you thought you could manage? A normal childhood has challenges in it … and we need to help our children understand how to manage themselves, but not protect them completely from those challenges.

1. Remember, your relationship with your child is the best stress buster. It is important to help your child take on and manage challenges himself rather than try to protect him from stress or fix his problems. But that doesn’t mean you have no role. In fact, your relationship with your child is essential. When your child knows that you are “there for him,” he is likely to feel that he can handle hard things. You act as a stress buster for your child when you do things like:

- Acknowledge his emotions, like: “It looks like you are upset to leave your friend.” This will help your child feel recognized and heard as he begins to make connections between his feelings and his actions.
- Share your experiences with your child. For example: “When I see my friends and have to leave when I don’t want to, it is hard for me, too. It is important to me to make sure I get to say goodbye and tell them how much fun I had. I also like to talk about the next time we will see each other.”

Your child is more likely to be able to manage challenging situations if he feels safe and secure and has warm, caring and trusting relationships with the important adults in his life.

Heidelise Als of Children's Hospital Boston and the Harvard Medical School has found through her work with premature babies and the impact of stress on their development, that you have to understand the language of children’s behavior to figure out how they function best and then build on what they do to manage stress.
2. Determine the issue. By reading the language of your child's behavior, try to figure out what it is about the end of your child’s play dates that makes them challenging. Have a conversation with him about his thoughts and feelings. You can say things like: “It seems hard for you to say goodbye at the end of your play dates. How do you feel when it’s time to leave?” When you do this, you are modeling the skill of reflection or stepping back from a situation to consider what is happening. You can also remind him of what he has done in the past to manage difficult times.

3. Problem solve solutions with your child for solutions. Once you have established what is making play dates so stressful, you can begin to set a goal together for making these transitions less difficult. Explain to your son: “We keep having the same problem when your play dates are over and it’s time to leave. You say no, I say yes, and then we argue. What ideas do you have to make it easier for both of us?”

   - Write down his ideas for solutions without judging them.
   - Ask him what would work and what wouldn’t work about each of these ideas.
   - Pick a solution to try together.
   - Evaluate how it is working or not working after your try it a few times.
   - If it isn’t working, repeat the problem-solving process again and come up with some different strategies to try.

If your child doesn’t have specific suggestions to try, you can suggest some. For example: “I will let you know five minutes before we need to leave. During the five minutes, what would like to do to make sure you are able to say goodbye to your friends?” When you make suggestions, it is important to remember that you are helping him learn to Take on Challenges rather than fixing problems for him.

4. Continue to give your child support as he tries out his solutions. There are things that you can do to make the transitions easier. Here are a few things to think about:

   - How much time is given for the transition to end the play date? If the transition is too abrupt, more warnings about the approaching end of the play date may be needed. You can say things like: “Three more minutes left to play, then it is time to go home” or “You can have two more turns with this toy and then we will say goodbye.”
   - What is the activity level of the play? If there is a lot of high energy play going on, consider arranging a calming activity for the playmates at the end of their playtime together. Your child can choose songs to sing, games like “I Spy” or “Simon Says” to promote focus and self control or tongue twisters and other word games.
   - Does your child worry that he won’t get the chance to play again? Ask your child about his feelings and reassure him that he will get together with his friend again. If possible, arrange for the next play date and use a visual reminder like a calendar. Try to give your child some control in choosing an element of the next meeting, like where it will be or what they will do.

By working together to find solutions, you are helping your child learn strategies for managing stress, which strengthens his ability to Take on Challenges, in school and in life.

Carol Dweck from Stanford University and her colleagues conducted a study where she gave fifth grade children tasks (like those found on intelligence tests) that became increasingly difficult. In this study, she found that the children in the study who “wilted” in the face of stress or a challenge saw their abilities—their intelligence—as something that can’t be changed. They believed that people are born smart or not. She called this view of the world a “fixed mindset.” In contrast, the students who continued to pursue the challenge saw their abilities as something that they could develop and change—they had a “growth mindset.”
Carol Dweck and her colleagues then found that the way adults praise children affects their mindsets or beliefs about the world. Children who are praised for inborn characteristics like: “You are so smart!” are likely to have a fixed mindset. Children who are praised for their effort or strategies are more likely to have a growth mindset.

5. **Praise effort and strategies.** As you teach your child about Taking on Challenges, it is important to focus on the effort and strategies he is using. This type of acknowledgement supports a “growth mindset.” You can say things like: “When you made an effort to say goodbye to your friends without getting upset, it really made that play date end fun for everyone. I could see how much you tried.”

These five strategies will help you to move from managing children’s behavior to promoting life skills in fun and doable ways.

**Taking on Challenges:** Life is full of stresses and challenges. Children who are willing to take on challenges (instead of avoiding them or simply coping with them) do better in school and in life.

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The Seven Essential Life Skills Every Child Needs

Prescriptions for Learning

Bedtime Fears
Promoting the Life Skill of Taking on Challenges in Preschoolers
Four Strategies That Work in Moving from Managing Children’s Behavior to Promoting Life Skills

Question: My three year old has recently become afraid of bedtime. What can I do to help him fall asleep?

The American Academy of Pediatrics notes that many children awaken from sleep at times during the night, but can return to sleep quickly and peacefully without help from adults. Changes—such as illness, the birth of siblings, and visits from friends and relatives—can temporarily affect already established sleep habits. Children may require reassurance that they are protected from whatever dangers stir their imaginations and affect their sleep.

1. Create a calm and consistent nightly routine. Transitions can, by nature, be stressful for preschoolers, and bedtime is a transition from the day’s activities to quieting down and getting ready for sleep. When children are tired, they can also become even more active.

When you create a series of steps leading up to bedtime, like a bath, songs, stories and saying what you are thankful for, your child learns what to expect and find comfort in the traditions. He is learning that these routines signal it’s almost time for bed.

You might also:
• have your child sleep with a nightlight or special blanket or toy;
• use deep breathing, massage and relaxation exercises with your child right before sleep; and
• tell stories or sing with your child before bed. These activities help your child focus on something else and begin to quiet down.

A predictable nightly routine helps your child feel in control of the transition to sleep.

Megan Gunner of the University of Minnesota set up scenarios to study how children cope with stress. Some children were able to control a noisy toy turning it on and off while other children had no control over the toy’s sound and motion. Gunner notes, “[T]he children’s control over making things happen was important in helping them decide whether they liked it or whether it was scary.”

Children can also make suggestions about what would help them get ready for sleep.
2. **Engage your child in problem solving.** You may need to provide additional support for your child to learn how to manage and master the stress at bedtime. The best place to start is by talking with your child.

- **Share** your observation with your child that bedtime seems to be difficult for him.
- **Ask** your child if he has any ideas about what might make it easier.
- **Listen** to your child’s suggestions and set up plans to try them out.

By coming up with ideas to manage stress, your child feels a sense of control. He is practicing finding solutions, which is an important part of Taking on Challenges.

Children may suggest ideas that you never thought of and would be fun to try out. One boy, for example, made a sword from aluminum foil and that helped him feel safe at night. A girl wanted a pet fish in her room to keep her company. Some children’s suggestions might not work. If that happens, ask your son to keep brainstorming until you or he come up with an idea that works for both of you.

3. **Show your support.** Your child is much more likely to take on everyday challenges if he or she feels supported and cared for by the important adults in his life. At bedtime, you can:

- reassure your child that he is safe at night. You can say things like, “I know you feel scared at bedtime, but I will keep you safe.”;
- do occasional quick “checks” on your resting child;
- stay in your child’s bedroom for gradually shorter and shorter time periods while your child falls asleep; and
- recognize and celebrate your child’s efforts, both big and small. Tell him things like, “You tried so hard to stay in your bed. I knew you could do it!” or “You remembered to use your nightlight! That helped you.”

These three strategies will promote the life skill of Taking on Challenges. When you encourage your child to manage and master his own stress, you are giving your child a skill for life.

**Taking on Challenges:** Life is full of stresses and challenges. Children who are willing to take on challenges (instead of avoiding them or simply coping with them) do better in school and in life.

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PREScriptions FOR LEARNIng

Praising Children
Promoting Taking on Challenges
Five Strategies That Work in Moving from Managing Children’s Behavior to Promoting Life Skills

Question: I have read that praising my child is important for her self-esteem, but then I have also read that too much praise can spoil my child. I’m confused. How should I praise my child?

You can find ways to authentically praise your child while, at the same time, promote the life skill of Taking on Challenges.

We typically think that children who are praised a lot will feel better about themselves, but this is not necessarily true. It’s how we praise children that matters. Carol Dweck of Stanford University found that adults who praise children for their personality (“you are smart” or “you are so talented”) develop what she calls a fixed mindset. They begin to believe that these characteristics are inborn and can’t be changed. As a result, they want to hold onto these labels and become less willing to try things that are hard where they might not seem as smart. On the other hand, children who are praised for their effort (“you tried so hard”) or their strategies (“you figured out how to put on your sock by yourself”), develop a growth mindset, where they see their abilities and intelligence as something that can be changed. Children who hold a growth mindset are more likely to try really hard in the face of challenges.

1. **Praise effort and strategies, not intelligence or personality.** Rather than praising your child’s personality or intelligence (“You’re so ‘artistic’ or ‘athletic’”), criticizing him or her (“You are lazy”), or attributing their accomplishments to luck, you can praise your child’s efforts or strategies. When your child sees that she or he can try and learn something new, your child will learn to feel good about himself or herself.

2. **Help your child set his or her own challenging goals and to work toward them.** Taking on Challenges includes believing that we can do things even when they are hard. Encouraging your child when he or she is working hard toward meaningful goals is important. It is best not to praise your child all of the time for everything because the praise become less special and thus has less impact. Children will learn to work diligently on something they want to accomplish when they are intrinsically motivated rather than doing something for approval.

3. **Be a role model and promote curiosity.** You can set goals and work toward them and share your experiences, strategies and feelings about the process with your child. It is important to share why you are working toward the goals (personal satisfaction, new knowledge, etc.) so your child can see that praise is not the reward, but rather, the experience and process are.
The American Academy of Pediatrics suggests the importance of setting appropriate expectations for success.

4. **Set appropriate expectations.** Set expectations for what your child can accomplish that are not too low or too high, is critical to developing competence and confidence. If you are overprotecting your child, and if he or she is too dependent on you, or if expectations are so high your child never can succeed, he or she may feel powerless and incapable of controlling the circumstances in his or her life.

5. **Help your child find ways to contribute.** Self-esteem is a key feature of leading a fulfilling life. Children develop a positive sense of self if they think they are making a contribution. Help your child find things to do that makes him or her feel good, like taking care of the dog or making a card for someone who feels sick.

**These five strategies will promote Taking on Challenges and move from managing children's behavior to promoting life skills in fun and doable ways.**

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The Seven Essential Life Skills Every Child Needs

Even if your child is predisposed to being shy or anxious, there are many things you can do to help her learn to manage her feelings in unfamiliar or challenging situations. When you support your child in Taking on Challenges, you are giving her a skill that she will use in all aspects of her life.

The researcher Nathan Fox at the University of Maryland has studied temperament in young children. He and his colleagues have identified genes that may underlie the tendency to be shy and anxious when facing new experiences. They have further found that while some children may be born with the predisposition to be shy or anxious, there is much that parents can do to help their children learn to regulate their emotions and behavior and manage these situations.

1. **Let your child watch first and move at her own pace.** Fox and his colleagues have found in their studies that shy children tend either to watch a new situation or to occupy themselves but not get involved with the other children right away. If this sounds like your daughter, you can:
   - Let her know that it is fine to take as much time as she needs to get comfortable.
   - Reassure her that you know she will learn to manage this kind of situation and are there to help her feel safe and calm. When your child trusts that you are truly there for her, she can learn from everyday setbacks and challenges.

2. **Talk to your child and brainstorm solutions.** Engage your child in a conversation about how she feels in these situations and help her to come up with solutions for dealing with them. If you ask your child in a calm moment and she knows you will take her seriously, she will most likely have some creative ideas for managing. With this approach, you’re helping your child learn to develop her own coping skills rather than protecting her or fixing things for her.

   If your child needs more support, you might suggest she keep a special toy in her pocket or give you a special sign if she’s feeling nervous.

3. **Be aware of your own involvement.** Fox and his colleagues also found that there are things parents can do, unintentionally, that are not helpful to their anxious children.
   - For example, some parents are “alarmist,” seeing danger everywhere. A parent who is being an alarmist might say things like: “Don’t” a lot or “You’re going to hurt yourself.” The feelings of fear from parents can even be communicated by facial expressions, so be mindful of how you look when your child is trying something hard.
   - Other parents are “intrusive” or overprotective. These parents interfere with what their children are doing and don’t let them explore. This was your concern in writing this question. A helpful idea to remember is that you want to daughter
to learn to meet new people and experience new situations, and your job is to support her as she takes steps to do so, not to fix things for her.

When parents guide instead of interfere, their children are more likely to take risks and to take on challenges without depending on others to solve their problems for them.

4. **Role play with your child.** Expectations are important in children’s lives, just like they are for adults. Rehearse with your child what might happen with new people and places. This can help her feel prepared to face difficult situations since she has practiced her responses in a safe and caring space with you. In the words of one six year old, your child can “practice not being shy.”

Jerome Kagan of Harvard University, the so-called “father of research on temperament,” has this advice for parents of shy children:

[T]he advice is very simple. It’s something your grandmother would give. Don’t overprotect. Gradually expose the child to the events he or she is afraid of. Invite other children into the house, one at a time, and talk to your child.

5. **Give your child plenty of opportunities to practice.** The more experience your child has in a variety of social experiences, the more likely she is to feel confident in Taking on Challenges like unfamiliar situations.

The American Academy of Pediatrics gives the following suggestions to support your child in feeling secure and confident:

- Support your child by giving hugs, participating in activities together and talking. Children with warm, nurturing parents are more likely to have confidence.
- Let your child get to know other trusted grown-ups by having him or her babysit and by participating in group activities with other families.
- Give your child plenty of opportunities to play with other children the same age through afterschool activities or other children’s groups.

6. **Manage your own stress.** In one of Fox's studies, he found that when parents have people to turn to—people upon whom they can rely when they feel stressed—that affects their own children’s social development. Even if children have genes that push them toward being shy and anxious, they’re far less likely to display these characteristics if parents can manage their own stress and if they have friends who can help them. Children learn from what they see and live and you are your child’s most important role model.

**These six strategies will help you move from managing children's behavior to promoting life skills in fun and doable ways.**

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The Seven Essential Life Skills Every Child Needs

PREScriptions FOR LEARNING

Stress Management
Promoting the Life Skill of Taking on Challenges in School-Agers
Six Strategies that Work to Move from Managing Children’s Behavior to Promoting Life Skills

Question: I worry about my eight year old becoming too stressed. On top of the demands of his schoolwork, he is also involved in a lot of extracurricular activities. I don’t want him to feel “overscheduled.” How can I help him learn to deal effectively with whatever stress he experiences?

The things that happen during daily life often provide the best opportunities to help promote life skills in your child. You can help your son manage stress by promoting the life skill of Taking on Challenges.

Study after study reveals that children who have warm, caring and trusting relationships with their mothers, fathers and other significant adults in their lives are less prone to stress. Even babies born prematurely are capable of managing some of their own stress with responsive support from adults. Megan Gunnar of the University of Minnesota, one of the foremost authorities on stress and coping in children, says:

[S]tress is when challenge overwhelm[s] your capacity to manage it. With a trusting relationship with a parent who's been there for you and [who’s] accessible, you're not overwhelmed.

1. Remember, your relationship with your child is the best stress buster. It is important to help your child take on and manage challenges himself rather than try to protect him from stress or fix his problems. But that doesn’t mean you have no role. In fact, your relationship with your child is essential. When your child knows that you are “there for him,” he is likely to feel that he can handle hard things. You act as a stress buster for your child when you do things like:

- Acknowledge his feelings and actions, like: “You are working so hard to get your homework done before going to your extracurricular activities.”
- Let your child know you are there for him. This means verbal support like: “I understand how hard it is to try and do so many things at once,” as well as physical encouragement like hugs, pats on the back and positive facial expressions.

When children are faced with unclear situations, they search for information from others (namely, their parents) to guide what they should feel and do. This behavior is called “social referencing,” and it begins in infancy. In an experiment with babies and their mothers, Joseph Campos of the University of California at Berkeley found that when a parent looks fearful, a baby is much less likely to try something new. If the parent smiles or show that trying something new is okay, the child is more likely to venture out. As Campos describes his findings:

This particular study powerfully demonstrates the role of nonverbal communication in determining the child’s behavior in an uncertain context.
Carol Dweck from Stanford University and her colleagues conducted a study where she gave fifth grade children tasks (like those found on intelligence tests) that became increasingly difficult. In this study, she found that the children in the study who “wilted” in the face of stress or a challenge saw their abilities—their intelligence—as something that can’t be changed. They believed that people are born smart or not. She called this view of the world a “fixed mindset.” In contrast, the students who continued to pursue the challenge saw their abilities as something that they could develop and change—they had a “growth mindset.”

Carol Dweck and her colleagues then found that the way adults praise children affects their mindsets or beliefs about the world. Children who are praised for their effort or strategies are more likely to have a growth mindset. Children who are praised for inborn characteristics like: “You are so smart” are likely to have a fixed mindset. Children who are praised for their effort or strategies are more likely to have a growth mindset.

3. Encourage your child by praising his efforts and strategies. As you teach your child about Taking on Challenges, it is important to focus on the effort and strategies he is using instead of his personality or intelligence. For example, instead of saying to your child: “You are so good at school” or “You are so talented,” you can say things like: “I could tell how hard you were studying for your math test.” This type of acknowledgement reinforces your child’s problem-solving strategies, his coping skills and supports a “growth mindset.”

Studies have shown that parental stress spills over onto children. In a national survey, when children in the third through the twelfth grades were asked what they’d say if given one wish to change the way their mother’s or father’s work affected their lives, the largest proportion wished that their mothers and fathers would be less stressed, less tired.

4. Be a role model. Your child is looking to you to show him how to manage stressful and challenging situations. You can model different behavior and strategies to help him learn to manage his challenges independently.

- Be intentional in finding ways to handle your own stress, so it is less likely to spill over to your son. Think about what helps you calm down. Is it exercise? Unplugging? Having time to talk with a friend? Try to build that into your life.
- Express your own feelings. You can tell your child directly that you had a bad day. Make sure to tell him that it isn’t his fault, because children will often blame themselves.
- Share with your child how you cope with stress like: “I need to take a break, just like you need to take a break when you are upset and can’t manage.”
- Remember to tell your child “the rest of the story” or how you resolved a stressful issue and coped with what was bothering you effectively. Use this as an opportunity to help your child learn from how you handle problems.

5. Use a problem-solving process with your child for helping him come up with solutions for managing his own stress. This is the most important suggestion. When his schedule seems overwhelming or stressful to your child, sit down with him and help HIM problem solve about the problem and solutions. By using this problem-solving process with your son, you are helping him learn the skill of Taking on Challenges, without your fixing the problem.

- Ask your child to think about what is not working in his schedule. Write these problems down as a list so that he can focus on each of them.
- Ask him to come up with as many ideas as he can for solving each of these problems. Write down all of these ideas, without judging them.
- Then ask your son to think about what would work and what wouldn’t work about each of his possible solutions.
- Select one solution to try. Agree to talk again soon to think about how this solution is working.
- Talk in the near future about how his solution is working in reducing stress and making his life more manageable. If there are parts of the solution that aren’t working, go through the same process (described above) again and come up some new solutions to try.
6. **Continue to give your child control in learning how to manage stress.** Your child is more likely to follow through on solutions when he has suggested the solutions himself. You can provide other tools to help him. For example, you can:

- Teach your child time management and organizational strategies, like using a planner or calendar.
- Encourage your child to use relaxation and breathing techniques.
- Help your child learn whom he can turn to for help, like teachers, relatives, friends and siblings. Taking on Challenges involves learning to ask others for help.

These six strategies work to move from managing children's behavior to promoting life skills in fun and doable ways.

**Taking on Challenges:** Life is full of stresses and challenges. Children who are willing to take on challenges (instead of avoiding them or simply coping with them) do better in school and in life.
The Seven Essential Life Skills Every Child Needs

PREScriptions FOR LEARNING

Encouraging Leadership
Promoting the Life Skills of Critical Thinking and Taking on Challenges in School-Agers
Five Strategies that Work to Move from Managing Children’s Behavior to Promoting Life Skills

Question: I worry that my child is too much of a “follower” with her friends. Sometimes it seems like she will do whatever they say and do or believe whatever they tell her. How can I encourage my daughter to be her own person?

Relationships with friends become increasingly important in your child’s life as she gets older. She may have a best friend or group of friends, an important milestone in her social development. All children are influenced by what their friends say and do.

There are two complementary approaches you can take to help your daughter become “her own person.”

- One approach involves helping your daughter evaluate what her friends tell her, so she doesn’t just do what they do or believe what they say. This calls on the life skill of Critical Thinking.
- The second approach involves providing her with opportunities to lead, calling on the life skill of Taking on Challenges.

Critical Thinking involves “thinking about our thinking” by reflecting, analyzing, reasoning, planning and evaluating.

1. Keep your child’s development in mind. Critical Thinking develops rapidly during the school-age years. Children progress in their ability to evaluate the accuracy of information from others, moving from an understanding that others might not know something to an understanding that others may be intentionally or unintentionally deceitful.

According to Frank Kiel of Yale University: “Critical thinking is the ability to step back and look at what you’re doing, to look at the dimensions of the task and to evaluate.”

2. Help your child learn to evaluate information received from others. You can help your daughter evaluate what she hears—whether from her friends or from others—thus increasingly gaining the ability to tell the difference between fact and fiction. You can:
   - Ask your child questions that help her think about what she has been told, whether by her friends or even something she sees on television, by asking her questions such as: “Do you think this information is true? Why or why not? How can you find out more?”
   - Engage your child in looking at the reasons behind why people behave in certain ways: “Do you think that she wants you to like her or to be impressed?” Having this kind of discussion around books you read or movies and TV shows you see together, provides non-threatening ways to sharpen her thinking about why people behave as they do.

3. Help your child role play how to handle situations where she might be included to go along with the group. Again, this role playing may be most effective at first if it is not about her own situation, but she is thinking about others. Ask her:
   - “What could this character in the story have done not to go along with the group?”

Brainstorm as many possible approaches as you can and then evaluate what might work and what wouldn’t, so we can
4. Give your child opportunities to lead in different kinds of groups. In doing so, you are helping your daughter learn the life skill of Taking on Challenges, as she moves into other groups.

Think about your daughter’s interests and see if you can find groups where she might be with other children with similar interests or help her create a new interest, such as:

- Is there a sports, art, singing or church group where she could shine?
- Could you work together as a family on a volunteer activity, such as bringing food to shelters?
- Could she work with younger children, sharing a talent or an interest or helping them with school work, such a learning to read? Older children can feel much more competent when they can lead younger children.

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5. Praise your child’s efforts and the strategies she uses in becoming her own person. Each step your daughter takes in becoming her own person can be acknowledged. You can say things like:

- “You didn’t go along with your friends when they wanted to do something you thought was wrong. I know that took courage, and I am so proud of you!”
- “You helped the young child you are working with feel good about herself and be her own person! That is such an important thing to learn in life.”

These five strategies will help you move from managing children’s behavior to promoting life skills in fun and doable ways.

Critical Thinking is the ongoing search for valid and reliable knowledge to guide beliefs, decisions and actions.

Taking on Challenges: Life is full of stresses and challenges. Children who are willing to take on challenges (instead of avoiding them or simply coping with them) do better in school and in life.

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SELF-DIRECTED, ENGAGED LEARNING
The Seven Essential Life Skills Every Child Needs

Jack Shonkoff of Harvard University says, “The drive to master our environment is a basic human characteristic from the beginning—from birth.” You can offer your child an opportunity to become a master by building strategies to prepare and plan for a pet.

1. **Talk with your child about why he wants a pet.** Your child’s desire for a pet may be motivated by a social reason, such as his friends have dogs and he’d like one, too, or an emotional reason, such as he thinks a pet would make a good companion. Helping your son understand why he wants a pet will help you understand why it is important to him and also what kind of pet would best meet his needs and your needs, too.

2. **Do research together.** Once you have a list of possible pets that you agree would be good options, give your child an assignment to learn as much as he can about these pets. Help him outline the questions he needs to answer in advance—this will help him be a self-directed learner. For example, he will need to know the kind of environment and care that different pets need. This project could involve research using the internet, trips to the library for books on animals and interviews with pet owners, pet store employees and/or animal breeders. Your child could then organize and present the information he has gathered to the rest of the family, and ideas about whether or not to proceed with getting a pet could be discussed.

3. **Ask for a proposal and a plan for accountability.** The plan and proposal can include expenses, time and specific tasks. Ask your child to determine what he will need your help with. Also include a discussion about what happens if everyone doesn’t fulfill their roles in the care and perhaps training of the pet.

**The promotion of life skills requires us, as adults, to step back and reflect on our own thoughts and feelings.**

4. **Make sure you want to be on the pet care team.** No matter how much preparation you and your child do, you will have ultimate responsible for the pet (for example, if the pet becomes ill), so make sure you are willing to be a member of the team. If the decision is made to bring a pet into the family, a plan for pet care responsibilities should be developed, with a plan for accountability for following through on assigned duties.
These four strategies will promote Self-Directed, Engaged Learning and move from managing children's behavior to promoting life skills in fun and doable ways.

**Self-Directed, Engaged Learning:** It is through learning that you realize your potential. It is through learning that your minds become attuned, ready to meet whatever life brings. As the world changes, so can you, for as long as you live—as long as you learn.

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The Seven Essential Life Skills Every Child Needs

The American Academy of Pediatrics suggests that engaging in regular household chores is good because it promotes a sense of responsibility in the child and helps her feel as though she is an essential part of the family.

Helping children to become increasingly accountable for their learning and actions is an important component of helping children to become self-directed, engaged learners. We can help children by:

1. **Explaining why the chore is important.** Talk with your child to clearly define the what, when, where and why of the tasks involved in the chore(s). You can help her have a greater appreciation for the task by explaining why it needs to be done. For example:
   - “Please put your dirty clothes in the laundry basket so I don’t have to look all over the house to find them.”
   - “We need to wipe up the crumbs on the table so we don’t get bugs.”

   Your child will be more cooperative if you leave a little room for her to innovate the “how” in carrying out the task.

2. **Catching your child doing positive things.** Acknowledge your child’s successes in carrying out her chores. For example:
   - “You did everything we agreed upon without any reminders. Thank you.”
   - “The table looks so clean. I can tell you took the time to do your job well.”

Carol Dweck of Stanford University found that adults who praise children for their personality (“you are smart,” “you are so talented”) develop what she calls a fixed mindset. They begin to believe that these characteristics are inborn and can’t be changed. As a result, they want to hold onto these labels and become less willing to try things that are hard where they might not seem as smart. On the other hand, children who are praised for their effort (“you tried so hard”) or their strategies (“you figured out how to put your sock on by yourself”) develop a growth mindset where they see their abilities and intelligence as something that can be changed. Children who have a growth mindset are more likely to try hard in the face of challenges.
3. Praising effort or strategies, not intelligence. Praise your child for her genuine effort and the strategies she used in approaching her chores.
   • “You figured out how many forks to put on the table by counting how many people are here!”

4. Giving children freedom to make mistakes and learning from them. Children may not complete chores in the most efficient or accurate manner. Help them learn from their mistakes. You can ask questions to help your child learn. For example:
   • “What can you do differently next time?”
   • “What went well? What could have been better?”

5. Giving children time to help teach and learn from each other. When possible, let your child teach younger siblings how to perform their household tasks or demonstrate to you her strategies for doing a job well.

These five strategies will promote Self-Directed, Engaged Learning and move from managing children’s behavior to promoting life skills in fun and doable ways.

Self-Directed, Engaged Learning: It is through learning that you realize your potential. It is through learning that your minds become attuned, ready to meet whatever life brings. As the world changes, so can you, for as long as you live—as long as you learn.
Learning to Write and Draw
Promoting the Life Skill of Self-Directed, Engaged Learning in Preschoolers
Five Strategies that Work to Move from Managing Children’s Behavior to Promoting Life Skills

Question: My three and one half year old becomes easily frustrated when he writes or draws. How can I help him practice writing and enjoy it?

Learning to write and draw is a complicated process, and it is important not to push your child beyond his developmental capacities. Your son is working to strengthen his finger and hand muscles so that he is able to write with precision and control while also learning how to form the words that represent his thoughts. For adults and children, it is difficult to learn when frustrated, but you can help make learning to write and draw more engaging for your child by promoting the life skill of Self-Directed, Engaged Learning.

1. Understand the developmental process. There are steps in the process of learning to write and draw. The purpose of both is ultimately to have your child be able to express himself so you don’t want to close down that process, especially at his age.
   - With drawing, your child should be able to explore colors, shapes and objects. He will move from making marks on paper to being able to draw things that he sees and feels. There is no one correct way to draw a person or a house, for example. He should be able to draw them as he sees them or feels about them, without criticism.
   - With writing, your initial focus should be on your writing down what he says so that he can see the connections between the letters on the page and his spoken words. His own writing should begin with his finding a way to write his name (even with its first letter) and then perhaps with other words that mean something to him, like the names of a family member, a pet or a favorite place.

The Committee on Integrating the Science of Early Childhood Development—a committee of 17 scholars from across the United States—was created in the late 1990s to evaluate what we know about the science of early development. One of their major conclusions was that human relationships “are the building blocks of healthy development.” The Committee went on to say that all of young children’s achievements occur “in the context of close relationships with others.”

2. Remember, your relationship with your child is central to his learning. When children have supportive and trusting relationships with the important adults in their lives, they are much more likely to believe that they can do things, even when they’re hard. This kind of motivation is essential to Self-Directed, Engaged Learning. Your child is more likely to pay attention, to remember and to have self control when he feels calm, understood and safely challenged. Some things you can do are:
• Have conversations with your child. Take the time to talk to your child and ask him about what frustrates him when he writes or draws. Is he asked to copy letters or do other kinds of writing drills where it is just memorization? Do his hand muscles get tired quickly? Is he worried about what his writing or drawing looks like? Once you know what your child is thinking and feeling, you can start to work together to find a way to make the process easier and more enjoyable for everyone.

• Praise your child’s efforts. When your child makes any attempts at writing or drawing, be sure to praise his efforts and strategies. As children get more interested in writing, they pretend to write by making squiggles on the page. This kind of “writing” should be appreciated. Ask your child: “Tell me about what you are writing?” Don’t expect this writing to necessarily represent words or sentences, but rather, ideas. Carol Dweck of Stanford University has found that if adults praise children’s efforts—“You are working hard!”—rather than their intelligence—“You are so smart!”—they can help your child learn to “love challenge.”

The Committee’s National Scientific Council on the Developing Child also concluded that: “Cognitive, emotional and social capacities are inextricably intertwined throughout the life course.”

3. Involve your child socially, emotionally and intellectually. Children are more likely to be truly involved in learning when they are engaged on all three levels of thinking. You can help your child stay interested in writing and drawing by relating them to subject areas for which he has already shown some passion and interest. For example, you could:

• Help him write—or you write down his words—about things that spark his interest, like animals he’s seen or his favorite foods.

• Make a personal book, featuring photographs of your child and his drawings and/or writings. Your child can retell the story of a favorite family experience in his own words. You can write some of the words, and he can write the words he knows.

If the writing tasks have personal meaning for your child, he is more likely to stay with the task longer. It will also give him the opportunity to practice his communication skills. But, most of all, keep it fun!

Robyn Fivush of Emory University studies children’s memories of their experiences. She and her colleagues taped conversations between mothers and their preschool-aged children talking about past experiences. In this and other studies, the researchers found that children of more elaborative mothers—it could have been fathers, too—are more likely to have better language and literacy skills. The highly elaborative mothers would:

• discuss past experience in rich detail;

• ask lots of open-ended, “wh” questions (who, what, where, why);

• repeat what the child says;

• go back and forth in conversation and give feedback; and

• show genuine interest in what the child is saying.

4. Elaborate and extend children’s learning. Studies show that children are most likely to remember what they learn by having direct and real experiences. You can then elaborate on these experiences to motivate your child to draw and write. You might:

• Take walk and look for animals (dogs, squirrels, whatever you see). Encourage your child to draw about your animal walk.

• Then ask your child what he wants to say about his drawings and write down his words. He will be so excited to see his words on paper!

• As he becomes more confident, allow him to write some of the letters. You can staple pages together to make his very own book.
5. Help children set and work toward their own goals. From preschool on, children begin to use their higher order thinking, the parts of the brain required to manage their emotions and behaviors, or “Executive Functions.” Being able to set and work toward goals is critical for the life skill of Self-Directed, Engaged Learning. You can start habits of goal directed behavior in your child by helping him set short-term goals, like: “Tonight, I will write my name on my drawing.” You can also talk about long-term goals, like: “One day, I will be able to fill a whole page with words!” Remember to keep goals manageable and flexible, with lots of encouragement.

These five strategies will help you move from managing children's behavior to promoting life skills in fun and doable ways

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The Seven Essential Life Skills Every Child Needs

The American Academy of Pediatrics describes quality child care as care that gives young children valuable opportunities to learn to relate effectively with other children and adults, to explore their physical and social worlds, and to develop confidence in their abilities to learn new skills, form trusting bonds of friendship and process information from a variety of sources.

Study after study finds that it's not the name on the door of the program or even what the program says about itself that matters most. It is the adults who teach and care for the children who are the key ingredient of quality.

As we discuss further below, families should look for child care/preschool programs where the teachers/caregivers:

- value relationships first and foremost and are warm and caring with each child;
- know each child and what that child’s interests are, observing what the children are doing and create opportunities to build on and extend that learning;
- engage the children socially, emotionally and cognitively; and
- help children learn to set goals and become accountable for achieving them.

The floor of quality is that the program provides a clean, safe, nurturing and interesting environment. You are most likely to find that if the program is licensed. These standards include issues such as whether the teachers have learned about child development (teacher education), whether there are enough teachers for each child (staff:child ratios) and small enough groups (group size), so that children get individual attention.

To look for the best in quality, look for programs that are accredited by organizations such as the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). Their website is: http://www.naeyc.org/.

Below, we elaborate on what research finds in quality programs, focusing on the characteristics of programs that promote the life skill of Self-Directed, Engaged Learning.

Robert Pianta of the University of Virginia, an expert on early childhood education and teacher quality, describes in greater detail the importance of the relationship between teacher and child:

*Looking for Quality Preschool*

Promoting the Life Skill of Self-Directed, Engaged Learning in Preschoolers

Five Strategies that Work to Move from Managing Children’s Behavior to Promoting Life Skills

**Question:** I am starting to look at child care and preschool programs for my almost three year old. I want her to attend a quality program, so that she is ready for school when she starts kindergarten. What should I be looking for in a good program?

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*A lot of people talk about the relationship between kids and a teacher as providing] a secure base for exploring the world. A good teacher-child relationship is going to offer the child the opportunity to stretch and risk a little bit socially, emotionally or in learning something hard and new. It's going to provide just the
**kind of support that the child needs to be able to master what's being offered.**

1. **Look for relationship-based education.** The foundation for learning is good relationships. As Jack Shonkoff from Harvard University says: “There is no development without relationships.” Be sure to look for programs where this is the bedrock of their learning approach. You will see this in how the teachers interact with the children. Ask yourself:
   - Are teachers making eye contact with the children?
   - Are they listening to the children, laughing and smiling?
   - Do they seem to know what each child is interested in?
   - Are they asking the children questions and responding warmly to what children say by continuing the conversation?
   - When discipline issues arise, do they teach the children what they can do to resolve problems, not just stop challenging behavior?

   When you are visiting the program, ask the teacher about the children in the program. If the teachers use positive words about the children, they are likely to use positive words and have positive feelings about your child, too.

2. **Look for programs that elaborate and extend children's learning.** Studies show that children are most likely to remember what they learn by having direct and real experiences—not by simply listening passively or learning by rote drilling. Early childhood programs that are considered to be “gold standard” base their curriculum on closely observing the children and then providing activities that move the children from where they are to the next step in learning.

   **As Craig Ramey of the Abecedarian Project explains: “If the child [who is just learning to talk] says ‘Ball,’ then the teacher might say, ‘That’s great. [You have] the red ball.’”**

   Teachers who elaborate and extend learning do things like:
   - have extended conversations that prompt children to go beyond the here and now;
   - include “wh” questions (Who? What? Where? When? Why?); and
   - ask children to think about the past, the present and the future

   **Catherine Snow of Harvard University and her colleagues have found that these methods have resulted in children with better literacy skills in their school-age years.**

   When you are visiting the program, look at what is happening. If the children are all doing the same thing for long periods of time or if the art work on the walls is by the teachers—not the children—then there is less likely to be real engaged learning going on. Here is a clue. When you walk into the room, the children should be too busy to notice you very much.

   **The National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, a collaboration of scientists and scholars from universities across the United States and Canada, concluded: “Cognitive, emotional and social capacities are inextricably intertwined throughout the life course.”**

3. **Programs should engage children socially, emotionally and intellectually.** Children are more likely to learn and remember information when emotional and social engagement is combined with cognitive work. Quality preschool programs:
   - provide activities that are emotionally meaningful to the children;
   - promote social learning where children learn from each other, not just the teachers; and
   - promote intellectual learning that engages the children in hands-on, direct and ongoing ways, including physical and art and musical activities.

   **Larry Schweinhart of the High/Scope Perry Preschool Project says:**

   *The reason we want children to be involved as initiators is because it works better for education and, in fact, it makes them better citizens in the long run. The basic cornerstone of that daily routine is making plans, then carrying out plans, and then getting back together and reviewing the plans, under the guidance of the teacher.*

4. **Find programs that support children in learning to set goals.** Your child’s drive to master her environment can be seen as the beginning of goal setting. Setting goals is critical to helping children develop lifetime habits of engaged learning.
• Classrooms that encourage goal directed behavior in their students are often set up with clearly defined activity areas, like the block area, reading area, pretend play area, etc. Ideally, in such programs, children make and carry out plans for play and learning in these areas, and then review how their plans went and what they learned, under the guidance of their teacher.

5. **Programs that encourage children to become increasingly accountable.** Child care programs and preschools that make expectations clear, follow consistent routines and schedules, and encourage independence help children take increasing responsibility for their own learning. It is also important for the program to celebrate children's strengths, efforts and interests. When children are active learners, they are more likely to enjoy school and the learning process, becoming committed, lifelong learners.

To find local resources about high quality programs in your area contact Child Care Aware at 800-424-2246 or at http://childcareaware.org/.

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The Seven Essential Life Skills Every Child Needs

The American Academy of Pediatrics suggests letting your toddler decide what and how much to eat from an assortment of nutritious foods you offer. Trust your child’s ability to know when she or he is hungry and full. If your child asks for more, provide a small, additional portion. If he or she stops eating, accept this decision. Don’t worry too much about messes made during mealtimes. Young children learn from experimenting.

1. Allow your child to explore and experiment. Learning to try new foods is one aspect of learning to explore and experiment. You can promote the skill of Self-Directed, Engaged Learning by letting your child explore the new food. He or she may want to smell it, touch it, look at it and taste it. These actions are a great sign that your child is learning and will, hopefully, feel comfortable to try a new food.

2. Create a routine for peaceful mealtimes. People—both children and adults—don’t learn to explore without first feeling safe. Your child will feel safer if you set up predictable routines around mealtimes. Routines can include having meals at regular times or in regular places. It can also include having traditions around eating, such as beginning a meal with saying what you are thankful for or singing a mealtime song.

3. Establish positive eating patterns. The American Academy of Pediatrics also suggests including your toddler in family meals by providing a high chair or booster seat at table height. Adults need to provide children meals and snacks at regular intervals. Feed your toddler three meals and two or three planned snacks a day. Foods offered should be nutritious and healthy, with only moderate amounts of sweets. Toddlers gain weight more slowly than during the first year, so your toddler may eat less now than he or she did as an infant. Toddlers’ appetites also vary; they will eat a lot at one time and not much the next time.

Have you noticed that when your child approaches something new or forbidden, he or she looks to you to try to figure how you feel about it? In a sense, your child is checking to find out, “Is this okay?” Joseph Campos at the University of California at Berkeley conducted an experiment to test this observation that so many parents have had. He found that babies, from nine to 12 months, do rely on their parents’ facial expressions to figure out whether to try something new or not. If the parent smiles at the child or nods, the child is likely to try something new. If, on the other hand, the parent makes a face that expresses fear, the child will become frightened too.
4. **Be a role model.** You can help your child learn to try new foods by being a good role model.
   - When you say, “I never tasted this kind of fruit before, but I want to try it,” you are setting a good example.
   - You can make new food look and taste appealing. If you experiment with different textures, colors and flavors in the foods you offer, your child will be more likely to experiment too.

5. **Offer choices.** Children are more likely to learn to explore when they have a sense of control. In this case, it is helpful to give toddlers specific choices. That doesn’t mean being a short-order cook. Nor does it mean giving unlimited options. Asking your child, “What do you want to eat?” may be overwhelming.
   - It is better to provided limited choices: “Would you like a banana or an apple?”

According to studies by Jerome Kagan at Harvard University and Nathan Fox at the University of Maryland, some children are temperamentally more wary of new experiences than others.

6. **Remember learning to try new things is a process.** Children’s responses to new experiences reflect an inborn temperamental difference. If you have a child who seems like a picky eater, don’t push him or her too hard or too fast, but encourage your child to try just a bite. And try again and again. But if this food just doesn’t appeal to your child, find something else that does.

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Prescriptions for Learning is supported by the Popplestone Foundation.

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Diaper-Changing Struggles
Promoting Self-Directed, Engaged Learning in Toddlers
Five Strategies That Work in Moving from Managing Children’s Behavior to Promoting Life Skills

**Question:** Changing my toddler has become a wrestling match. What can I do to make it less of a struggle?

Establish a safe, secure trustworthy relationship by understanding that your toddler is communicating with you. You can establish a trustworthy relationship with your child through conversation and eye contact.

1. **Figure out why your toddler is wrestling with you by watching for clues.**
   - "Is your child uncomfortable during changing? Is she or he too cold? Are the changing wipes too chilly? Is your child sensitive to being touched?"

If so, then try to make changing more physically comfortable.
   - "Is your child trying to become more independent?"

If so, build on this emerging independence by beginning to teach your toddler how to put on clothes by breaking down the task into small steps. Help with the more challenging steps (e.g., putting your child’s feet in each pant leg, buttons, socks, etc.) and let your toddler do the steps that he or she can do independently (e.g., put arms through sleeves, pull up elastic waist pants). Children take great pride in these small accomplishments and become more motivated to do things for themselves.

**Involve your baby socially, emotionally and intellectually.**

2. **Make it fun.** By providing safety, structure and fun in diaper-changing routines with your young child, you are fostering a secure relationship between you and your child. Daily have-tos can be turned in to lots of fun for you and your child. Here are a few ideas:
   - Turn the classic song “The wheels on the bus go round and round” into your own song: “Your legs go round and round, round and round, round and round” as your move your child’s legs in a circle.
   - Create a new game. Put your child’s feet in front of your eyes and say, “Where am I?” Then move your child’s feet, and say, “Here I am.”
   - Put some stuffed animals on the changing table and have them pretend talk to your child: “The lion says roar, and the pig says oink. What do you say today?”
Nameera Akhtar of the University of California at Santa Cruz found that toddlers are more focused when something is new and different, such as hearing new words. Akhtar says, “I think [our] experiments show how motivated children are to pay attention to adults’ conversations—and how motivated they are to learn new information.”

3. **Make the time matter by using rich and diverse language.**
   - You can talk with your child and explain what you are doing, what is coming next and how it may feel.
   - You can play peekaboo when you pull your child’s shirt on. By creating lots of positive feelings, even during the most routine things, you are creating a strong bond with your toddler.
   - You can introduce new words. For example, make up rhymes: “Your socks sound like rocks, but they are socks” or “Your shirt has lots of dirt—it is a dirty shirt.”
   - Give your toddler something to hold that interests him or her, such as a plastic jar filled with things that your child can shake and make noises.

The American Academy of Pediatrics suggests the following safety measures:

4. **Prevent your toddler from falling.** Make sure the location for changing clothes and/or diapers is safe.

5. **Avoid excessive force.** When handling your toddler, be sure to be gentle, no matter how intense the “wrestling matches” become.

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