

Keeping Young Children's Attention in Preschool

by Pam Millar



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Agenda

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Attendance

Demographic Poll

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General Brain Development

- **Nurture/nature:** Genes and environment interact at every step of brain development, but they play very different roles.
- Nurture: genes are responsible for the basic wiring plan
- Nature: experience is responsible for fine-tuning those connections, helping each child adapt to the particular environment (geographical, cultural, family, school, peer-group) to which he belongs

General Brain Development

- **Critical Periods:** There are certain windows of time during which the young are especially sensitive to their environment.
- Babies require normal **visual input** or they may suffer permanent impairment; children born with crossed or “lazy” eyes will fail to develop full acuity and depth perception if the problem is not promptly corrected. **Language skills depend** critically on verbal input (or sign language, for babies with hearing impairments) in the first few years or certain skills, particularly grammar and pronunciation, may be permanently impacted. The critical period for language-learning begins to close around five years of age and ends around puberty.

Effect of Experience on Brain Development

Cognitive, emotional, and social capacities are inextricably intertwined throughout the life course. The brain is a highly integrated organ and its multiple functions operate in coordination with one another. Emotional well-being and social competence provide a strong foundation for emerging cognitive abilities, and together they are the bricks and mortar of brain architecture.

The [emotional and physical health](#), social skills, and cognitive-linguistic capacities that emerge in the early years are all important for success in school, the workplace, and in the larger community.

Effect of Experience on Brain Development

Toxic stress weakens the architecture of the developing brain, which can lead to lifelong problems in learning, behavior, and physical and mental health.

Experiencing stress is an important part of healthy development. Activation of the stress response produces a wide range of physiological reactions that prepare the body to deal with threat.

However, when these responses remain activated at high levels for significant periods of time, without supportive relationships to help calm them, [toxic stress](#) results. This can impair the development of neural connections, especially in the areas of the brain dedicated to higher-order skills.

The Importance of Keeping Children's Attention

The ability to focus and control involves the **developing executive functioning** skills including the ability to pay attention, learn and remember rules, and the self-control to not act on initial impulses.

Studies have shown that children who have developed **executive functioning skills** often do better in school and are more likely to be able to achieve personal goals as they mature.

([Kylie Rymanowicz, Michigan State University Extension](#) -2019)

The Importance of Keeping Children's Attention

- **Executive function and self-regulation** skills are the mental processes that enable us to plan, focus attention, remember instructions, and juggle multiple tasks successfully.
- These skills are crucial for learning and development. They also enable positive behavior and allow us to make healthy choices for ourselves and our families. (**Center on the Developing Child: Harvard University 2018**)

Children's ability to pay attention, focus and persist on a task at age 4 increased their odds of completing college.

Breakout group discussion

Discuss and identify the teaching strategies you use to keep a child's attention

The Role of the Early Childhood Teacher

Monitor your behavior: pay attention to the child when they are with you. Show you are actively involved in what they are doing (no cell phones or emails)

Provide security: have routines, rules, and meet children's (basic) emotional needs. Let children know that you are there to keep them safe. Engage children in attention building activities.

Help children identify their feelings: children become overwhelmed. If a child is upset or worried, find the root of the problem. Children learn to deal with their emotions better if you acknowledge those feelings. Overwhelming emotions seem not-so-large when an early childhood teacher help them modulate the level of the feeling. Children need to understand there are boundaries for behavior, and even when upset, they, they can't let their emotions take over.

Provide Clear Directions

Break assignments into small steps, and ask children repeat the directions. This will help children with organizational and sequencing skills and ensure your directions are understood.

The Role of the Early Childhood Teacher:

Recognize the Limits

Use children's age as a guide. For example, a 4-year-old's mind will wander after four minutes, so break tasks into four-minute chunks; a 2 year old can focus for about 2 minutes.

Play Games

Playing movement and music games helps [preschool](#) children develop attention skills. "Playing games such as 'Red Light, Green Light' and 'Simon Says' are fun and engaging ways to promote these skills."

Follow the Leader

To help young children intentionally focus, games that require children to follow the leader's actions. With the Clapping Game, the leader claps out a rhythm and the children repeat it. You can increase the difficulty of the rhythm with each round.

Use a Timer

Using a sand timer lets children know there is a time limit and will remind children to redirect their wandering attention back to the task at hand. A timer also tells the child the task has an end, relieving them of the hopeless feeling that it will go on forever.

The Role of the Early Childhood Teacher

Provide Puzzles and Building Sets

Putting together puzzles and creating structures with building blocks, such as Legos or Lincoln Logs, requires children to intentionally focus.

Make it fun!

Use stories, games and give children active roles in the learning experience. But remember you are in charge. Still keep to the rules and boundaries.

Raise your voice to get attention...but do not yell!

Losing your temper will cause children to disengage and damage your relationship with them. You can also change your voice tone, sing a directive, or talk softly

Breakout group discussion

Why is it important to have humor in your interactions with young children?

Please prepare examples of how you interact with humor with young children.

Why is Humor Important?

Fires up more parts of the brain

High levels of activities in multiple parts of the brain

Strengthens memory

Builds cohesion

Softens criticism

Copes with stress

Creates a comfortable learning environment

Brings enthusiasm, positive feelings, and optimism to the classroom.



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How to Bring Humor to Your Preschool Classroom

A young child's humor is not as complex as that of an older child or adult. Preschoolers love simple visual and verbal humor such as silly antics, songs, games, funny rhymes and stories.

Create Laughable Moments Create laughable moments for children by watching funny movies, making up silly rhymes, butchering the words to his favorite tunes, or reading funny books. Some hilarious children's book selections include Silly Sally by Audrey Wood, and Bark, George by Jules Feiffer. You can also tickle your preschooler's funny bone by tying scarves around your heads and playing silly pirate games, or cranking up some music and doing a goofy dance around the room.

Laugh Out Loud Laughter is truly contagious, and when you giggle out loud, children will quickly follow suit. So laugh loud, and often.

Be Spontaneous Funny moments don't always have to be planned. You can help children have a good chuckle by doing something totally unexpected. This type of spontaneity will indulge your child in a bit of humor while teaching him to seize the small moments in life.

How to Bring Humor to Your Preschool Classroom

Laugh at Yourself Be open and willing to laugh about your misfortunes. This helps kids keep things in perspective, take themselves less seriously, and learn to better deal with disappointments in life. This attitude also encourages creativity in kids, and gives them the tools they need to learn how to think outside of the box.

Add humor to familiar games by modifying them. For instance, play hide-and-go-seek with children, and pretend you can't find him. Or play a game of tag, and pretend to stumble, and fall every time you get close enough to tag a child. Preschoolers will get a kick out of the fact that you're just too slow to catch him.

Point to pictures of different animals, and make the wrong noises for each one. For instance, instead of saying "oink, oink" when you point to a picture of a pig, say "quack."

Stand in the mirror, and see who can make the silliest face. Preschoolers love this!

Identifying Concerns: Early Intervention is Key

11% of children have ADHD (in America) (American Academy of Pediatrics). The recommendation for preschool children, treatment should begin as soon as possible, and geared towards teaching parents how to better control behavior problems. Hopefully preventing the step to medications.

Symptoms of inattention

- Often makes careless mistakes and lacks attention to details
- Often has difficulty paying attention to tasks or while playing
- Often seems to not listen when spoken to directly
- Often fails to follow through on instructions, schoolwork or chores
- Often has difficulty organizing tasks and activities
- Often avoids, dislikes, or is reluctant to participate in tasks requiring sustained mental effort
- Often loses things
- Often easily distracted
- Often forgetful in daily activities

Symptoms of hyperactivity and impulsivity

- Often fidgets with or taps hands and feet or squirms in seat
- Often leaves seat when remaining seated is expected
- Often runs or climbs where it is inappropriate or feels restless
- Often unable to play quietly or, if older, participate in leisurely activities
- Often acts as if "on the go" or "driven by a motor"
- Often talks excessively
- Often blurts out an answer before a question has been fully asked
- Often has difficulty waiting his or her turn
- Often interrupts or intrudes on others

Identifying Concerns: Ways to identify: NAEYC Assessing Young Children (2004)

Early Childhood Curriculum, Assessment, and Program Evaluation (NAEYC 2003)

- Emphasizes linking assessment information to the family and,
- The importance of professional development for teachers and families in understanding and using assessments for:
 - Making sound decisions about teaching and learning,
 - Identifying significant concerns that may require focused intervention for individual children, and
 - Helping programs improve their educational and development interventions.

Early Childhood Assessment Tools

Observations and Checklists: A well-defined checklist with observation training is critical and essential for an assessment system. Observations of child behaviors and skills provide the teacher with a powerful measure of a child's abilities.

Anecdotal records are short, factual, narrative descriptions of child behaviors and skills over time. Anecdotal records should be as objective as possible and only a few sentences long.

Running records are similar to anecdotal records but are much longer. An observer objectively writes in a narrative format everything the child did and said for a specific time period such as thirty minutes. Running records are especially helpful in analyzing social skill development or behavior concerns.

Developmental Screenings: Developmental screenings are a short (15-20 minutes) set of age- and content appropriate performance items based on a developmental continuum and linked to ages typical for the behavior. This type of assessment is helpful in identifying major developmental delays that indicate the need for a more thorough diagnostic assessment.

Early Childhood Assessment Tools

Standardized assessments are typically administered in groups and provide normative and scalable data that can be aggregated and reported to administrators and policymakers. Standardized assessments are direct measures of children's outcomes and are administered under very stringent protocols. For young children, standardized tests also should contain authentic content and mirror classroom instruction. They should incorporate an inviting use of color and graphics and include manipulatives when appropriate. Because standardized assessments are not as accurate, valid, and reliable for young children as they are for older children, they should not be used solely to make high stakes decisions until grade 3 and preferably not until grade 4.

A portfolio is a flexible and adaptable collection over time of various concrete work samples showing many dimensions of the child's learning.

Diagnostic assessments identify a range of strengths and weaknesses in the child and suggests specific remedial actions. Classroom diagnostic assessments are not direct measures of academic outcome and should never be used for accountability purposes alone.

Home Inventories: Parents may see behaviors and skills that children demonstrate in only the home setting

Group Activity and Presentation

Divide into groups of 2-5 people and discuss the following:

1. What do you think has the greater effect on general brain development? Why?
2. Review the strategies that help young children focus throughout their day. Pick three strategies and be prepared to give examples of how you implement them in your classroom.
3. When identifying concerns regarding attention deficit, review the symptoms we discussed.
4. What are the behaviors you would notice in a young child that might identify a concern? Be prepared to share.

Wrap-up and Evaluation



About Hanna Perkins Center

www.hannaperkins.org

Hanna Perkins Center for Child Development is a non-profit partner with parents, educators and mental health professionals to help children understand and manage their emotions for success in school and life.

Services include:

HANNA PERKINS SCHOOL: State-chartered kindergarten, preschool, parent/toddler program and dedicated Autism Spectrum Disorders

HADDEN CLINIC: Mental health assessment, counseling and therapy—from birth to 18, and for mothers struggling with postpartum depression.

CONSULTATION AND TRAINING with schools and early learning centers.

CONTINUING EDUCATION for educators, child care professionals and others who frequently work with children.