



# Getting Ready for School Begins at Birth

How to help your child learn in the early years



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A national nonprofit promoting  
the healthy development of  
babies and toddlers

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**M**ost parents watch proudly as their 5-year-old grabs her backpack and heads out the door to her first day of kindergarten—her “official” start into the world of education and learning. Few might imagine that their child has actually been preparing for this day since she first opened her eyes.

With so much emphasis today on preparing children for school, parents are eager to know how they can help their young children learn. This booklet is designed to help you understand what you can do to get your baby or toddler off to the best start by using your **everyday interactions** to teach the basic skills she will need to cooperate, get along with others, and be an enthusiastic learner.

Children are born ready to learn. Children are naturally curious beings who are motivated to make sense of the world around them. The brain is the only organ that is not fully formed at birth. During the first 3 years, trillions of connections between brain cells are being made. *A child's relationships and experiences during the early years greatly influence how her brain grows.*

Children learn best through their **everyday experiences with the people they love and trust, and when the learning is fun.**

Remember, children develop at their own pace and in their own way. If your child's development is delayed, you can adapt the information in this brochure to meet your child's individual needs. If you are at all concerned about your child's development, consult a health care provider.

**K**indergarten teachers report that a child's social and emotional “literacy”—the development of self-control, respect for others, a sense of confidence and competence—is vital for success in kindergarten. Without these skills, children are at a greater disadvantage in school.

Center on Families,  
Communities, Schools and  
Children's Learning, 1994.



**To become eager learners, children need to develop skills in four key areas:**

## 1 Language and Literacy Skills

Language provides the foundation for the development of literacy skills. Learning to communicate through gestures, sounds, and words increases a child's interest in—and later understanding of—books and reading.

**Talking, reading aloud, and singing** all stimulate children's understanding and use of language, and help them learn to become good communicators and eager readers.



## 2 Thinking Skills

Children are born with a need to understand how the world works. They start by making basic associations such as, “I call out, dad comes.” As they grow, they develop more and more complex ways of figuring things out. In their everyday experiences, children use and develop an understanding of math concepts, such as **counting and sorting** and **problem-solving skills** that they will need for school. For example, a 2-year-old figures out that she needs to get one more cookie because another friend has come to the snack table.

## 3 Self-Control

Self-control—the ability to express and manage emotions in appropriate ways—is essential for success in school and healthy development overall. It enables children to **cooperate with others**, to **cope with frustration**, and to **resolve conflicts**. Young children learn these skills through interactions with others and guidance from you.

## 4 Self-Confidence

When children feel competent and believe in themselves, they are more willing to take on new challenges, a key ingredient for school success. Self-confidence is also crucial for **getting along with others** and working out the many social challenges—such as **sharing, competition, and making friends**—that children face in school settings. Self-confident children see that other people like them and expect relationships to be satisfying and fun.

# Helping your child learn:

## Birth–12 months

### 1 Language & Literacy

Newborns use their gestures, sounds, and facial expressions to communicate feelings and needs such as hunger, fatigue, or joy, or to let you know that they need a break from interacting or playing. Early on, babies start to engage in “conversations”—first with back-and-forth cooing and smiling, later by using their movements and sounds to express what they feel and want.

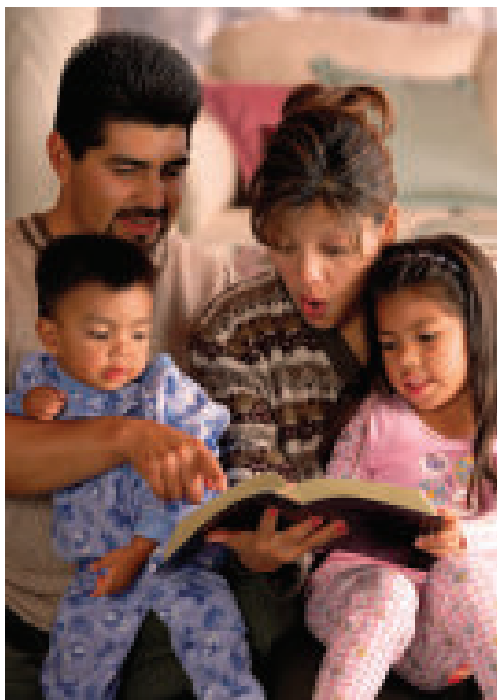
**Talk together.** Copy your baby’s sounds and encourage her to imitate you. She will start by making specific sounds such as “ohs” and ahs” and progressing to “puh,” “buh,” “da,” and “ma.” At around 6 to 9 months, she may begin putting sounds together like “dada” and “baba.” You can help make these sounds meaningful by repeating and attaching meaning to them. “Dada gave you a big hug!”

**Share books.** It’s never too early to start sharing books with your baby. Let him explore them in whatever way he likes. Offer chunky board, cloth, or soft bath books for chewing and gumming. Good books for babies are simple ones with brightly colored designs and pictures of things and people that are familiar to them. They really enjoy lift-and-flap books as well. Follow your baby’s lead; this may sometimes mean staying on the same page the whole time or “reading” the book upside down!

### 2 Thinking Skills

In this first year, babies are learning very important early math and logic concepts. They learn about *cause and effect* when they push a button to make the toy car move. They learn about *size and shape* and how to solve problems when they figure out that one ball fits into the bucket but another doesn’t. They learn about *gravity* when they drop a spoon from the high chair and watch to see where it lands. They learn “*object permanence*”—that *things they can’t see still exist* when they play peek-a-boo or crawl into the next room to find you.

**Encourage your child to explore objects and toys in different ways.** Touching, banging, shaking, and rolling help children learn about how things work. Talk with your child about what he is doing. “You got the truck to move by pulling the string!”



**Make everyday activities “teachable moments.”** For example, bathtime is a fun time to learn basic math and science concepts. Filling and dumping out cups help children learn about *empty* and *full*, and *in* and *out*. When your child makes the rubber duck splash in the tub, she learns about *cause and effect*. When the duck stays on top of the water, she is learning about *floating* and *sinking* and the difference between liquids and solids.

### 3 Self-Control

Babies have very little self-control. They naturally act on thoughts and feelings without the ability to stop themselves. With your sensitive guidance, they can begin learning to manage their feelings and actions.

**Help your child to soothe herself.** The calmer she feels, the more in control she will be. Babies have different ways of calming down. Some need lots of physical contact, such as rocking or hugging; others prefer to be swaddled or put down for a minute. *You teach your child to calm herself by staying calm yourself when she loses control.* This helps her feel safe.

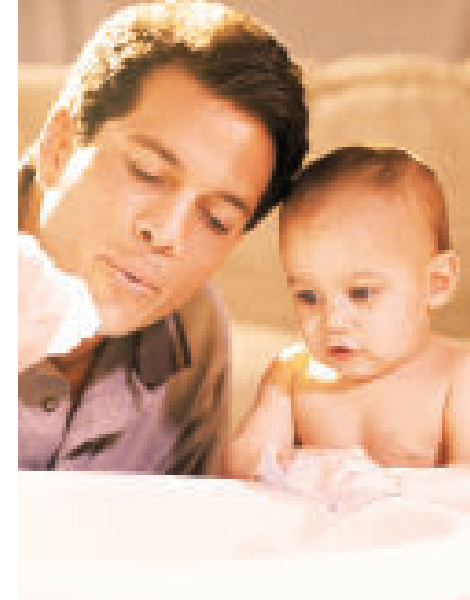
**Teach acceptable behaviors.** Tell and show your child what he *can* do, not only what he’s *not* allowed to do. If he’s throwing balls around the house, give him an empty trash can to drop them into, or take him outside and show him where he *can* play with the ball. This helps him learn right from wrong and to channel his energy and interests in acceptable ways as he grows—a key ingredient in school success.

### 4 Self-Confidence

Children need a strong sense of security to develop self-confidence. Comforting your baby, responding to his cries and needs, talking and playing with him—all make him feel secure, as well as loved and important. Feeling secure also makes it easier for him to transition to school because he knows that you’ll always be there for him. Another way to build your child’s self-confidence is by providing him the support he needs to accomplish a task, rather than simply doing it for him.

**Establish routines with your child.** Most children feel safe, confident, and in control of their world when events are predictable—when they happen in approximately the same way at the same time each day. Indeed, going to school requires following many routines!

**Do it again and again and again.** Children need lots of practice doing things over and over again to succeed at a new skill. Think of the pride a baby feels when she can finally grasp the rattle and put it into her mouth by herself.



# Helping your child learn:

## 12–24 months

### 1 Language & Literacy

In the second year, toddlers become more effective communicators. They use a combination of their gestures and sounds to let you know what they are thinking and feeling. They may take your hand and walk you to the sink as if to say, “Please get me a drink.” Most children are learning and saying many new words, and at around 18 months they start putting a few together, such as “More milk.” By 24 months, most children can say approximately 200 words.

**Talk together.** Point out and name the things you see together. Ask what it is, then wait a few seconds until you offer the answer. This gives your child a chance to respond and show you what he knows. Research shows that the more parents talk with their children, the bigger the children’s vocabularies.

**Share books together.** Let him hold the book. Point to the pictures as you read together. Ask him to point to the baby, house, or dog. You can start to read stories that introduce ideas such as: *up/down* or *big/little*, *colors*, and *numbers*. Most children are also just beginning to learn to sing. Share books that can be sung, such as “Wheels on the Bus.” Soon he’ll be “reading”—telling you the story as he turns the pages.

### 2 Thinking Skills

Toddlers are like little scientists. They are eager to figure out how everything works. For example, they might throw a ball to the ground and see that it bounces, then throw a doll to see what it will do. They also learn to use objects as tools—for

example, using a stick to try to get an out-of-reach toy. Their growing memory is also an important tool in helping them learn. For example, they imitate what they see others do. Although your toddler may not repeat what you show her immediately, she may do it at a later time.

**Follow your child’s lead.** Toddlers can learn almost any concept through their everyday activities. If your child loves to be active, she will learn about *fast* and *slow*, *up* and *down*, and *over* and *under* as she plays on the playground. If she prefers to explore with her hands, she will learn the same concepts and skills as she builds with blocks.



**One more time!** Toddlers like to repeat actions over and over again. This strengthens the connections in the brain that help children master new skills. Provide interesting and challenging objects and activities that encourage her to figure something out—such as blocks, puzzles, water, and sand.

### 3 Self-Control

Toddlers have minds of their own and strong feelings that they express with gusto. “No!” becomes a favorite word and a powerful way to assert their independence. At the same time, toddlers can become easily frustrated because there are still many things that they want to do but cannot. Routines are especially helpful now since they make children feel secure at a time when they can feel very out of control.

**Teach your child limits.** Setting consistent limits makes children feel safe because the limits help them know what to expect. A child who has her crayons taken away when she writes on the wall learns that she either writes on paper or she can’t use crayons.

**Label and validate your child’s feelings.** Letting children know that their feelings are understood helps them calm down and regain control. This doesn’t mean you give in to their demand. “I know you are mad that we had to leave the park, but hitting me is not okay. You can hit this pillow instead.” Giving a child choices is also important for helping her feel in control—that she has some say in the matter. Let her make decisions about what to wear or what to eat, within reasonable limits.

### 4 Self-Confidence

Most toddlers are eager to establish their independence. But they still need to know that their loved ones are always there for them as a “safe base.” This knowledge enables them to explore and learn. Accomplishing tasks “All by myself!” is also an important way children build self-confidence and are successful in school.

**Let your child be the problem-solver.** Be your child’s coach. Give her the support she needs to solve a problem but don’t solve it for her. Suggest she try other holes where the triangle shape might fit instead of putting it in for her. This makes her feel confident to take on challenges and learn new things.

**Provide challenges.** Watch to see what skills your child has learned and then help her take the next step. If she can easily push the buttons on the pop-up toy, offer her a new one that has more complicated ways to make the toys appear. If she is building towers with blocks, suggest that the blocks can also be a house for her stuffed animals. This helps her learn about pretend play.





# Helping your child learn:

24–36 months

## 1 Language & Literacy

Language development soars at this age. By 36 months, a child's vocabulary is much larger, and he is able to put together simple three- to five-word sentences. Most children are beginning to understand the meaning of stories; this is critical for learning to read and write. Drawing and "writing" also help children express their feelings and ideas in a more active way and build good writing skills later. Encourage your child to experiment with crayons, markers, and pencils. Have her help make a grocery list. This helps her to connect language with the written word.

**Talk together.** Talk with your toddler about everything! The more you talk, the more words she will learn. Tell each other stories. Singing with your child is also a terrific way to teach children new words and ideas. Play games by trying new words in a familiar song, "The itsy bitsy doggie..." Remember, your child will actually understand more than she can say and will follow simple instructions like, "Go to the kitchen and get your cup."

**Share books together.** Older toddlers begin to make connections between symbols in books and what they see in their world. For example, you may see them point to a dog outside and call him "Clifford." When reading, point to pictures and ask your toddler what he thinks is happening. Children this age love books that tell simple stories and have simple rhymes that they can memorize. Books about counting, the alphabet, shapes, or sizes—as well as those with humor and songs—are favorites.

## 2 Thinking Skills

The ability to pretend marks a big leap in the development of thinking skills. When children pretend, it means that they understand symbols—that a block can become a car, a shoebox can become a home for stuffed animals, and eventually, that a word stands for a thing or an idea. Understanding symbols is a vital stepping stone to the later ability to create ideas. This is important for the development of skills such as math, logic, and creativity. In fact, it is around this age that children are beginning to understand how things are logically connected. That's why it seems that every other word they speak is ... "Why?"

**Encourage your child's growing imagination.** It's important to allow your toddler to take the lead in your playtime; let him be the "director."



This helps him develop his own ideas. It also strengthens his thinking skills as he makes logical connections in his stories: "The dog has to go back in his house because it's raining." Offer him props to help him act out the stories he's creating.

**Incorporate math games into your everyday routines.** Count as you climb the stairs. Ask if there are enough crackers for everyone. Help her put the socks in one pile and the shirts in another as you do laundry.



## 3 Self-Control

Older toddlers are often unable to stop themselves from acting on their desires. Again, acknowledging their feelings and suggesting other ways that they can express themselves is still the best response at this age. As they grow, encourage them to think about what else they can do—making music by banging on a pot instead of the table. The ability to substitute an acceptable action for one that is not is essential for functioning well in school.

**Give choices.** Present him with two acceptable options and let him choose: "Would you like to brush your teeth or put on your pajamas first?" If a decision is really yours, don't offer a choice. Say, "It's bed time," not "Are you ready to go to bed?"

**Help your child learn to wait.** Waiting helps children learn self-control. And it teaches them that others have needs, too. Make it short, and give your child something to do in the meantime. Also, playing with friends offers many opportunities to help your child learn to wait, to share, and to take turns. With your guidance and lots of practice, your child will be well equipped to work out conflicts with his school pals later on.

## 4 Self-Confidence

Two-year-olds are very capable people. Naturally, they want to do more for themselves—like brushing their hair or getting dressed on their own. This makes them feel strong, confident, and independent—key ingredients for school success.

**Give your child responsibilities.** Children this age love to help out and feel great pride when they can show you how they feed pets or water plants. Be specific about what you want them to do. "Please pick up your blocks," instead of, "Let's clean up the room." Also, be specific about what your child accomplished: "You put the toys in the box. Good job!" This will help him later when he is asked to perform many "jobs" around the classroom.

**Encourage your child to ask for help.** Let your child know that you see she's struggling and ask what kind of help she wants. "Getting shoes on can be so hard! Sometimes opening up the laces can make it easier. Can I help you loosen them?" This helps her learn to ask for help. Let her see that you sometimes need help, too.

# To think about...

**Everyday experiences are great opportunities for learning.** You can teach about shapes by cutting cheese into triangles and squares, or about textures as you play outside and feel the grass, rocks, and, if you can stand it, dirt and mud. You don't need to buy expensive toys. Often what children like best are household items such as pots and pans, wooden spoons, and plastic containers.

Children also learn about making friends and getting along with others as you take a walk and talk with neighbors. They learn self-control when they have to wait their turn to go down the slide at the playground. They build self-confidence when they're able to feed themselves.

**TV plays a limited role in learning.** Although children may learn some concepts from educational programming, and enjoy watching these shows, research tells us that children learn best from interactive, hands-on experiences—touching, feeling, manipulating, problem-solving—with people they care about.

The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends no TV for children under 2. If you do choose to allow your child to watch, here are some suggested guidelines:

**Watch with your child.** Make TV watching an interactive experience. Dance and sing together. "Extend the learning" by talking about what he's viewing and connecting it to the real world. If the show deals with the theme of sharing, point out how this comes up for your child in his daily life. If he's learning about colors, talk about the different color houses you see as you take a walk.

**Don't use TV/video to put your child to sleep.** This makes it hard for him to learn to fall asleep on his own. Instead, establish a bedtime routine that includes soothing activities such as reading and singing softly to him before you put him down.

**Limit viewing time.** A 30- to 60-minute-a-day limit for any "screen time" (meaning time spent in front of a TV or computer screen) is reasonable for 2- to 3-year-olds.



**You matter.** What you do makes a difference. You teach your child self-control when you remain calm in stressful situations, such as being stuck in traffic. Your child learns about responsibility when you pick up the litter you see on the playground. You model helping others when, together, you take care of the neighbor's cats. Children learn manners and respect for others when they see you thank the grocery store clerk. They learn about trust when you keep your word.



**Your beliefs and values shape what you teach your child.** Ultimately, what you teach your child reflects the values that are most important to you and your family. For example, one parent may not like her child playing with his food, while another may see this as an acceptable way to explore and learn about different textures. A family's beliefs and values can have a particularly strong influence on attitudes about potty training, sleep practices, the degree of independence parents encourage in their child, and how children are taught to express their emotions. Being aware of your values and how they influence your parenting will help you make good choices as your child grows. ■

Dear Parents:

Children are born ready to learn. They enter the world with a natural curiosity that grows through their explorations and experiences.

MetLife Foundation is pleased to partner with ZERO TO THREE in developing this booklet that shows how young children prepare for lifelong learning, the specific skills they develop, and what you can do to support your child so he or she will enter school as a confident and interested learner.

Please enjoy the booklet, share it with others, and consider putting its suggestions into practice so your child is prepared for one of the most important and enriching journeys of life.

Sincerely,



Sibyl Jacobson  
President  
MetLife Foundation

## MetLife Foundation

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Published by:



A national nonprofit promoting the healthy development of babies and toddlers

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Printed in the United States of America  
ISBN 0-943657-87-3

Writers: Claire Lerner, LCSW  
and Lynette A. Ciervo

Based on the ideas and concepts in Parlakian, R. (2003). *Before the ABCs: Promoting school readiness in infants and toddlers*. Washington, DC: ZERO TO THREE.

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Design: Metze Publication Design

ZERO TO THREE gratefully acknowledges MetLife Foundation for making this brochure possible.

We extend special thanks to ZERO TO THREE Board Members who helped to shape and edit this brochure.

Ron Lally, Ph.D., Chair  
Rich Atlas  
Katherine Barnard, Ph.D.  
Carol Berman, Ph.D.  
Megan Gunnar, Ph.D.  
Sam Meisels, Ed.D.  
Anne Pleshette Murphy

Special thanks to Pam High, M.D., Professor of Pediatrics (Clinical), Brown Medical School. Committee on Early Childhood, Adoption and Dependent Care, American Academy of Pediatrics.

Executive Director: Matthew E. Melmed

This brochure is also available in Spanish.

Picture credits: page 7, Easter Seals