

# Early Childhood Education Tips for Parents

Once again, according to the 2005 annual national survey of education leaders by The Parent Institute and NAESP, elementary school principals have rated “Helping children learn at home before they ever start school” as a critical element in early childhood education.

As the school year begins and parent interest in education hits its yearly peak, now is the time for principals to seize the opportunity to educate parents about the importance of early childhood learning.

But what should schools tell parents about early childhood education? Research and my own parent involvement experience over the years suggest that specific information, explaining exactly what parents should do, is most effective. For example, a suggestion like “Read to your children” is not as valuable or productive as “Spend at least 10 minutes reading with each of your children every single day.”

Consider the following suggestions, developed by The Parent Institute and published in its *Parent Guide: 37 Experiences Every Child Should Have Before Starting School*:

## Social and Emotional Development

**Involve your child regularly in play groups.** Play groups help children develop important social skills while providing entertainment and friendship for families.

**Assign household chores.** Even small children can handle simple jobs like setting the table and sorting laundry. Pitching in builds responsibility and independence.

**Offer choices.** Making decisions helps your child feel competent and builds reasoning skills. For example, say, “We have room for only one toy in the bag. You can pick the truck or the race car.”

## Physical Development

**Develop gross motor skills.** Promote upper and lower body strength by activities like rolling balls, throwing beanbags, running, and jumping. As your child grows, add more difficult tasks, such as swinging and climbing.

**Build fine motor skills.** Encourage drawing, stringing beads, and working puzzles. Practice cutting, lifting objects with tongs, buttoning, snapping, zipping, and lacing.

## Language Development

**Foster reading skills.** Make reading a fun experience by



keeping exciting children’s books and magazines handy. Set a good example by reading together and on your own. Visit the library together.

**Communicate verbally.** Research has shown that there is a strong link between spoken and written language development. Encourage young children to talk with you. Listening to them and responding will boost their social competence.

**Play with words at home.** The more fun children have with language, the more they will use it to learn. Teach them words that sound like their meaning, such as rustle, crunch, bang, bark, and zip. Encourage them to use words they know to create rhymes and songs.

## Cognitive Development

**Emphasize classification skills.** Sort familiar objects, sounds, smells, and flavors with your child. For example, describe things by their shape—square waffles, oval grapes, round crackers.

**Incorporate numbers into everyday life.**

Teach your young child to count to 20 and recognize some written numbers. Routinely count things aloud—five blocks, two cookies, three books, four crayons, one friend.

**Give your child practice with directions.**

You can practice directions by making up games with clues. Hints should be simple at first (“Go to the kitchen”) and involve more steps when children are ready (“Walk to the front door, open it, and look outside”). The last clue can lead to a reward (“You found the prize!”).

Parents love their young children and will work hard to help them—if they know how. Use these suggestions and add your own and those of your staff. The evidence is clear that the early years, before children start school, are the foundation for nearly all subsequent learning. With so much competition for parents’ attention, it’s important to use every outlet at your disposal—videos, Web sites, newsletters, and presentations—to tell parents what they can do to prepare their young children for school success.

Now is the time! ■

John H. Wherry is president of The Parent Institute in Fairfax, Virginia. His e-mail address is [jhw@parent-institute.com](mailto:jhw@parent-institute.com).

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