

# TIPS FOR EARLY LEARNING & SKILL BUILDING

## Simple Concepts to Embed in Everyday Routines



Researchers from around the country offer helpful tips that you can practice to help young children grow and learn. The tips are based on concepts of learning and development that can be worked into everyday routines. Each tip describes a concept, why the concept is important, and a step-by-step description of how to put the concept into action. We hope these concepts are useful!

The concepts include:

- Engaging Children in Social Object Play
- Using Children's Interests in Activities
- Uncovering Learning Potential
- Learning Words During Joint Attention
- Predictable Routines
- Distracting and Redirecting Children to Engage in Appropriate Behavior
- Narration
- Playing Together with Objects: Practicing Joint Attention
- Book Sharing
- Predictable Spaces & Routines
- Peer-Mediated Support: Teaching Children to Play with Each Other

*Publication compiled by:*



## Skill Building Activities Tool

This tool accompanies the *Tips for Early Learning and Skill Building Guide (Guide)* and the results of the Kindergarten Student Entrance Profile (KSEP). The Guide provides suggestions of activities that parents can do at home with their child to increase skills needed to succeed in kindergarten and beyond. The below chart indicates which activity is associated with specific items on the KSEP.

**\*REMEMBER\* STUDENTS' SCORES ARE CONFIDENTIAL. PLEASE DO NOT SHARE INDIVIDUAL STUDENT SCORES WITH PEOPLE OTHER THAN THE STUDENTS' FAMILY/CAREGIVERS. Complete reports will be available in early November.**

### Suggestions on how to use this tool:

- Incorporate into parent/teacher conferences. If there is a student that is in need of skill development in a certain KSEP area as shown by their KSEP scores, share with the parents the specific activity that would support their child.  
Example:
  - *"I have observed Sylvia doing great in cooperative play and she is very enthusiastic about school. Our READY data highlights this. One area that she can use support in is demonstrating expressive verbal abilities. Check out page 8 of this Guide. This is an activity you can do at home to strengthen Sylvia's verbal expression skills."*
- Email or send home a couple activities a week to all parents for overall skill building.
- Align suggested home activities with lessons/strategies already happening in the classroom.
- Share phrases/terms used in the classroom with parents so they can reinforce classroom messaging at home.

KSEP Item	Activity Page Number
1. Seeks adult help when appropriate	4, 6
2. Engages in cooperative play activities with peers	2, 11
3. Exhibits impulse control and self-regulation	6, 7
4. Maintains attention to tasks (attention focus, distractibility)	3
5. Is enthusiastic and curious about school	3
6. Persists with tasks after experiencing difficulty (task persistence, coping with challenges)	4, 6, 7
7. Recognizes own written name	5
8. Demonstrates expressive verbal abilities	8, 10
9. Understands that numbers represent quantity	8, 10
10. Writes own name	5, 9
11. Recognizes colors	8, 10
12. Recognizes shapes	8, 10

# CONCEPT

## Engaging Children in Social Object Play



### WHAT:

Social object play means playing with toys or other objects in a way that encourages talking, looking, or engagement between a child and an adult and/or a peer. The child and the adult or peer play together with an object, usually taking turns that build on each other's activity to keep the play going. Social object play should be fun. The adult and the child share in this fun together, meaning there are mutual smiles or laughs, and the child shows interest in continuing the activity.

### WHY:

Social object play is an important skill that helps children grow in their social development and their communication with others.

### HOW:

Adults can engage children in social object play by following these steps:

- Step 1:** Provide toys or objects that the child enjoys playing with. Pay close attention to what objects the child shows interest in. Sometimes you can tell what interests the child by paying attention to what the child looks at or reaches for.
- Step 2:** Once the child begins to play with the toy or object, join in by imitating what the child is doing.
- Step 3:** Take turns doing what the child is doing with the toy or object. Balance the turns so that neither partner is taking more turns than the other. For example, if the child is building a tower, take turns adding blocks to the tower.
- Step 4:** Expand the play routine. Once you and the child have taken many turns, expand the play routine. Bring in other toys or objects to make the activity longer. Here are some examples:
  - If the child is building a tower with blocks and you are taking your turn to help build the tower, encourage the child to knock the blocks down when all the blocks are used. The crashing of the blocks should be fun and motivate the child to repeat the activity (rebuild the tower and crash it down again).
  - Once the routine of building the tower and knocking it down is mastered, expand the activity by adding a toy figure just before the tower crashes or using a truck to help push the tower down.
- Step 5:** Make sure the play routine is fun and motivating for the child. Look to the child's attention, involvement, and enjoyment that show the play routine is fun and motivating. The more motivated the child is, the longer the play routine will last and the greater the opportunities for practicing social and communication skills.

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# CONCEPT

## Using Children's Interests in Activities

### WHAT:

When you are planning activities, use children's interests to guide you. When transitioning to an activity that your child does not prefer, use favorite interests to help motivate and engage the child.

### WHY:

Children have different interests. They are more likely to transition or engage in an activity that includes their special interests.

### HOW:

Adults can use children's special interests in activities by following these steps:

**Step 1:** Make a list of the special interests of your child. They may include:

- toys or objects, such as trains, blocks, music toys, certain books, or movies
- topics, such as dinosaurs, maps, or the alphabet
- characters, such as Dora the Explorer or Thomas the Tank Engine
- activities, such as bouncing a ball, spinning, or singing
- certain colors, numbers, or songs

**Step 2:** Make a list of the activities during the day that are difficult for the child to do or transition to.

**Step 3:** Think about different ways that you can include the child's interests in these activities.

Here are some examples:

- If a child does not like playing with blocks or other manipulatives, tape pictures of the child's favorite cartoon character to the blocks.
- If a child has trouble doing art projects, create an art project based on the child's favorite book or song.
- If it is hard for you to get the child to wash his hands, try singing a favorite song only when he is washing his hands or have him wash his hands and a dinosaur (or another favorite toy) at the same time.



Courtesy of The Shield Institute

Using Interests—A teacher took a photo of the child's favorite toy to begin to teach the child how to put together a puzzle.

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# CONCEPT

## Developing Persistence with Tasks



### WHAT:

*All children are capable of learning. Some may need more support from their caregivers than others. To promote learning, you can get children's attention, provide clear instructions, persist in your request, and help them respond appropriately.*

### WHY:

Many children miss out on hundreds of learning opportunities every day because they are not paying attention to what others pay attention to. Missed learning opportunities can hold children back in their development. Over time, lack of progress may lower adult expectations. This can be prevented.

### HOW:

Adults can help children reach their learning potential by following these steps:

**Step 1:** Expect that each and every child can learn.

**Step 2:** Give clear instructions. Always be sure the child understands what is expected. If your instructions are clear, the activity will result in a more positive experience. Here are a few tips:

- Get close and at the child's eye level to get her attention.
- Tell and show the instructions to the child. Using pictures or demonstrating can help.
- Use simple and clear language.

**Step 3:** Help the child complete the task after you have made sure the child understands your instructions. Provide as much help as needed for the child to participate, but make sure the child makes an effort, as well. Do not have the child just go through the motions.

**Step 4:** Give many opportunities for practice throughout the day, reducing your help as the child learns the routine. Your goal is for the child to participate with less and less help over time.

**Step 5:** Engage the child throughout the day in what you and others are doing. Letting children occupy themselves or wander for long periods, rather than engaging in social learning with adults and other children, deprives them of needed learning opportunities and can slow their progress.

# CONCEPT

## Learning Words During Joint Attention



### WHAT:

Joint attention is when a child shares an object or activity with an adult. A child might point to an interesting object, look back and forth between you and an object, or show interest by holding up or giving you an object. Adding words during periods of joint attention can help children pair words with objects and activities and help them learn new words.

### WHY:

Adding words during joint attention can help children learn new words and stimulate their language development.

### HOW:

Adults can use words during joint attention by following these steps:

- Step 1:** Follow the child's lead so that you use words about objects that the child is interested in. Following the child's lead means joining in the activity or playing with an object that interests the child. Paying attention to what the child is looking at or reaching for can give you a good idea of what interests the child.
- Step 2:** Add a playful action to extend the child's activity, like making objects move in new and interesting ways. Make sure you and the child are taking turns with the object. Combine the child's actions and your actions with words that match the action, object, or activity.
- Step 3:** Use simple and animated language when teaching new words. Try to avoid long sentences. Instead, insert short phrases about the shared object or activity. If the child continues to show interest in the shared object, repeat the words and phrases. Here are some examples:
- If a child likes playing with a toy frog and makes it jump, you can say, "Frog is jumping!"
  - When it is your turn, you can make the frog do a different action, like flying, and say, "Flying frog!"
- Step 4:** If the child does not start using the new word ("frog"), encourage its use in a different way. You can ask the child to do something with the object ("Make the frog hop!") or ask a question about the object ("Who's hopping?"). Even if the child does not say the new word right away, continue to insert words into joint attention during play and other activities.

# CONCEPT

## Predictable Spaces & Routines

### WHAT:

Predictable spaces are spaces in your setting that are used for the same purpose on a regular basis. Predictable spaces and routines answer questions for children, such as “What am I doing?” “Where am I doing it?” “How long will I do it for?” and “What will I do next?”

### WHY:

Young children like predictability. They need to know what is expected of them and what they can expect throughout the day. Predictable routines provide this information clearly and consistently. Predictable spaces provide consistency in the child’s environment and give cues about what the child is supposed to be doing.

### HOW:

Adults can develop predictable spaces by use of visual cues to tell the child what to expect. A visual cue for lunch could be a plastic table cloth or simply placing a place mat on a table before inviting your child for a meal. Adults can develop predictable routines by following these steps:

**Step 1:** Make a list of activities that occur in your home on most days, for example, toileting or diaper changes, breakfast, snack, reading, and outdoor play.

**Step 2:** Sequence these activities so that they happen in the same order most days. There may be small changes from day to day. For example, different materials may be used for art, or there may be different visitors each Wednesday, but most activities should occur in the same sequence.

**Step 3:** Warn children when there will be a transition from activity to activity. Here are a few tips you can try:

- Use a visual or ringing timer.
- Say, “Two more minutes, and we will clean up.”
- Use a transition song, such as a clean-up song.

**Step 4:** Alert family members to the importance of staying consistent with routines.



Courtesy of The Grove School of Cary

Predictable Routines: A daily schedule may be broken down into smaller predictable routines.

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# CONCEPT

## Distracting and Redirecting Children to Engage in Appropriate Behavior



**WHAT:** This concept means distracting and redirecting a child from one activity to another or away from challenging behaviors.

**WHY:** Sometimes distraction or redirection is all that is needed to change children's challenging behavior and make them forget about whatever was causing the behavior. When children are upset, you can show them a toy, lead them to another activity, or choose a new playmate to help focus attention away from undesirable behavior. These strategies can lead to a "reset" in behavior, for the better. This works best when the child really likes the distraction and redirection object or activity.

**HOW:** Adults can help redirect children to more appropriate behaviors by following these steps:

- Step 1:** Be aware of settings (time of day or activity) where children are more likely to show challenging behaviors. For example, a child may engage in more challenging behaviors during certain group activities, like snack or play time. A child also may show more challenging behaviors at certain times of the day, such as in the morning trying to leave the house, or in the afternoon after coming home. During these times, stay close to your child so that you can step in immediately, if needed.
- Step 2:** Make a list of the child's favorite activities and objects. Have pictures of these objects or activities or the actual objects or activities together in one place.
- Step 3:** During each activity or interaction, state clear expectations, such as, "Lilly, we use nice hands."
- Step 4:** If distraction or redirection is needed, show the desired object or activity or its picture.
- Step 5:** Verbally guide the child toward the new object or activity. "Lilly, look! Let's give your favorite doll a bath!" If needed, hold the child's hand as you transition to the new activity.
- Step 6:** Praise the child for transitioning and support the child in playing with the new object or activity.

# CONCEPT

## Narration



**WHAT:** Narrate daily routines with children. Don't just do it; talk them through it.

**WHY:** Routine times are the perfect opportunity to incorporate more language into a child's life. Adults dress children every day. You feed them. You play with them. You're going to be doing these activities anyway, so why not use your words to build a child's brain along the way!

**HOW:** Use daily activities to surround children with rich language by following these steps:

- Step 1:** Talk about what you're doing, as you're doing it. Be as descriptive as possible, including different action words, to grow your child's vocabulary. For example: "Let's eat some yummy watermelon for a snack. I'm slicing the round watermelon in half. The watermelon is smooth and green on the outside but it's juicy and red on the inside."
- Step 2:** Don't forget about math! Shapes are everywhere and there's always something you can count. Use words like *big/small*, *tall/short*, *under/over*, *more/less* to begin laying your child's foundation for learning math. For example: "This slice of watermelon is a circle. If I keep cutting, I can make triangles. Look at the little black seeds that are inside the big watermelon. I think this piece has more seeds than the other piece. Let's count them."
- Step 3:** Use child-directed speech with a higher-pitched, exaggerated quality when communicating with young children—to both engage a child in the activity and encourage him to respond.
- Step 4:** It's never too early to have a conversation with a baby. Diaper changes, baths, and tummy time are great opportunities to narrate. Every gurgle, coo, and laugh is a baby's way of participating. It's your job to respond by putting words to what you think the baby is communicating and adding more.
- Step 5:** Take narrating a step further by talking about the past/future and thoughts/feelings. For example: "This watermelon is delicious! Remember when we had watermelon at our picnic last week? It was so hot outside but the watermelon was cold and juicy. The juice rolled down your chin and made your hands sticky." Thinking and talking about events beyond the "here and now" helps build a strong pre-literacy foundation for a child because it requires him to respond using more complex language.

# CONCEPT

## Playing Together with Objects: Practicing Joint Attention



### WHAT:

Joint attention is a social exchange, usually between a child, caregiver, and an object that interests the child. A child engages with an adult, usually by pointing to, sharing, or showing an object. Joint attention also can happen when a child is looking back and forth between an object and the caregiver, often sharing enjoyment, such as smiling, laughing, or showing and maintaining interest.

### WHY:

Joint attention is an important skill that predicts language development and social outcomes. Adults can make play more beneficial for children by playing together instead of only side by side without interacting. Examples of playing together include engaging with the same toy, exchanging gestures, looks, laughs, and smiles, talking with each other, or playing a simple game

### HOW:

Adults can engage children in joint attention by following these steps:

**Step 1:** Find an object or activity that interests the child.

**Step 2:** Engage the child in a game or activity using this object, making sure that both players (you and the child) are necessary to play the game. Here are some examples:

- rolling a truck back and forth
- bouncing a ball back and forth
- building a tower, taking turns adding blocks
- taking turns flipping the pages in a book

**Step 3:** If the child shows interest and enjoyment, keep practicing the activity. If the child appears to lose interest, transition to a favorite activity or preferred object. Keep track of all the two-player games the child seems to enjoy and practice them daily.

# CONCEPT

## Book Sharing



**WHAT:** Book sharing is not just “reading a book” to children. Rather, by sharing time together while looking at and talking about books, children and adults have fun and children learn.

**WHY:** Children like books. Books have fun pictures. The pictures, and the related words and events, can help children learn new words and cause-effect relationships.

**HOW:** Adults can engage children in book sharing by following these steps:

**Step 1:** Pick a book with pictures that are colorful. Avoid books with abstract pictures and pictures that show many small characters and objects. Those books will be too complicated and distracting for younger children.

**Step 2:** Talk about the picture on one page, then ask the child to point to the picture you name. Make it fun and interactive. You do not have to read the text on the page. Keep your language simple.

**Step 3:** Give the child a turn to say something and to turn the page.

**Step 4:** After sharing the book, be sure that objects related to the book are available for play, use your imagination if you do not have any on hand. As you and the child play with these toys, repeat the words you used when you shared the book. This will help the child learn that the words apply to both pictures and objects.

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# CONCEPT

## Peer-Mediated Support: Teaching Children to Play with Each Other



**WHAT:** Peer-mediated support means teaching children specific social skills to help them play with friends who have social difficulties.

**WHY:** Social development is an important part of children's development. Research tells us that early social skills and friendships predict positive social and academic outcomes for all children. Teaching children how to initiate play with their peers encourages friendships and allows them to bond by socializing.

**HOW:** Adults can teach peer-mediated support to children by following these steps:

- Step 1:** Teach all children basic social skills during large group times, like circle time. Some skills may include:
- getting a peer's attention, such as tapping a friend's arm or saying the child's name
  - sharing by giving an object, such as a toy or snack, to a classmate
  - sharing by asking for an object
  - giving compliments
  - giving a play instruction
- After teaching these skills, have children practice and show you the skills.
- Step 2:** Encourage children to use these skills with each other during daily activities, including free play, outdoor play, meal time, and transitions.
- Step 3:** If a child is playing alone for a period of time, ask a peer to practice one of the social skills she has learned, such as sharing or asking the other child to play.
- Step 4:** Praise children every time you find them practicing their social skills with peers. This will call positive attention to the child and the behavior and will motivate other children to practice their social skills too.

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