



MEALTIME

Make placemats out of old maps. Just cut them to size and cover with clear contact paper. Talk about the different states and cities that are on each placemat.

Pick one letter of the alphabet to focus on for dinner. Discuss foods that start with that letter with your child. For example, for the letter B, serve beans one night for dinner in the entrée and serve blueberry muffins for dessert.

Discuss manners during dinner. This is a good time to talk to your child about proper etiquette and the importance of saying “please” and “thank you.”

Let your child help you wash fruits and vegetables. When children help prepare healthy foods, they are more interested in eating them. Eating healthy foods helps them feel good and be alert for thinking and learning.

Show your child that there are many ways to be creative. Have her help you when you are cooking and baking. Let him choose what to put in a burrito or a healthy fruit salad.

Let your child help you set the table. She could put out the spoons and placemats. That’s a way to practice counting—and a way to feel helpful.

As you set the table together, ask questions such as “What do you see here that is shaped like a square?” “Do you see any circles?” “What shape is the table?”

At the dinner table, ask everyone for “news” about his or her day. Let your child know that it’s important to listen when someone else talks. For school, children need to be able to express their thoughts and feelings. They also need to know there are times to be quiet and listen.

Don’t force your child to eat something he doesn’t like. It usually doesn’t work and can cause power struggles that make mealtime unpleasant for everyone.

It’s not unusual for a child to eat just one or two foods at a meal. Serve only foods that you wouldn’t mind her making a whole meal of.

Introduce a new food with more familiar foods. Call the new food an “extra.”

Remember these simple guidelines: Breakfast really is the most important meal of the day. Junk food can be enjoyed as a treat on a limited occasion. And sit down with your child to eat. He’ll learn healthy eating habits from watching you.

When your child has a friend over for the first time, make it a short visit and include a snack or meal. Have them collaborate making sandwiches or playing restaurant.

When cooking, let your child count the four tablespoons of sugar and the three eggs. Ask her to help you measure ingredients. As you measure, use words such as full, empty, more than and less than.

Children eat better with “friends.” A favorite doll or stuffed animal can be seated at the table to serve as a “friend.” Better yet, make mealtime a family affair. Turn off the TV and enjoy each other’s company.

Planning makes snack time easier. Cut cheese into cubes. Keep celery, carrot sticks and fruit-flavored yogurt on hand. Cut up fruit, drizzle a little juice on it and leave it in the refrigerator for a quick snack.

Present foods in a fun way. Cut sandwiches into shapes such as triangles or circles—or use your favorite cookie cutter. Bake mini-muffins. Or make bite-sized meatballs instead of hamburgers.

It’s good to ask your child what would happen when directions are not followed exactly. (“What would this taste like if we added a cup of salt instead of a teaspoon?”)



PLAYTIME

Help your child learn how to join others who are playing. Children aren’t born with social skills. They need to be taught how to enter play, like asking the other child if they can play or suggesting an idea or watching or playing alongside for a while. Some children need more time to feel comfortable with new children or a new activity.

Help your child build a friendship with one other child. Children often feel braver and more willing to join in when they have a friend.

Help nurture your child’s friendships by planning regular play dates with friends in your building or neighborhood a few times a month. Involve him in planning things to do that both children will enjoy.

Not all toys lend themselves to sharing. When your child is having friends over, try putting out puzzles, books, musical instruments, cars, blocks, puppets, stuffed animals and dress-up clothes—all of which are easier to share.

Suggest activities that encourage sharing like making a big mural or a long paper chain.

Give your child an empty paper towel tube or cardboard box and ask, “I wonder what you could make from this?” A paper towel tube can be a tunnel or a magic wand. A box can be a doll bed or a garage for cars. When children pretend and feel good about their ideas, they’re becoming confident learners.

Give your child water and a big paintbrush or sponge to “paint” the sidewalk or an outside wall. It’s a fun way to see how the heat of the sun changes things by making them warm and evaporating water.

Play a variety of different types of music and ask your child to act out how it makes her feel or where she can imagine the music taking her.

Make a creative corner in your home and put markers, crayons and paper there. Let your child draw when she is interested. Add other materials like stickers and glitter glue over time as a way to add to her drawings.

Research shows that children develop important skills through make-believe. Let them pick a favorite story or nursery rhyme and take on different roles and act out the action. They might even want to make some simple props.

Keep Halloween costumes on hand all year long. Dress-up play gives children a chance to express their fantasies and feelings—and have imaginative fun.

Give your child an old key and pretend it opens the door to an imaginary land. To stimulate his imagination, you could ask, “What do you see when you open the door? Who is meeting you? What’s happening there?”

Children often pretend about skills they’ll need for school, like reading, writing and working with numbers. Then they see those skills are useful, and they’ll WANT to learn them. To encourage “office” play, offer catalogs and old telephone books, along with a toy phone, a calculator and a pad of paper and a pencil.

For pretending that needs no props, encourage your child to pretend to be different animals—a snake, an elephant, a tall giraffe, a monkey. Ask, “What sounds does that animal make? How does it move or eat?”

Use an empty box to store craft materials, like glue, scissors, colored paper, yarn, ribbons, magazines with pictures, greeting cards, etc. Keep the box handy for “There’s nothing to do” days. When children can keep themselves busy, they’re more likely to be able to work independently when they get to school.

Fold a piece of paper in half like a card. Let your child decorate the front of it—and write (or dictate) a kind message to someone on the inside. Help her send it or give it to that person. Besides learning about writing, your child will know that saying kind things is important to you. Kindness is a part of getting along with others, and that’s essential for school.

If you’re concerned about your child being messy with crayons, markers or paint, put a cookie sheet or newspaper or grocery bag under the paper. Children need lots of experiences using crayons, markers and paint so they can learn to use a pencil to write.

When your child makes a picture, write down what he says about it. Then read the words together.

Let your child play with a deck of cards. Sorting them by colors or numbers will help her develop skills that are important for learning math.

Sing songs with numbers like “This old man, he played one...” Songs are a fun way to help children learn numbers.

When the hands are active, the brain is more engaged. Building with blocks, drawing and painting, fitting puzzles together and acting out an experience actually activate the brain.

Surround your child with words. Have fun with language: sing songs, read rhymes, play word games.

Put a blanket over a table to make a tent. It makes a cozy area for play—and a fun place to learn about important words for school, like “in and out,” “over and under.”

Being able to focus helps children in school. Encourage your child to focus on his own by doing quiet activities like looking through a favorite book or doing a puzzle.

Children need time—and quiet—in order to play. Turn off the TV and radio so children aren't distracted. Then they can focus all of their attention on playing, and focused attention is important for learning.

Leave time for clean up and talk about it beforehand. Try to have your child stop playing while there's still enough energy and time to put things away.



TRAVEL TIME

When you're traveling in the car, take turns naming "what else" belongs in the category: things to eat, furniture, clothing or animals. Categorizing is an important thinking skill, and it's a fun way to exercise your child's mind.

Sing songs that have finger motions, like "Itsy Bitsy Spider" or "The Wheels on the Bus." It will help your child have something physical to do, develop finger muscles—and memory!

Make up new words to familiar songs, like singing about where you're going or what you'll see there to the tune of "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star." It can help children be creative thinkers—and know that there are fun things to do while they're waiting to get somewhere.

Ask your child to look out the window to find three red objects. Then ask for three objects that are other colors. It's a fun way to help children learn colors—and numbers.

Read aloud some of the signs that you see along the way, like stop signs or store signs. It lets your child see that reading is helpful.

Places where you run errands are full of things that interest children. Talk with your child about the pictures on the walls, signs and other things you see or hear. When children are interested in things, they want to learn more about the world around them.

Ask your child to make up silly nonsense rhymes like, "Purple, durple, smurple...." Or "Butter, putter, sutter..." The first step in learning to read is being able to hear sounds in words. Rhymes make the sounds stand out clearly, and children enjoy nonsense words.

Exploring comes as a natural part of learning. In fact, children often enjoy exploring new things. With your child, visit a natural history museum. Look at dinosaurs or artifacts and talk about where they came from.

Keep handy (in your purse or car), little playthings like a toy car, a little notebook, small people figures, a magnet.

Writing can happen anywhere. In fact, those first scribbles are really important. Carry a few pieces of paper and a couple of crayons in the car. Ask your child to draw you a picture of something she sees during a car trip.

Paying attention can be fun too. As you are driving, ask your child to pay special attention to signs. Can she tell you how many signs she sees?



CHORE TIME

Find safe ways to involve your child when you cook, vacuum or change batteries. Ordinary household machines can be fascinating to children—and they like to feel helpful.

If a job like “clean up your room” feels too big, break it into smaller, more manageable pieces, like “First pick up all the stuffed animals, then we’ll pick something else to put away.”

Let your child see that you write shopping lists, “to do” lists, phone messages and directions. It lets children know that writing is important in everyday life.

Label containers with pictures of the things that are stored in them. Clean up time is easier when children know where things belong—and “reading” pictures on the label is the beginning for learning to read words.

Find easy chores that your child can do. Children like to feel helpful, and they enjoy doing grownup things. Besides that, children who can manage with responsibility at home are more responsible about doing their work later on in school.

Let your child help you empty and sort things in the “junk drawer” or sort coins in the change jar. Sorting and matching are games that prepare children for working with numbers and letters at school. Sorting coins will also help your child learn the names of the different coins—pennies, nickels, dimes and quarters.

On index cards, write some chores that your child can do. Then have her pick two. Children are often more willing to do chores that they have chosen. You will also be giving your child a way to learn about reading—and to understand what “two” means.

Have your child help you put clothes in the dryer and name the colors together.

At the supermarket, point out letters and numbers on signs and products that you see. Take along a shopping list. It shows your child that words and numbers are useful.

Put on some music and dance around while you’re doing chores at home. Dancing makes chores more fun—and gives your child a way to get some exercise. Exercise sends oxygen to the brain, and that’s fuel for thinking.



BATH TIME

Let your child have some toys, balls, or other things in the bathtub. What makes some things sink or float? Even if you don't know the answer, you're helping your child figure things out—and discover important things about water.

Give your child several sheets of tin foil. Let her experiment making different kinds of boats from them. Give her some pennies and find out which boat holds the most pennies before it sinks. Your child will learn some things about water, about what things float and about experimenting and problem solving.

Help your child learn “left” and “right” at bath time. Ask him to first wash the “left” hand and then the “right” hand, the “left” foot and then the “right” foot.

For some inexpensive and educational play in the bathtub, give your child plastic kitchen things—like ladles, funnels, basters, measuring cups and containers. Filling and dumping help children learn about words like “empty” and “full,” as well as help them practice controlled finger movements.

Float a plastic bowl in the tub. Let your child toss a lightweight ball into it. It's a fun way to practice hand-eye coordination.

For an interesting bathtub toy, poke holes in an empty soda bottle. When your child puts water in it, the water comes out like a fountain. Let her experiment with different soda bottles that have holes poked in different places—high, low, on the bottom.

Help your child learn the names of body parts by making up new words to “This is the way we wash our clothes”: “This is the way we wash our elbow, our shoulder, our knee, our ankle.” Knowing these vocabulary words helps children understand their bodies and themselves.



STORY TIME

Reading aloud with your child is a wonderful way to develop a joy of reading early on. Choose a special time and place to read together and make it a part of your routine.

Use voice tones that match the personalities of the different characters. For example, use a high-pitched voice for mice. Add sound effects, too. Make a swooshing sound for a waterfall. Ask your child if she knows what sound something makes.

Find stories that have meaning in your child's life. A story involving brothers and sisters may help him express his feelings about the arrival of a new sibling.

Encourage your child to ask questions about the stories. Ask her what will happen next. Invite her to make up different endings.

Mix music and books. Invite your child to create a rhythm for a character or an event in his favorite stories.

Involve your child in “orchestrating” a story. Introduce familiar, repetitive stories and invite her to play some background music by humming or drumming on a pot.

Take your child to story time at the library. And read to and with him. Following a story helps children practice listening skills.

Pretending is imagining something that isn’t there. To be able to listen to a story or to read, children need to imagine the characters and what happens to them. You can help your child develop imagination by asking questions like “What if everything were purple? What things would be silly if they were purple?” or “What if you were a giant? What would our house be like?”



BEDTIME

Set a regular bedtime and make bedtime routines. Then your child knows what to expect each night. When children have a regular predictable schedule, they feel more secure. That will also help them manage the schedule of a school day.

Help your child learn some bedtime routines, like brushing teeth and washing hands and face. Children who can do some of their own care are learning how to be responsible. Then they will know how to be responsible with other things, like their schoolwork.

Read to your child before bedtime. Make it a cuddly time. It can help him settle in for sleep. And when your child holds any book later on at school, those warm feelings come back.

Do calming and relaxing things before bedtime. Whatever you’re doing, remind your child that bedtime is next.

Sometimes children don’t like being separated from their parents. Try giving your child something of yours to keep through the night.



ANY TIME

Listening is an important first step in your child’s learning. Be a model of good listening skills for your child. Let her know that what she says is important, encourage her to finish his thoughts, and respond to her questions.

Work on the important rules. For example, tell your child, “When you want to hit, put your hands in your pocket.”

Having friends is fun, and it is also important to a child’s development. With your child, role-play ways to meet new friends. You can show him how to introduce himself, ask someone to play, offer to share a toy or provide help to another child who needs it.

Taking turns is a good way to share. Pretend that your child is sharing a toy with dolls or stuffed animals. Have her share some of her toys with each doll or animal for a short time and then have her practice asking for them back.

Teach your child some simple jokes to share with his friends. Humor is a wonderful way to develop language and enjoy friendship.

Help your child develop empathy for others' points of view by asking her to look at situations from their perspective: "How would you feel if Jenny took the truck away from you?"

Take notice when your child helps another in need and praise him for being considerate. Showing kindness should be reinforced as much as trying a new food or mastering a skill.

Help your child use words like "mad" or "frustrated" or "scared" or "sad" or "disappointed." Naming their feelings helps children feel more in control—and better able to control themselves.

Let your child know that all of her feelings are okay, but not all of her actions are okay. For example, it's okay to be sad or upset, but it's not okay to hit someone.

Talk to your child about different groups he is a part of like your family, your extended family, your apartment building or neighborhood, or a school group. Can he think of some things he does when he is a part of these groups?

Trying new things can be scary to children but it is a critical part of learning. Make a game out of trying new things. With your child, try one new thing during the day. At the end of the day, talk about what you tried. You can cut out pictures of "Things Tried" and display them on your refrigerator.

Sometimes, young children have to try many times before completing or learning something. Talk to your child about something that was hard to do at first, but now she does easily.

Young children start developing reasoning skills along with their curiosity. When your child asks you why something is the way it is, turn the question back to him. "Why do you think it is that way?" Listen to your child's ideas and talk them through with him.

Let your child know how good you feel when you share something with her, like a cookie or some time in a busy day.

Ask him simple questions like, "It's raining today. What do you think you should wear?" That helps him with reasoning skills.

Marvel at things in the world around you—a flower, a sunset, an interesting stone, a snowfall, a rainy day, a rainbow, the stars and moon at night. Your interest is contagious—and encourages your child to notice things and be curious. Children who are interested in the world around them are more eager learners.