

BANANAS CHOOSING CHILD CARE HANDOUT

What Preschoolers Need in Child Care – Age 3 through 5 Years

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Each stage of child development presents different challenges for families and child care providers. This handout is one in a series of four which examine developmental needs in different age groups and suggest how child care settings can best meet those needs.

What do Preschoolers Need in Child Care?

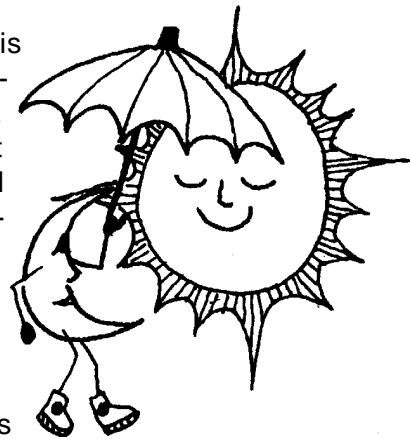
A Warm Connection to a Primary Caregiver – Children need a familiar, helpful person they can rely on when they are away from home. Ideally, each child would be with this same caregiver for years, not months. The more hours children are in care, the more important is a long-term relationship with their main caregiver.

Practice Talking – Most three-year olds talk much more to adults than to other children. It is not until about age four that most preschoolers start to talk as much with other children as with adults. This makes sense. When we start to learn a new language, we learn much more from the teacher than from classmates who know as little as we do.

Lots of Exercise – Most preschoolers have more energy than adults and most crave outdoor play. New studies suggest that preschoolers need **at least** one hour of active play each day. Many need *much* more!

Acceptance of Developmental Limits – Caregivers need to understand that most preschoolers can only focus their attention on things that they themselves find interesting. In other words: don't expect too much of them and save yourself a lot of frustration! There are three basic types of attention: first, our own internal curiosity, interests or abilities draw us toward certain activities, such as jumping or drawing; secondly, an exciting, outward event may capture our attention, as when a puppy licks our hands, and finally, we may consciously direct our attention where others want it to be. Most

children don't develop this "other-directed" attention until around age five or six. Therefore, if adults want preschoolers to be engaged and feel confident and successful, adults need to find topics and activities that interest each child.



Practice Learning Social Skills – Most preschoolers enjoy playing with other children. While three-year olds usually play with one other child at a time, four-year olds take on the much bigger task of learning how to play with two or more friends at a time. Many need help along the way. For example, Emma and Deja are playing Mommy and Daddy and won't let Shanty join them. Shanty, understandably, is upset and turns to the caregiver for help. It's tempting to suggest "Why not let Shanty play the child?" However, four-year olds get more practice in problem-solving skills if one points out "Shanty is feeling left out. She wants to play with you." Then add, "What part could she play in your game?"

Support for Self-Esteem – An important way for children to develop self-esteem is to encourage them to follow their interests and abilities. It is one of the caregiver's jobs to help them view themselves as competent, successful human beings. Development is very uneven at this age. One child has well-developed large muscles for running; another has well-developed small muscles for drawing. One child impresses with a large vocabulary, while another is really good with blocks and jigsaw puzzles. Another child has advanced social skills and gets along easily with others. Self-esteem deepens when adults repeatedly delight in what youngsters are good at, rather than push them toward things they cannot yet do.

Reading and Writing? According to the latest studies, the following activities and skills are important for preschoolers:

1) Enjoy books with caregivers. Look at books and talk together about the pictures and stories each child loves. 2) Learn to hear – from rhymes, songs and word play – that words are made up of shorter sounds. For example, "Alex ate the Alligator" and "Hop the Mop to the Top" help children hear when words start or end with the same sound. Four-year olds love word play. 3) Paint and draw to develop small finger muscles. With these three basics, preschoolers will be ready to combine sounds and letters at age five and six. In fact, many countries in Europe don't teach reading until age six or seven. It is really important that preschoolers enjoy learning rather than feel pressured to perform.

Considerations for Parents

Developmental vs. Academic – What’s the Difference? There are two general types of preschool: many adults believe preschoolers should have formal lessons to get ready for kindergarten (academic). But most child experts say that young children learn best from play and that, given a choice, children usually play with things they are *ready* to learn (developmental). Many child care programs offer a mix of these two basic types.

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| Child Centered
(Developmental) | Children choose what to do and when to do it. |
| Teacher Centered
(Academic) | Teachers decide what children will do and when they will do it. |
| Mix of Both | Children choose some activities and teachers choose others. |

Which Program is Best for my Child? Different children need different child care settings. As you visit various sites, look for a child similar to yours. Notice how this child fits in. Following are some children’s traits with child care settings that tend to suit them best.

Traits	Child Care Needs and Likes
High Energy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Needs lots of space and time to run, swing, ride bikes and wrestle. Usually thrives in mixed-age groups that allow active youngsters to play with older children who match their physical energy and skill.
Low Energy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Likes lots of things to do with hands: art work, construction sets, etc. Needs quiet corners to relax.
Cautious	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Needs time, patience and encouragement to try new things. More likely to act as leaders when they are with younger children or in smaller groups.
Curious	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Needs thorough childproofing. Needs lots of interesting things to do. Needs a stimulating environment.
Sensitive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Needs peaceful corners away from the noise and the crowd. Prefers small programs with fewer teachers and low turnover.
Early Talker	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> May do better with older children who match his/her language skills.

My Child Speaks little English – How Will She Cope in an English Environment? Children who do not hear their native language in preschool may stop talking for months while at school until they feel ready to speak English. Today’s diverse classrooms often include native speakers of many different languages. Teachers can validate children who speak languages other than English by teaching songs, rhymes and games in Chinese, Spanish or whatever language is spoken by the children. Alternatively, teachers can invite parents to teach such songs and games in their native language. Children can be invited to say numbers or colors in their native tongue as well as English. Such activities show all children that it’s fun and useful to know more than one language. The goal is to build respect for diversity, rather than ignore or put down children who speak languages other than English.

How Can my Bilingual Child Stay Bilingual? Children are more likely to grow up bilingual if they use their native language in the community (including preschool) and with several adults at home. However, if Juan only hears Spanish at home (especially from just one parent), he is likely to stop speaking Spanish between age three and high school. Learning two languages well, while young, improves children’s overall ability to learn. Non-native English speakers are more successful academically if learning throughout elementary school is in both English and their native language.

To Nap or Not to Nap – We all do better with a good night’s sleep. Whether or not children start the day well rested depends on when they went to sleep the night before. If naps are either too long or too late in the afternoon children will stay up late at night and won’t be well-rested in the morning. Or, if children no longer need an afternoon nap, but are forced to take one, they will be up late and tired in the morning. In some families, a late bedtime seems fine because parents enjoy the evening time with their children. Other parents want children in bed early so there is evening time to maintain close adult bonds – and sanity! Nap schedules affect the emotional well-being of everyone. If children start the day sleep-deprived, they are much more likely to be grouchy both at home and at child care.

Relationship with your Caregiver – Because of their experience, child care providers often know more than parents about what kind of behavior to expect of children at different ages. Caregivers can tell parents what is considered “normal” at a given developmental stage. On the other hand, most parents know their child as no one else does. Ideally, parents and providers work together for the good of the child.

Considerations for Caregivers

Allow for Different Physical Needs – Provide a quiet space for nappers and separate space and supervision for children who don't nap. Some youngsters are hungry at regular snack times and others aren't – but we all get grouchy when hungry! (Some child care programs provide a table with healthy snacks and just two chairs so that children can eat whenever they feel hungry.) Likewise, children are ready for potty-training at different ages. On average, boys train six months later than girls. Ideally, children should be grouped according to abilities and interests, not potty training.

Accept Differing Energy Levels – Some low-energy four-year olds can easily sit for 20 minutes. However, most high-energy youngsters find it really hard to sit still for even five minutes. These youngsters need a very short, action-oriented circle time (such as singing songs with hand motions) or else they do best when allowed to skip circle time and play elsewhere. Many high-energy children listen and learn better when they are moving instead of using all their attention to hold still.

Encourage Language Development – Talk with individual children and with small groups about their activities at home and school, their interests, experiences, fantasies and feelings. Starting at age four, encourage them to talk, listen to and ask questions of their friends, especially if they aren't inclined to do so on their own.

Teach Respect for Other Cultures – Teach songs, rhymes and games in languages other than English. Prepare special meals or let children make special arts and crafts projects to celebrate holidays such as Chinese New Year, Cinco de Mayo, etc. Invite families to present customs of their native culture.

Encourage Friendships – Children naturally tend to play with others of similar high, medium or low energy. Help children tell others about their wishes and goals. Especially at age four and up, teach social skills rather than solve children's problems. For example, Zebby threatens, "I won't be your friend unless you jump from here!" (They are on top of the play structure.) Jesse is afraid of jumping and also afraid of losing his friend. The teacher encourages Jesse to tell Zebby how he feels. Then the teacher explains, "Real friends don't tell their friends to do things they are afraid to do." Next she asks, "What game can you two play together?" With the inevitable conflicts among four-year olds, ask each child, "How are you feeling now?," "What happened just before you felt this way?" and "What can you do differently next time?" Strong-minded children need help learning

to share leadership. "Maya, I know you like to be in charge and you've been in charge of setting up the furniture in the play house. Now Bella wants a turn to be in charge. How can you two work this out?" Recognize that many shy, quiet children need help standing up for themselves. Encourage them to state their needs, such as "I want to pretend I'm the Mommy now. I don't want to always be the baby."

Teach – Answer children's questions, discuss their ideas, show them how things work when they need help. Encourage them to take the next step in learning about topics of personal interest by asking questions and providing relevant materials. Once children turn four, invite them to think and problem-solve before jumping in with your own answers: "How do you think you could make this work better?" To decrease frustration, offer activities and projects that are challenging enough to be interesting, but not so hard that they are discouraging. For example, offer an easier or harder puzzle, depending on the child's ability and experience, or help with a puzzle by asking "Can you find a piece that has some red on it like this piece?" Support children who take reasonable risks to increase their skills, e.g. by jumping off the climbing structure if it suits their abilities. Teach them to bend their knees to protect themselves as they land and make sure the area is properly cushioned.

Build a Sense of Community – Play games that help children learn and use each other's names. Children can see that their actions affect others when they decorate for a party or help another child who needs help or comfort. Invite preschoolers to make pictures to send to a sick classmate. Children learn that they are part of a wider community when they join cleanup time or conserve water or pick up litter near their school. Find opportunities to point out and appreciate what each child (and family) contributes to the group. Invite parents to teach words or songs from their cultural heritage or bring something interesting to show about the work they do. Make regular visits to a nursing home so the children each get to know one resident.

Use Age-Appropriate Discipline – Childproof carefully. Distraction still helps at age three. Tell children what they may do, rather than what they may not do: "We can go outside after we clean up these blocks." "You need to walk here, away from the curb, where it is safe. If you can't remember, then I will hold your hand."

Build Supportive Relationship with Parents – Tell parents often about things their child does well. Acknowledge their concerns. These steps provide solid groundwork should problems arise in the future.

Suggestions for Activities

Skills	Activities
Language	Stimulate children’s language skills by talking and listening to them. Many preschoolers love to make up stories. Gradually help them learn the difference between “real” and “pretend” stories. Write down children’s stories and let them add colors and designs. Use rhymes, singing and finger plays. Provide toys that encourage story telling, such as dolls, little people, farm animals, dinosaurs, dishes, telephones, dress-up clothes. (It’s common for three- and four-year-old boys to dress up as girls!)
Imagination	Invite children to make their play more interesting: If Natalie usually drives her car down a straight road, suggest curves or a building to drive around. If Latasha usually plays house with a mommy and daddy, suggest adding a child. Let four-year-old boys act out the conflict of “good” and “bad” with superheroes. They are really working on their internal struggle to control impulses and “do the right thing.” Many also love gun play and will outgrow it. Shooting imaginary bullets is practice in “moving objects through space” – a visual skill used later to drive cars and build buildings.
Large Muscle Skills and Rhythm	Provide balls to kick and throw at targets; riding toys with pedals; things to climb and jump off, such as bottom stair, climbing structure or sofa; simple obstacle courses and a 4- to 6-inch-wide board to walk for balance. Provide opportunity for supervised roughhousing and wrestling; active circle games; dance and playing of drums, tambourines, maracas, etc.
Small Muscle Skills	Offer lacing and peg boards, puzzles, beads to string; screwdriver, wrench and hammer along with large bolts and nails; building sets, such as Legos or K’nex. Provide art supplies: crayons, marking pens, paints, clay, scissors (some use scissors much earlier than others!). Many four-year-olds love to draw freehand. Provide tracing or coloring books for children who get upset because they are unable to draw as well as they would like. Some four- and five-year-olds are naturally interested in letters; others are not yet.
Science and Nature Study	Offer materials such as magnets, bubbles, measuring sticks, seeds to plant. Keep pets such as snakes, rabbits, birds for children to care for and observe. Computers are very controversial for preschoolers: allow no more than half-an-hour a day, beginning at age four.
Reading	Children learn more from talking about books than just listening. Ask questions about the pictures, people and events in the book. A conversation is more important than getting to the end of the story. This is much easier with one or two children than with six or eight. Include stories about different cultures, ethnic groups, family structures and disabilities.
Learning about the Real World	Preschoolers are eager to learn about the real world. Encourage real-life activities, such as cooking, gardening, taking care of animals, running a lemonade stand. Children love field trips to the neighborhood grocery store, auto garage, pet store, fire station or construction site. Ride the bus. Visit nearby parks.

Related BANANAS Resources

BANANAS has many handouts – available by mail, at our office or from our website – and videos for child care providers and parents. For a complete listing, see our publication and video lists, or visit our website, www.bananasinc.org.

Handouts

- A Closer Look at Large Family Child Care Homes
- Choosing a Child Care Center
- Choosing Child Care for a Child With Special Needs
- Choosing Family Child Care
- Choosing a Preschool Setting
- Cooking for Fun and Learning
- How Many Children Can Be Cared For In Licensed Family Child Care Homes?
- Ideas for Gross Motor Activities
- Mini Art Guide

Videos

- Developing Child: Preschoolers, Physical & Cognitive Development
- Diversity and Conflict Management
- Preschool Parent
- Growing through Play: Cognitive and Social Development
- Parenting: Discipline – Managing Misbehavior

Books in our Reference Library

- Blakey, Nancy. *Go Outside! Over 130 Activities for Outdoor Adventure*, Tricycle Press, 2002.
- Kohl, MaryAnn. *Preschool Art: It's the Process, Not the Product*, Gryphon House, 1994.
- Sandall, Susan; Schwartz, Ilene. *Building Blocks for Teaching Preschoolers with Special Needs*, Brookes Publishing, 2002.
- Seefeldt, Carol. *Playing to Learn*, Gryphon House, 2001.
- Sher, Barbara. *Popular Games for Positive Play*, Communication Skill Builders, 1995.