

Preschooler's Learning Processes Are Different

For centuries young children were thought of as miniature adults. During the past 100 years, however, more has been learned about the significant differences in the ways in which adults and young children perceive the world than in all previous centuries combined. Being aware of those differences can enable parents to better understand and stimulate their own child's learning. Here are six ways in which adults and young children perceive the world differently:

1. *While adults lose much of their sense of curiosity, a preschooler is curious about everything in his world.*

He wants to know how come he can hear grandmother's voice on the telephone even though she lives over 200 miles away!

Questions seem to be never-ending. What will happen if he mixes the yellow and blue paints? Where does the sun go in the evening? Are those cartoon characters really singing inside the TV set?

Parents can rekindle their own sense of curiosity by telling their child honestly, "I don't know the answer to your question, but we can try to find out the answer together."

Nothing stifles a young child's curiosity as much as a parent's negative rebuke or scolding for asking a question. On the other hand, the more parents seek to answer questions in a simple and honest manner, the more their child's curiosity and learning will flourish and develop.

2. *While adults generally find constant repetition to be boring, preschoolers love repetition and*



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their learning thrives on it.

After reading an enjoyable book, adults are usually ready to begin another one. Not so with a preschooler. He wants you to read to him "Goodnight Moon"—or whatever his favorite bedtime book may be—tonight, tomorrow night, and the night after! Again and again and again!

Why do young children crave the kind of repetition that can bore adults? Young children have to deal with so much newness in their daily lives that it's a relief for them to be able at times to experience sameness and predictability. Amid so many new experiences, it's reassuring that their favorite storybook always has the same predictable ending.

Predictability gives a young child a sense of some control over the events in his life. The more you repeat the same

routine in his daily activities, for example, the more at ease he will be. If you forget some detail in the bedtime routine—such as forgetting to kiss his teddy bear good night—you will promptly be reminded of the proper sequence of events!

Repetition also helps young children deal with feelings of fear or anxiety. For example, your preschooler may ask you to repeat over and over the story of Humpty Dumpty who had a great fall. Fearing that he may experience a similar consequence if he were to fall, he can gradually come to terms with his feelings of fear by having you repeat the story in a calm voice—while he is nestled safely and comfortably in your lap!

3. *While adults are clock-watchers, conscious of time, a preschooler has not yet developed a similar sense of time.*

There can sometimes be a conflict when parents are focused on the time of day whereas the child is focused on the *sequence*, but not the *timing* of events.

For example, if by 3:30 p.m. a preschooler has not yet had his 3 o'clock nap, it's more important to him that you maintain the sequence of reading a story to him before nap time than to be concerned about the time on the clock. It's best to adjust to his world in which the focus is on *sequence* rather than *time* of day.

A good way to avoid hassles when getting ready for a new activity, such as a ride in the car, is to allow twice as much time as you think it will take. In that way, you will feel more

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relaxed and your child will feel less pressured.

Young children also need a transition period between one activity and another. Whereas an adult may look at the clock and think, "I must leave immediately," young children need some buffer time between finishing one activity and beginning another. Before leaving the playground in the park, for example, the parent might announce, "There's time for just three more rides down the slide."

Although a preschooler can't yet tell time, if the parent says, "Just five more minutes," those words will also convey the message that it's time to adjust mentally to the end of one activity and the beginning of another. It's also a good way to introduce your child gradually to the concept of measuring time.

4. While adults can focus on just one thing over a period of time, preschoolers tend to be multifocused.

While carrying a book for you to read to him, for example, your preschooler may spot a piece of red wool on the floor that attracts his full attention. He becomes totally absorbed by his newfound interest and will quickly forget what he set out to do.

It's as though one new distraction after another demands his immediate interest and attention. Because adults don't normally behave in this manner, some parents may find this type of behavior to be very irritating.

They would do well to overcome their initial irritation and use the child's signal of interest as a "teachable moment" during which the child's mind is receptive to new learning—rather than try to impose on the

child a rigidly planned schedule of learning activities.

Children learn best when they demonstrate a desire to acquire new knowledge related to what interests them—even when those interests shift from one moment to another.

5. While adults are often more preoccupied with the end product (such as being neatly dressed), preschoolers are more concerned about being involved in and even mastering the process.

Young children have a built-in desire to develop competence. A 12-month-old, for example, may spill half his food on his clothes or on the floor in his determination to get the spoon to his mouth by himself, without any help.

You know—and probably he knows too—that his feeding could be accomplished much more efficiently if he would just let an adult do all the work for him!

Fortunately his desire to master this skill is more important to him right now than his desire for food.

Throughout their young lives, children continue to develop self-mastery of new skills: brushing teeth, dressing themselves, learning to ride a bike ... and eventually, as teenagers, learning to drive.

A child's desire to master self-care skills can be difficult for parents for a number of reasons. First, it demands a lot of patience on the part of parents. It usually means abandoning one's own standards—such as seeing the child neatly dressed—in the interest of letting him be involved in the process, even though the end result may look far from perfect.

If you tell your child that he is too young to help you, or

that he won't do it the right way, he will have missed a very important learning experience.

Another reason that a child's desire to develop self-mastery of new skills may be difficult for some parents is because it makes them feel that their "little baby" is growing up too fast. They enjoyed taking care of all their child's needs and find it difficult to adjust to a new stage of development.

6. Children learn best when they are involved as active rather than passive learners.

That's why it's important for parents to find ways to involve their child actively in what they are doing. When preparing dinner, for example, you might invite your preschooler to help you stir whatever ingredients you are mixing. It may make things a little more messy in the kitchen! Just don't be too surprised to hear him proudly tell someone later that he and Mom or Daddy were the ones who prepared the dinner.

He will feel so proud of his accomplishment that he will want to help you in other ways as well. If you are changing his baby sister's diaper, for example, you could ask him to hold the clean diaper for you and hand it to you when you need it. In that way, you help him become actively involved in this activity rather than being a passive observer who feels excluded from what you are doing. Children who consistently feel excluded by adults are most likely to exhibit misbehavior problems.

By involving your child in as many of your daily activities—even at the expense of neatness and efficiency—you are not only providing great real-life learning experiences, but you are also helping him develop a positive self-concept. ■