How to socialize your preschooler without preschool

Emma’s parents were hopeful that Emma could start preschool this winter, but with the slow COVID-19 vaccine roll out, Emma’s parents chose to keep her home just a little longer. Grandparents come over every day, but three-year-old Emma does not have interaction with other children. Her parents are confident that they can teach Emma shapes and numbers, but are concerned about her social and emotional development. For those in the same shoes as Emma’s parents, we share ways to socialize your preschooler without preschool.

Preschool has not changed much since you were three or four years old. There is still circle time, show-and-tell, and cubbies to hang little coats in. And games, lots of fun and games. But as early childhood educators will tell you, there is a method to their madness. In particular, the fun and games encourage social and emotional growth.

Fun and games

Unlike a two year old, three and four-year-old children are capable of turn-taking and rule-following. These skills help preschoolers form friendships and learn to get along with others. At home, parents can teach their preschoolers simple games that involve turn-taking. Don’t be tempted to bend the rules to allow your child to win every game of Candy Land®. Whether you lose or win, you will model “good winning” and “good losing.” For instance, if you win, say “Good game!” If you lose, say “Oh, I lost, but I had fun playing!” Fast forward a few years and you can avoid having the kid who is a poor sport and can’t move on from a loss.

Whenever you teach a new life skill, take turns. For example, as you teach them to set the table, say “I put the fork next to this plate, now you can put the fork next to THIS plate,” Or, as you teach them to brush their teeth, take turns brushing. This will teach taking turns as well as also ensure shiny bright teeth.

Use manners

Children who say “Yes, please!” and “No, thank-you” endear themselves to others. When you teach your child manners, say “thank you” to your child. By saying “Thank you for putting your cup on the table and not the floor,” and “Thank you for putting your clothes in the hamper” and “Thank you for helping me clean up this game,” you build their confidence, and you model how to speak to others politely. Since children this age like to please their parents, your praise will motivate them to repeat the behavior.

Teach them to use their manners even with family members. When you teach that even family members deserve gratitude, fast forward to the teen years and you will have a teenager

thanking you for waking up early to make them pancakes in the morning.

Preschoolers are learning how to temper their tantrums

To help them with emotional development, label their negative emotions as you see them arise. For example: “You are so frustrated that the toy is not working correctly,” or “You are sad because I said we cannot play outside right now.” This allows them to feel what they feel and legitimizes them by giving their feelings a name. In the example above, if they lose the game of Candy Land® and start to tantrum, you can say, “You are disappointed that you lost this game, but we had such fun together. You might win the next game! Thank you for playing with me.”

Resist the temptation at home to soothe emotions with food or cups of liquid. In times of calm, be sure to read books about emotions, or talk about the emotions of characters in books. Talk about how to display anger and frustration in acceptable ways. Except for the binkie suggestion, this post applies to preschoolers as well as toddlers who find cooling down after a tantrum difficult.

Show and tell

Show and tell gives kids the confidence to express themselves in front of others. Virtually connect with a cousin or other relatives and have your child talk about what they brought. Have your child reciprocate by listening and asking one or two questions to the others in the group. The internet is full of themes and suggestions for items.

Fast forward to elementary school, middle school or high school and your kid will be breezing through their powerpoint slide deck in front of an entire classroom of kids.

Kids love structure to their day

The purpose of circle time, a hallmark of the young child

classroom experience, is to give order to the day. Circle time organizes kids, and relieves anxiety. Just as teachers do, at the start of the day, review the day's plan. Keep in mind that children who are 3 and 4 cannot keep more than 3 or 4 items in mind at one time.

> *Circle time organizes kids, and relieves anxiety*

For example, say during breakfast, "After breakfast, you can play with your puzzles while daddy cleans up, then we will play out in the yard, and then we will read books." Then after you read books, say, "Now that we are done reading, you can have time for free play while daddy does (some other task they need to do), then we will do laundry together and then have lunch." Side note: young children can empty a hamper into a basket, they can sort and fold clothes, and they can turn on and off the washer and dryer under your guidance. They enjoy mimicking you and like to spend time with you. Take advantage of that!

Other useful tools are the color alarm clocks (google to find a large assortment) which use colors to mark the passage of time. Do-it-yourself felt boards have pictures of weather or activities. While your child will not understand a full calendar, they will be happy to populate a "today" felt board and "tomorrow" felt board with activities.

Continue to pause throughout the day to remind your child what they just did and then a couple of things that come next. You will find that your child's day runs smoother than days without a plan.

A word about same-age friends

If you can find one other family with a child the same age as your preschooler who is quarantining the same way your family is, consider setting up playdates for the two children. In the age of this pandemic, it is best for playdates to occur

outside while wearing masks. Be sure to cancel if anyone has any illness symptoms or was exposed to anyone with COVID-19.

Unstructured play with one other child is just as valuable as a classroom full of others for your child to practice and enjoy socializing. Eventually the pandemic will end and you will feel safer sending your child to school. In the meantime, use these tips to help socialize your preschooler even when they are not in the classroom.

For more on three year olds, check out our post “Three’s the magic number” and this one that highlights four-year old development.

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