

Information on Separating

WHAT IS IT?

Children are typically upset the first few times a parent leaves them at an early childhood program. There is a lot for them to learn about and adjust to in this new setting. The intensity, however, varies from child to child. Some children approach a new setting enthusiastically. Others become upset or cling to the parent. Others don't cry but still miss their parent. A few children withdraw and refuse to engage in activities.

Observe and Respond

Help your child adjust to a new program by arranging an orientation period. If you aren't available, ask a grandparent or other trusted adult. The first visit can be short, followed by gradually longer visits. Play near your child at first, and then move to the side of the room. Once your child seems comfortable, say good-bye and take a short walk or read a book away from the child care program. The length of time spent away from your child can be increased each time until your child is able to stay for the whole program day.

Prepare your child by reading books like *The Kissing Hand* by Audrey Penn or *Will You Come Back for Me?* by Ann Tompert. Pretend going to preschool or child care. Take turns being the one who leaves and the one who is left behind. Be honest about your own feelings about leaving your child, but be careful those feelings don't rub off.

When you and your child are at home and relaxed, create a positive mental image of the new setting. Emphasize that you will be back. Talk about things that may take place and how your child will fit in. Find another child going to the same program, and get together a few times. Talk with the teacher about letting your child carry a security item, such as a cuddly toy or a picture of your family.

It is best to say good-bye before leaving rather than sneaking out, even if your child becomes upset. Sneaking out teaches your child to be wary about when you may leave. Once you say good-bye, leave promptly. The teacher will do everything possible to help your child become involved and make a positive adjustment. Most likely, your child will shut off the tears and begin to play happily soon after you close the door.

continued

Sometimes children become upset after a few weeks of attendance or after a special family time. Look to see if there is a pattern to the upsets (for example, every Monday after a terrific weekend at home). Consider if your child is anxious about something. Has there been a change at home or in the early childhood setting? Was there an upset with another child or adult? Is your child upset because he or she was disciplined for something? Your child needs support while learning to cope with changes and new feelings.

The work of separation is not complete until your child is fully engaged in the early childhood program. Ask the teacher if your child is wholeheartedly participating or just going through the motions until it is time to go home. Look at newsletters or lesson plans so you can ask questions about specific activities and preview things to look forward to the next day. Say, "Tomorrow you're going to do a pretend car wash on the playground."

Some children cry or behave inappropriately when their parents arrive to pick them up. Children who fall apart at the end of the day may be releasing emotions they have worked to control. They may have been involved in an interesting activity, or they may have been

having so much fun that it's hard to leave. Help your child respond to pickup time more positively by setting a regular time to arrive. Make sure there's enough time for your child to finish activities. Highlight something fun that you have planned to do at home. Focus on your child at this time rather than talking with the teacher. Be clear about who is responsible for guiding your child's behavior at pickup time. Sometimes each adult is waiting for the other to do something.

CONNECTING WITH SUPPORT

Adjusting to a new setting is highly individual. It may take your child three hours, three days, or three months. If your child attends the program sporadically or is shy in all settings, separation may be an issue for a long time. A child who cries daily for more than ten minutes for several weeks may need additional help. If your child is experiencing this level of distress, consider a longer transition period or a shorter day in the program, or talking with a parent educator or counselor who specializes in working with families of young children.

Information on Attention Getting

WHAT IS IT?

Children like to have adults spend time with them, notice the things they are doing, and comment on what they are learning. However, some children require more attention than others, and some seem insatiable. It is easy to tire of their pleas to play together or for you to watch them, yet it is essential to respond in a way that supports their growth.

Observe and Respond

Help your child feel more confident, play alone more often, and follow simple rules to reduce dependence on your attention. “Watch this,” and “Look,” are favorite phrases of a child looking for confirmation of newfound skills. Help your child feel proud of work by modeling words of praise by saying something like “I see colorful lines and circles.” Help your child praise his or her work by asking, “Which part did you work on the hardest?”

Help your child gain confidence by ensuring success. Check to see if your child’s toys are difficult enough to be challenging but not frustrating. If your child seems bored, add

items that are more difficult or that haven’t been used for some time. Set out easier toys if your child seems unable to do the activities with just a little assistance. Notice when your child is trying hard. Accept mistakes. Focus on your child’s efforts or on progress made rather than on the end product. Bolster your child’s confidence by complimenting actions like making good decisions and running fast.

If your child continually calls your attention to activities, you may need to set a limit on how many times you will watch. Say, “I will watch you one more time, and then I need to get my work done.”

Help your child move from being dependent on you to being more independent. Be firm but fair about how much undivided attention you can give. Schedule special times together each day. Talk about your special time and when it will take place. Make clear how long you will be able to play. Draw the play session to an end. Promise to play with your child again later. Once your time together is over, explain in a kind but firm way that you have other things you must do and that your child must do something independently. You can help your child decide and then get the activity started. Once your child is playing alone, look for a break or pause in the action. Commend your child for how independent he or she is.

continued

Arrange ways to work side by side. Continue with your work while your child does too. Your nearness will help your child feel valued. A nonverbal signal, such as a wink or the okay sign, lets your child know you appreciate his or her efforts to play independently.

Some children crave attention most when you are talking to others. Help your child learn to wait for a turn to talk by making a rule that everyone must take a turn or interrupt politely. Tell your child, "I'd like to hear what you have to say, but someone else is talking. You need to wait until she is done." Teach your child to put a hand on your shoulder or wait for a break in the conversation and then say, "Excuse me."

Occasionally a child will feel as if the only way to get attention is to be reprimanded for doing something wrong. A child who feels this way may seek attention through inappropriate behavior. Turn this type of behavior around by paying attention when your child is behaving appropriately. Say something like "Thanks for helping set the table." Teach your child some simple phrases to use to ask for your attention appropriately, such as "Sit by me" or "Hold my hand."

When your child does break a rule, pay as little attention as possible. Simply state that what has been done is not acceptable. Do not engage in discussion or argue with your child at this point. Instead, explain what needs to happen before you will attend to him or her again. For instance, you might say, "I will come and sit by you when you stop kicking the table."

CONNECTING WITH SUPPORT

Talk with your child's teacher. Work together to develop a plan to meet your child's need for attention. Establish consistency between the home and the early childhood setting to teach your child to be more confident and independent and to develop self-regulation skills. If your child does things for attention that are dangerous or self-injuring, see a family counselor who specializes in working with young children.

Information on Joining a Group of Players

WHAT IS IT?

Many children are highly motivated to become part of group play. Children usually learn to join play by watching and copying others. Others find it difficult to join already established play groups. It isn't necessary to expect your child to play with others at all times. Children of all ages play by themselves when they do not know each other very well, are feeling shy or cautious, or need time to themselves. When children have the skills they need to join others in play but choose to play alone, respect their decision.

Observe and Respond

If your child appears anxious or doesn't seem to know how to join in, it is time to offer support. You can help your child learn effective ways to enter play. Most children who are successful with their peers have had good relationships with adults. Be sure your child knows how to play with you by playing together each day. Get down on the floor and

follow your child's lead. Your child will want to play with you even after learning to play well with other children.

Look for children who can be playmates for your child in your neighborhood, early childhood program, or place of worship. Set up play dates. Try neutral settings like playgrounds first, before inviting another child to your home, where your child must share toys. When another child comes to your home for the first time, the visitor may need time to explore. Once the children settle in, join the play too. Find ways to solve any problems that may come up.

Children who disrupt play or are aggressive, critical, or bossy are not as likely to be accepted by a group of children who are playing. If your child tries to take over play, such behavior is likely to result in rejection. If your child's play idea is too different from what is already taking place, the group is likely to reject her or him. Help your child develop ideas that fit in with what others are already doing.

Some children initiate play by slapping a child's shoulder, bulldozing their way into a group, or knocking over toys. These behaviors are upsetting to other children. See how your

continued

child tries to gain entry into a group. Consider if your child is being physical because of limited verbal skills. If that's the case, suggest your child take a less verbal role, such as pretending to be the family pet or bussing dishes at a restaurant. If your child uses only one approach to join play, offer a different suggestion, and then add, "If that doesn't work, come back, and we'll think of something else."

One successful strategy for joining group play is to offer a prop that supports play. Your child can bring coffee to those who are playing house or be the pizza delivery person. Watch to see that your child is not taking a role that someone else has already claimed. Children have difficulty making room for two teachers or two babies. Help your child think of how to act out a role before actually playing it.

A child who makes comments related to play has learned to add to play rather than try to change it. Help your child watch play and then decide where to fit into it. Ask, "What could you bring that would help them? What can you say to let them know you want to play?" To increase your child's chances of being accepted even further, suggest getting the attention of one other person before making a comment. For example, encourage your child to say, "Dylan, here's a bag to put the groceries in."

CONNECTING WITH SUPPORT

Talk with your child's teacher to determine what the adults are doing to encourage your child to enter group play and what you can do to support their efforts. Seek additional assistance by having your child's skills screened by your local school district if the verbal expectations of group play seem too demanding or if your child seems to be on the outskirts of play because of difficulty in understanding the pretend aspect of it.

Information on Turn Taking

WHAT IS IT?

In most families (especially those with more than one child), children need to learn to share toys, materials, and adult attention. Some children learn to take turns by watching others and experiencing give-and-take with adults. Some children require adult guidance in order to learn turn taking. Before the age of three and one-half, many children may not be developmentally ready to share. If your child is this age or younger, don't expect turn taking with toys every time your child is asked. Allow plenty of time for using a material when possible; your child may need to feel the fullness of possession before he or she willingly shares something with others. Lay the groundwork for sharing by being a generous role model.

Observe and Respond

Determine if there are certain times of the day when it is more difficult for your child to take turns. If your child is especially tired before nap or hungry before dinner, activity or material that can be used alone is a good choice. You can teach your child to play with cherished materials alone in his or her room. Teach your child to say, "I want to play alone right now."

Your child may refuse to take turns from fear that the toy being lent will not be returned or will be ruined by the borrower. Your child may ask to have the toy back right away. It's okay if your child says, "You may look at it if you give it right back," or "You may use my car, but don't smash it into any walls."

Teach your child to take turns by playing games that have a back-and-forth rhythm. Roll a car back and forth or bounce a ball to each other. Pause expectantly as you wait for your child to return the toy or take the next turn. Emphasize turns by saying, "Your turn" and "My turn." Play board games. Emphasize when your child's turn will come by saying, "It's almost your turn. As soon as Mom is done, it will be your turn."

continued

Include one other child in your play. Learning to take turns with one other child at home may set the stage for sharing more widely with others. If your child's friend is coming to your home, put away new or favorite toys. Taking turns with favorites may prove too difficult.

Help your child learn that toys that aren't being used can be used by others. When your child abandons a toy, ask if he or she is finished or wants it a few more minutes. If your child decides to return to the toy or you must call your child's turn to an end, ask, "May Claire have it now or in two minutes?"

There are many times your child may need to wait for a turn, such as when you are in line at the grocery store. Help your child learn to wait by finding something interesting to do. Play simple guessing games while you are in line. Or bring a bag of small toys to the waiting room at the doctor's office. Comment favorably on the times your child waits patiently.

If your child takes toys from others, play alongside and explain the consequences of taking toys that others are using (others get angry and may not want to play with you). Give your child words to use, such as "May I have a turn on the swing?" or "I like trucks too. May I use the blue one?" Help your child learn to wait or find things to do while waiting.

For other situations, your child may need to learn how to politely say he or she isn't done with a turn. Teach your child to say more than "No" if someone asks for a turn with a toy your child is using—for example, "No, I only have one, and I'm using it right now."

CONNECTING WITH SUPPORT

While taking turns may be difficult for your child at home, the difficulty can be magnified in a group setting. Talk with your child's teacher to determine what steps you should take to teach this important skill. Establishing consistency between the home and the early childhood setting will help your child learn appropriate skills more quickly.

Information on Tattling

WHAT IS IT?

Children today are faced with many difficult situations. Some are too dangerous or too challenging for them to handle on their own. They need to feel free to tell trusted adults when someone is hurting or bothering them or when someone else is in danger. In many situations, they need support from an adult in order to learn to handle a situation on their own.

Unfortunately, many people feel that telling an adult is tattling. Although tattling can be annoying, it is important not to discourage children from seeking adult guidance. Try to think of tattling as reporting. By responding effectively, you may be able to help your child gain problem-solving skills.

Observe and Respond

Many adults believe the reason children tattle is to get another in trouble. While this may be one motivation, other reasons exist. Some children tattle in order to draw attention to

themselves. Prevent your child from needing attention through tattling by paying attention to him or her at other times. Spend time each day cuddling, talking, and playing.

Sometimes a child will report because he or she has been asked to help look after others. Or he or she feels an adult needs to know when someone else is hurt, crying, or being bullied. Your child may become confused and think he or she should always tell you if something is wrong. Avoid giving your child mixed messages. Allow your child to tell you, but when a situation is not dangerous, help your child learn to handle upsets on his or her own.

Your child may come to you with wide eyes describing the daring acts of others. In such situations, your child may be truly concerned about another child. Reassure your child by saying, "I can see you're worried. She is climbing high, isn't she?" Knowing that you are paying attention may be enough to reduce your child's fear and allow him or her to return to his or her own play.

If your child seems to be reporting about others who are breaking the rules, he or she may be trying to understand them better. Or your child may be looking for affirmation that he or she knows the rules. Acknowledge your

continued

child's comment by saying, "I'm glad you know the rules." Reassure your child that you will take care of a problem if needed.

Some children report upsetting behaviors when they don't know how to solve a problem on their own. Help your child learn to solve problems independently by teaching him or her the steps in problem solving. Use the colors of a stoplight to remind him or her of the steps: Red means stop and identify the problem. Yellow reminds your child to think of ideas. Green stands for "try the best idea." Help your child use the steps when he or she brings a concern to you. Ask "What?" questions to help your child think of ideas. Say, "What could you do to work this out?" Encourage your child to think of more than one idea. Ask, "What's another idea?" Help your child choose the best one; then help your child try out his or her idea. Say to your child, "If that doesn't work, come back and we'll think of something else."

Sometimes children will report behaviors to you as a way of seeking support. You might overhear your child say, "I'm going to tell!" as a way to enhance his or her power. Avoid rushing in to solve a problem for your child. Instead, listen to what your child has to tell you. Then say, "It sounds like you're having

trouble getting Sophie to listen." If your child has the skills to handle the situation without adult help, let your child know you believe he or she can manage. Say, "I'm sorry you're not getting along. I'm sure you'll find a way to work this out." This may be all your child needs to go back and try again.

If you think your child needs some help resolving the issue, offer to go with him or her. Ask, "Can you talk with her by yourself, or do you want me to go with you?" If your child chooses to have you go with, your presence will inspire confidence.

CONNECTING WITH SUPPORT

If reporting persists, talk with your child's teacher. Anticipate the types of situations in which your child needs help and decide how you and your child's teacher will respond. Developing consistency between the home and the early childhood setting helps your child get the message that telling adults his or her concerns is okay and that the adults will help him or her learn to handle most situations independently.

Information on Inappropriate Language and Swearing

WHAT IS IT?

Young children are just learning to express their emotions using words instead of crying or acting on their feelings. Some children swear when they are upset. Children usually learn swear words from other children, family members, people in their community, or the media. Hearing other people swear gives young children the message that it is acceptable. If your child is swearing, you can help him or her learn more acceptable ways to express himself or herself.

Observe and Respond

Although your child may not understand the meaning of swear words, he or she probably has a sense that these words are not acceptable. Many children, especially four-year-olds, explore this kind of out-of-bounds talk. Adults hearing young children talk like this usually react with laughter or shock. Your child may try to get this type of response by repeating the words.

Make it clear that using this type of language isn't okay the first time you hear it. Respond in a matter-of-fact manner. Say, "That's a word we don't use." Model the kind of language that is okay, such as, "Oh shoot!" or "Nuts." Let your child know some of the consequences of swearing: it upsets other people, others may not want to be around when he or she talks like that, or he or she may hurt someone's feelings.

Teach your child words that describe feelings at times when he or she is not upset. Look at pictures to see what people are feeling. Label the feelings and explain how you can tell: "I think he might be happy. He has a big smile." Try to determine why the person might be feeling that way. If a problem is pictured, think out loud of possible solutions. Listen for sounds that indicate how someone is feeling. "I hear someone crying; I wonder if she is sad." Play a game in which you describe a situation and ask your child how he or she would feel. "How would you feel if you scraped your knee? Or if you couldn't watch your favorite TV show?"

If your child becomes frustrated, offer your support before he or she swears. Teach your child to ask for help or to say, "This is too

continued

hard for me.” Find a substitute toy or activity that is easier so your child can be successful, or help your child settle down with a book in a comfy chair.

Recognize that some emotions feel big for your child, and he or she may feel unprepared to cope with them. Help your child feel supported by spending time each day in pleasant conversation and cuddling together. Help your child feel safe by offering predictable routines and consequences that are fair and consistent. Adjust your schedule to ensure your child’s needs are met rather than having him or her wait.

Teach your child to deal with big emotions in appropriate ways. Your child can ask for help, stamp his or her feet, or use problem-solving techniques. Give your child words to use when he or she is angry. Say, “I know you are angry. You can tell me ‘I’m so mad.’” Teach your child that feelings range from upset to furious.

If your child needs to leave an upsetting activity for a short time, ask him or her to choose a quiet activity to do alone. When your child regains control of his or her emotions, he or she can try again.

Children hear swearing many places. Monitor the television programs your child watches and the music he or she listens to. Ensure that appropriate language is used. Find ways for your child to socialize with people who do not swear. Be sure to use words you are willing to have your child repeat.

CONNECTING WITH SUPPORT

If you believe that your child is learning swear words from someone in the early childhood setting, talk with the teacher about it. Develop a Plan for Action. Work to establish consistency between your home and the early childhood setting to teach your child more acceptable behavior. If swearing does not decrease after three to four months despite your efforts to reduce it, your child may not understand this or other rules. Contact your school district for a skills screening to see whether your child is developing skills at an age-appropriate rate. If your child expresses anger that seems out of proportion to the situation or if the anger is prompted by a chronic stressor in your child’s life, talk with a family counselor who can teach coping skills.

Information on Temper Tantrums

WHAT IS IT?

Children have temper tantrums for a variety of reasons. Some throw themselves down on the floor when they do not get what they want, when they are asked to do something they don't want to do, or when they become frustrated. Sometimes children become overwhelmed by activities, anxiety, or feelings.

Tantrums reach different levels of intensity depending on whether children receive attention, have the language to express their needs and wants, and have effective coping skills. Sometimes children have learned they will get what they want when they cause a fuss.

Observe and Respond

Children are prone to outbursts when they are tired, sick, or hungry. Help reduce the risk and frequency of tantrums by adjusting your schedule to avoid your child becoming overtired or hungry. Stay away from challenging activities when your child is fatigued. Watch for symptoms that your

child may be getting ill; emotions can be close to the surface the day before he or she comes down with something. Other common triggers include too many changes in activity, too much going on at one time, or stressful family changes, such as a new sibling or a move.

Help your child learn to recognize when he or she is becoming frustrated. Say, "It looks like you're getting frustrated. Take a break or count to ten." Encourage your child to ask for help; teach safe ways of expressing anger. Your child can stamp feet, yell, or talk with you about it. Teach your child to take deep, calming breaths.

Be careful not to model emotional outbursts yourself. Recognize your own need to take a break. Use words to name your feelings. Demonstrate how to calm down by listening to music, looking at a book, or taking a walk.

Provide choices when possible. When you must set a limit, be firm. Remember not to take outbursts personally. Do not let your child's outbursts sway you. Offer a choice: "Do you want to do it by yourself, or shall I help you?" Encourage your child to use words rather than behavior to tell you, "I want help."

continued

If you can't give your child something for a good reason, do not give in. Ignore any outburst. Detach yourself from the situation by focusing on something else or by walking away. Don't try to explain while your child is upset. Listen for a break in crying and watch for signals that your child is calming down. Move close to offer comfort and support. When the tantrum is over, do not lecture. Help your child become engaged in an activity. If your child brings up the difficult situation, problem-solve how to handle it. Offer the words to use next time.

Focus on teaching your child words to use to express feelings. Read books about feelings. Find pictures in magazines of people expressing different emotions, and talk about the feelings they are showing. Listen for people laughing, crying, or yelling. Guess how each person might be feeling from what you hear. Teach your child a variety of feelings words. Teach vocabulary such as *angry, mad, frustrated, sad, upset, surprised, happy, and frightened*. Explain that not every event is tragic. Talk with your child about how the intensity of feelings can vary from really, really mad to just a little bit frustrated. Set special quiet times aside to talk more about your child's feelings.

Occasionally children become locked into tantrums. If your child gets stuck, move in close and acknowledge the feelings. Distract your child with another activity. Once a tantrum has lasted more than ten to fifteen minutes, say, "It's time to stop now." Help your child take deep, relaxing breaths.

CONNECTING WITH SUPPORT

Work with your child's teacher to develop consistency between the home and the early childhood setting. If your child has a tantrum in every stressful situation or when denied his or her way; if the tantrums seem filled with extreme anger or distress; if the tantrums consistently last beyond fifteen to twenty minutes, talk with a parent educator or a family counselor who specializes in working with young children.

Information on Aggression

WHAT IS IT?

Unfortunately, aggressive behaviors can be common when young children come together in group settings. When young children are asked to share materials and toys, they are more likely to experience frustration and conflict, which can cause aggression. Aggressive behaviors include hitting, kicking, slapping, scratching, throwing toys, and destroying materials in anger. Children who are aggressive need to learn to express their frustration and solve problems without hurting others or ruining things.

Problem solving involves identifying a problem, thinking of ways to solve it, choosing the best idea, and trying it out. Children learn to problem-solve by observing others, direct instruction, and trying out a solution on their own. Usually aggression decreases as children learn to problem-solve.

Observe and Respond

Some aggression is accidental. For example, when children are crowded, they are likely to bump into one another or to knock things over. When this occurs, you may need to quickly say something like “Sarah accidentally knocked down your blocks when she tried to get to her building.”

Occasionally children try to make contact by poking, pushing, or slapping someone on the back in a way that is interpreted as aggressive. Watch to see if your child is trying to be friendly. Teach your child to tap other children’s shoulders or gently rub their backs to get their attention. Children who use few words or who are difficult to understand may become frustrated and act out when their words don’t work. If this is the case, teach your child a few simple words to use: “Stop,” “That’s mine,” or “Help.” When your child is ready, teach more complex statements like “I was using that” or “When can I have a turn?”

Many children love to engage in roughhousing. If you wrestle with your child, establish a few rules, for example, stop when someone says “Stop,” and wrestling only—no hitting. Help your child transition to a calming activity after this type of play. Try sensory experiences like

continued

playing with playdough, helping to wash the dishes, or taking a warm bath.

Everyone feels angry from time to time. Anger is often caused by feelings of frustration. Children are likely to become frustrated when they feel they aren't getting what they want, whether it is attention, a toy, or an activity. Learn your child's triggers and the signs of building frustration. Is your child more aggressive when tired? Perhaps a nap is needed before playing with a friend. Are certain activities usually frustrating? Try easier activities for the time being. When you see a sign your child is becoming frustrated, move close by. Reduce the tension by labeling your child's feelings.

Teach your child to recognize his or her signs of anger. Perhaps these are tight fists, pursing lips, or scrunched eyebrows? Teach your child to stop and think, "Don't hit. Do something different." Effective possibilities include getting help, yelling, pounding playdough, or scribbling a picture.

When a problem arises, walk your child through the steps in problem solving: identifying the problem, thinking of solutions, choosing the best idea, and trying it. Ask each child involved in an upset to describe the problem. Then ask, "What can you do that will make both of you happy?" If the children are unable to come up with any solutions, suggest a few. Ask them to choose the best idea. Then help them try it.

CONNECTING WITH SUPPORT

Use the suggestions listed here, and work with your child's teacher to formulate a Plan for Action. Consistency between your home and the early childhood setting will help your child learn appropriate behaviors more quickly. Persistent high levels of aggression may require specialized instruction. Seek assistance if your child is frequently aggressive, doesn't seem attached to you or other adults, or rarely follows directions. Contact a parent educator, family counselor, or behavior specialist to help your child learn more effective interaction skills.

Information on Activity Level

WHAT IS IT?

Young children need to pay attention to and persist at a task in order to learn from their activities. They also learn through hands-on exploration. They have high activity levels, and most don't attend to any one thing for very long. Depending on the activity, a two-year-old child can usually sit and be engaged for two to three minutes, and a five-year-old child for fifteen to twenty minutes. While a high amount of energy is normal, some children with high activity levels may be easily distracted, have difficulty finishing projects, and act without considering the consequences of their behavior.

Observe and Respond

You can help your child learn to focus his or her attention and persist at tasks. Let your child move and release energy by getting outside at least once a day. Provide ways for your child to move indoors too. Throwing rolled up socks into a basket, jumping across parallel tape lines on the floor, dropping pegs into a plastic jar, or dancing to music

helps burn off youthful energy. It may be tempting to sit your child in front of the TV or computer, but these activities may increase the amount of energy and restlessness your child exhibits. Limiting these activities increases your child's ability to focus.

Join your child in playing with a favorite toy. Often your presence helps expand the length of play time. Be sure to notice and comment when your child engages in an activity, and offer positive attention for time spent concentrating. When your child seems ready to move on, ask for one more action with the toy, such as feeding the doll or parking the toy car in the garage.

To help calm or sooth your active child, offer sensory activities, such as pouring sand, playing in water, or working playdough. Reduce noise and cut back on the number of toys available at one time. Displaying toys attractively makes it easier for your child to make choices.

If your child is moving too quickly to analyze the consequences of an action, move close by. Confidentially state the rule by saying something like "It's not okay to open the guinea pig's cage. If you open the door, he will get out, and we may not be able to find him. What can you do instead?" If necessary, offer

continued

choices like “You can open and close the doors on this shape box or draw a picture of the guinea pig.”

Many children who have high activity levels do best with predictable schedules and routines. Arrange your child’s day to include an opportunity to move before and after sedentary activities. Provide a balance between things you must do and things your child wants to do.

Give notice a few minutes before an activity needs to end. This gives your child a chance to complete an activity or mentally prepare to take a break from it. When you must wait for an appointment or in line at a store, bring a bag of books and toys or play a simple guessing game. Keep your child occupied with appropriate things to do.

Reading books together helps your child learn to focus his or her attention. Pique your child’s interest in the story by posing a riddle or question before beginning to read. Keep the book short so your child can successfully focus on it. When you need to draw your child’s attention back to the book, ask a question like “Do you think the boy in the story will run home or to school? Let’s find out.”

CONNECTING WITH SUPPORT

With your child’s teacher, work to teach your child to slow down and become more attentive. Consistency between home and school will help your child learn more quickly. Determining if your child’s activity level is outside of the norm can be difficult, so try some of the suggestions listed here for three to four months before becoming overly concerned. Then consider if your child is still in constant motion, has difficulty sticking to an activity for more than a few minutes, or continues to have difficulty following routines. If necessary, contact your pediatrician; have your child’s skills screened through the school district; or talk with a family counselor specializing in working with young children.

Information on Curiosity and Questioning

WHAT IS IT?

From very young ages, children are driven to learn about the world around them. They are curious about the people, places, and things they see and experience. Through their explorations, they learn vocabulary, how things work, and whether they can effect changes. This helps them acquire knowledge that they can build on throughout their lifetimes.

When children are curious about something, they become engrossed in their exploration of it. They lean in to get a closer look, focus their attention, show surprise, spontaneously describe what they see, or ask questions about it. Support your child's curiosity by sharing wonder, providing a safe environment, introducing new experiences, and offering ways to delve into things that capture your child's interest.

Observe and Respond

It may look to you as if your child is just playing with an object, but playing engages all of a child's senses in learning about a new material. Encourage your child's sense of wonder by taking walks to listen to sounds you hear or to smell how fresh it is following a spring rain. Go new places together. Make predictions about what you might see before you go. It doesn't matter if your child's predictions prove correct, as long as they build curiosity about the event.

Encourage curiosity by letting your child take apart items you no longer use: an old radio, sewing machine, or tape recorder and screwdriver can stimulate new discoveries (be sure to remove electrical cords). Grab your child's attention by stopping before the end of a book; finish it later. Wonder out loud about things you see, read, or hear. Model your excitement about new things by commenting on a plant breaking through the soil or a spider web strung between two branches in a tree.

continued

If your child tends to choose the same type of toys or materials, encourage other choices. For example, if your child plays with blocks most of the time, expand on this interest by suggesting toy cars, which can drive on roads built from blocks. Keep toys organized so your child can easily find them. Put some toys away for a while. When you bring them out again, your child may have a renewed interest. Learn about new things by reading books. Check out a variety of books from your local library.

Invite but do not force your child to join a new activity. Your participation may encourage your child to try it. Say something like “Let’s go listen and see what we can find out” or “Let’s go try it and see what this is about.”

Around the age of three years, children begin to seek answers to more and more questions. They ask “Why?” about most everything. While the number of questions can sometimes be unsettling, it is good to know that your child is curious about new things. Take the time to respond to these questions; remember that no question is stupid, even when you are tired of answering. If you are in the middle of something and can’t take a break, keep a list of questions to answer later. Be sure to come back to your list. If you don’t know an answer, find out together—first,

your child can describe the question, and then the two of you can determine how the information can be found. Get answers by looking together for information in books, online, from someone who knows, or by experimenting to discover answers. If you get really stuck, try turning the question back to your child. Ask, “What do you think might happen? Why do you think it would be that way?” Ask questions of your own, such as “How did you learn that? What did you do first? What happened next?” Allow your child time to think before expecting an answer or asking another question.

CONNECTING WITH SUPPORT

If you notice that your child is not very inquisitive, doesn’t try new things, or doesn’t ask questions about new things or experiences, talk with your child’s teacher. Seek additional assistance if your child usually wanders around without becoming occupied by activities other than TV or electronics, shows little interest in nearby people and things, is so fascinated by something that you cannot draw away his or her attention, or is so fearful of trying new things that your child’s learning seems to be affected.

Information on Superhero Play

WHAT IS IT?

Many children are drawn to the fast action of superhero play. Whether they are pretending to be parents, shopkeepers, or superheroes, they are learning to take on pretend roles, play with others, sequence a story, and negotiate how play will continue. In superhero play, children work on their understandings of good and evil, power and control, and real and pretend. Adults are sometimes opposed to superhero play because it tends to become loud and may involve violent themes. Banning it doesn't seem to work. Redirecting children to play house lacks excitement.

Observe and Respond

Look closely at your child's superhero play and become involved in it. Then help your child be creative while keeping a lid on this type of powerful play. Children who are active tend to be drawn to superhero play because it usually involves running, hiding, and sneaking around. A child who is active can meet these physical needs in other ways

too. Be sure to plan many times per day when your child can play outside or be active indoors.

Some children pretend to have powers they wish they had, such as being brave or strong enough to take care of themselves. Your child can feel powerful by controlling the story line when you play together or showing off strength by climbing to the top of playground equipment.

In dramatic play, children often start by imitating things they have seen or experienced and then creating stories that go beyond. Expose your child to new adventures by reading books or visiting a zoo or museum. Then take an imaginary trip to the land of the dinosaurs, go on a photo safari, climb a jungle gym mountain, explore cardboard box caves with a flashlight, or cross a river of hot lava on rope spread on the floor. Help your child plan a story line. Talk about what materials you'll need, including props and costumes. Help your child get started making props, finding a costume, and then acting out the role.

Some people have strong feelings about allowing children to pretend to use weapons. But no matter what adults say, a child will fashion a weapon—even if it is made from

continued

toast! Encourage your child to create other, more creative props. Incredible gadgets like those used by Spy Kids can easily be made. Ask, “If you were going to track an animal that escaped from the zoo, what would you need? What could you make?”

Some children imitate television scripts rather than create their own stories. When this is the case, join the play and expand your child’s ideas by making suggestions that are closely related to the ongoing story. If your child is pretending to be a superhero who fights crime and you suggest instead that he or she pretend to go to a movie, your child probably won’t see a connection. But if you pretend that you see the villain enter a movie theater and the superhero should follow, your child may embrace the idea. If you must draw superhero play to a close, do so by ending the story logically. Say, “The superhero has been trying to find the bad guys all day, and now she is very sleepy; let her sleep for a while and choose something quiet to do.” Direct your child toward a calming activity like playdough.

If your child tends to become overexcited during superhero play, supervise closely. Tune in to signals that play is getting too chaotic or that your child needs help to resolve a problem. Watch for louder voices, more arguments, or trouble sharing props. Help your child learn to solve problems.

If your child’s play only imitates television or is excessively violent, limit viewing of violent programming. Perhaps there is one particular program that is problematic and should be turned off.

CONNECTING WITH SUPPORT

If play is repetitive, excessively gruesome, or violent, or if your child resists involvement in other types of play, talk to a parent educator or counselor who specializes in working with young children.

Information on Speaking

WHAT IS IT?

Children begin to communicate from the time they are born. They cry when they are hungry, tired, or need to be changed. Through interactions with family members, they hear the language spoken in their home and begin to understand that words have meaning. Learning to speak involves listening, comprehension, attention, memory, word knowledge, and grammar.

Observe and Respond

Children as young as three years old may have a speaking vocabulary of about one thousand words when people talk, sing, and read to them. You can help increase your child's vocabulary by introducing your child to new experiences. Talk about your experiences. When you are together, describe what you are doing by saying, "I'm going to stir this gravy until all the lumps are gone." Or describe what your child is doing. You can also sing songs and say nursery rhymes. Ask questions that call for more than one-word responses. Instead of asking, "Did

you like the movie?" ask, "What was your favorite part of the movie?" Ask all the "wh" questions: who, what, where, when, and why. Encourage your child to use descriptive words like *angry*, *frustrated*, and *upset* to describe feelings.

Expand your child's single words into short phrases or sentences during pretend play. If your child is pretending to order at a restaurant and says, "Pizza," repeat the word but add to it. Say, "Yes, I would like a small thin-crust pizza with sausage and mushrooms, please."

Find ways to include your child in household chores and routines. Use these chances to talk as well as to accomplish some of what you need to get done. You can build vocabulary through everyday activities like cooking together. When you cook you can say: *stir*, *whisk*, *mix*, *measure*, *spread*, and *taste*. Play guessing games while you work. Ask your child to describe something to you. Try to guess what it is. Stop what you are doing when your child initiates a conversation with you. Get down to eye level, paraphrase what your child has said, and then ask, "What happened next?" or "What did you do?"

Help your child build lengthy sentences by taking pictures of things you do together.

continued

When you look at them together, ask your child what was taking place. Solicit more detail by asking, “What else is going on?” Involve your child in storytelling. Start a story and then stop. You can say, “Once upon a time there was a purple and orange monster who . . .” Let your child finish the sentence.

It takes time for children to perfect the sounds of the English language. Some of the more challenging sounds for children to produce include *l, s, r, v, z, y, ch, sh,* and *th*. Usually by the time children are four years old, their speech is understood by those who know them and by unfamiliar adults. If your child mispronounces words, it is not necessary to draw attention to the error. Instead, repeat the words using the correct pronunciation.

At times, your child may pause, hesitate, or repeat words. Stuttering usually first appears in children two to five years old. Listen attentively, be patient, and avoid asking your child to slow down. Give your child time.

CONNECTING WITH SUPPORT

Talk with your child’s teacher if you are concerned about problems with articulation. Further investigation is usually needed if a four-year-old child is not understood in his home language by people he doesn’t know but who are native speakers. If your child demonstrates any of the following problems in your home language, it is important to seek assistance from your primary health care provider or screening through your school district. If your child

- ◆ Is not easily understood most of the time by three years of age
- ◆ Is not using short (two- or three-word) sentences to communicate by three years of age
- ◆ Is not understandable by unfamiliar adults by four years of age
- ◆ Is not speaking sentences that sound almost adultlike by four years of age

Early recognition and intervention can help your child become better prepared for entering kindergarten ready to succeed.

Information on Following Directions

WHAT IS IT?

Following directions isn't easy for young children. Doing so requires them to focus their attention, remember, and do what is asked. To help your child learn this skill, you will need to determine if your child has heard what to do, knows how to do it, and is choosing not to cooperate. You can help your child learn to follow simple directions once you pinpoint what he or she needs.

Observe and Respond

Before you give directions, be sure your child is focused on you and paying attention. Call your child's name, touch your child's shoulder, or establish eye contact. Reduce competing noise by turning off music or the television before you proceed. Ask your child to stop and pay attention. Be sure to allow time for your child to think about your request.

Sometimes children have difficulty remembering things they hear. They may remember only the first or the last step of lengthy instructions. Keep directions short and simple. Simplify your directions by giving

them one step at a time. When your child can consistently follow one-step directions, add a second step. Build up to three steps by the time your child enters kindergarten.

You can help your child remember directions by asking him or her to repeat them back to you. Repeating your directions helps to ensure that your child has heard and helps commit your instructions to memory. Asking your child to help retell a familiar story, such as *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*, can help your child practice remembering things he or she hears and the order of information. To help with daily routines, use a checklist; use a picture of pajamas as a reminder to put on pajamas and a picture of a toothbrush as a reminder to brush teeth.

Don't assume your child knows what is expected. Focus on saying what to do rather than on what not to do. Avoid vague instructions. "Watch out!" doesn't give much information. Say instead, "Your cup is tipping. Use two hands to hold it straight." Be careful not to ask a question or add "Okay?" to a direction. If you say, "Are you ready for cleanup?" the likely response is "No." What you really mean is "Please clean up now."

Be sure your child knows how to do what you are asking. Teach the steps involved in each task. For example, here is an effective

continued

two-part directive: “First, pick up all of the toys and put them in the toy basket. Then put all of the dirty clothes in the hamper.” A photograph showing your child’s room when it is clean provides a visual reminder of what cleanup looks like.

Give directions in the way that matches how your child learns best. A visual learner responds best to picture cues of what needs to be done; a verbal learner learns best by hearing things. Some children learn best by doing, so let them try. If you give a verbal direction and your child does not respond, wait to see if it takes awhile for the request to sink in. If he or she doesn’t respond, restate the directive in a slightly different way to make sure your child understands. If this is not enough, help your child get started. Compliment your child for following directions. Say, “I see you are putting all the blocks in the bucket. Your room is really looking clean.”

CONNECTING WITH SUPPORT

Sometimes you may find that you and your child argue about following directions. You have tried the approaches described here and believe your child knows how to follow the directions you have given but is choosing not to cooperate. If this is the case, ask your child’s teacher for the handout “Information on Power Struggles.”

You and your child’s teacher may be concerned if your child is not following directions. Talk with the teacher about what works in the early childhood setting. Have your child’s skills screened through your local school district if you are seeing patterns of behavior that suggest your child does not hear or is having trouble processing directions, remembering verbal directions, or can only follow directions with one-to-one help.

Information on Power Struggles

WHAT IS IT?

Sometimes children understand and can follow directions but resist in attempts to be independent. When this happens, children and adults can find themselves caught in power struggles that are difficult to end. You can learn to recognize the signs that a power struggle may be coming and how to avoid it, and help your child learn to cooperate.

Observe and Respond

When you and your child engage in power struggles, ask yourself two questions: First, does your child know how to follow directions? Second, how will you gain your child's cooperation? For ideas on how to give effective instructions, consult "Information on Following Directions." Suggestions on how to avoid arguments when you give your child directions follow.

Some young children say no when given a direction without even thinking about it. Perhaps your child frequently hears, "No." Help your child hear, "Yes," more often by finding ways to say yes. Say, "Yes, when the

toys are cleaned up" or "Yes, after you're done cleaning."

Your child may argue when a job seems overwhelming. Be sure your expectations are realistic. Break a task into more manageable steps. Let your child know that other activities await after the task at hand has been completed. Say, "When you hang up your coat, we will be able to play a game."

Children who are accustomed to being pulled away from their chosen activities may delay chores by arguing. Or they may agree to do what you have asked but continue to play. If this is the case, tell your child that an activity is about to end. Avoid some arguments by being consistent about chores. Use a picture schedule or a job chart so your child knows what you expect. Recognize that from your child's perspective, cleaning up may destroy an incomplete project. Keep all the pieces of a project in a bag so your child can work on it another time.

If your child refuses to do as asked many times each day, make sure you are not asking for too much. Reduce your expectations, and see if this helps decrease power struggles. When you know your child is tired or hungry, try not to give directions. Cut down on how many extra activities your child is involved in. Make sure your child is getting enough sleep.

continued

When you must give your child a direction, be sure your directions are effective. Avoid repeating yourself or losing your temper. Repeating yourself teaches your child to tune you out. Losing your temper gives the impression that your child has power over your emotions. Take a few deep breaths to maintain your composure.

Avoid power struggles by offering choices. Ask, “Do you want to do it yourself, or shall I help you?” or “Do you want to hold my hand or my jacket in this busy parking lot? You pick.” Make sure you can live with the choice your child makes.

When you find yourself arguing with your child, base your decision on what is best for your child in the long run—not what is easier at the moment. End the argument. Say, “You’re trying to get me to change my mind, and I am not going to.” Ignore further protests. If you responded to your child’s request before thinking, you can still change your mind. Let your child know you have reconsidered. Say something like “I have thought about it a little more, and I’ve changed my mind.” Offer any other reasons you have.

Children may be more willing to do as adults ask when they are regularly offered opportunities to make their own decisions. Allow your child opportunities to be powerful by deciding what to do next. Provide plenty of time to play before asking your child to follow directions. Let your child direct the story line and what you do during play.

CONNECTING WITH SUPPORT

Work with your child’s teacher so you both respond to power struggles in the same way. This will help your child learn that there are times when cooperation and agreement are necessary. Seek additional assistance if your child shows a pattern of uncooperative behavior that escalates into angry outbursts, prevents participation in activities, or interferes with learning. Find a parent education program or seek family counseling to learn more about how to help your child learn to follow directions and cooperate more readily.

Information on Emerging Reading

WHAT IS IT?

The process of learning to read begins well before a child enters kindergarten or first grade and entails much more than learning the ABCs. Parents do a great deal to help their children develop a strong vocabulary, learn how to handle books, recognize simple words and letters, and discover how reading can open new worlds they haven't yet explored.

Observe and Respond

Help your child develop an interest in books by reading or telling stories every day. Make reading part of your bedtime routine as well as other times of the day. As you read, ask your child to finish a sentence for you or make a prediction about what will happen next. Ask your child to hold a stuffed toy animal that matches a character from the story you are reading. Each time the animal is mentioned, your child can hold it in the air.

Visit your local library regularly. Check out a variety of books, including predictable stories, wordless picture books, fiction, informational books, fairy tales, counting books, alphabet

books, and nursery rhymes. Reread favorite stories to help your child learn the sequence of events and the important features of the story. Encourage your child to retell parts of the story independently.

Talk about your child's favorite character and ask why that character is special. Ask open-ended questions that help your child relate the story to personal experiences. Ask, "Has anything like that ever happened to you?" If your child can't think of anything, provide a few hints. Say something like "Remember when Grandma was here and we made cookies?" Ask your child to explain parts of the story. Say, "What do you think it meant when they said they were uncertain what to do next?" Be careful not to ask so many questions that it feels more like a quiz than a conversation.

Help your child learn how to handle books by talking about how to turn the pages, the difference between the front and back, and how print is read from left to right. Point out the title as well as the names of the author and illustrator. Say, "Let's start at the front. It's the beginning of the story." Run your finger under the words to show that you read from left to right. Invite your child to turn the pages.

continued

Help your child learn to recognize print. Talk about the pictures on the page, and then say, “Now I’m going to read the words.” If your child holds a book so that the words are covered up, point out the words and tell your child you need to see the words to read. Find print throughout your environment: look at food containers in the grocery store and menus in the restaurant. Look for signs when you are in the car, and read what they say.

Children need to be aware of sound so they can isolate the sounds of speech and connect them to the letters they are learning. Help your child hear sounds of speech by telling nursery rhymes and playing word games by saying, “My son Fillie? Tillie? No, Willie.” Read books like *Lilly’s Purple Plastic Purse* by Kevin Henkes or *Sheep on a Ship* by Nancy E. Shaw. Call attention to the start of words by searching for things in your house that start with the sound *b*, like blocks, books, and beds. Or ask your child to say the first little bit of the words *table*, *turtle*, and *tank*.

CONNECTING WITH SUPPORT

Work with your child’s teacher to learn more about how children typically develop reading skills. Find out what you can do to support your child’s efforts. If rhyming words, playing word games, or paying attention to sounds of speech seem difficult, have your child’s hearing checked. If your child isn’t speaking clearly, lacks an interest in book reading or nursery rhymes and has difficulty in understanding simple directions warrant a screening for lags in development. Contact your local school district or consult with a speech and language pathologist for further information. Early intervention can help your child make significant progress in continuing to learn throughout the school years.

Information on Emerging Writing

WHAT IS IT?

Learning to write comes fairly naturally to many children: they explore writing materials, copy people they see writing, and then experiment with making lines and shapes of their own. When learning to write, children need strength in their hands and fingers; they need to hold writing tools; and they must learn to create vertical and horizontal lines, circles, and curves. Once they recognize that writing helps people communicate, they are motivated to write for a reason and are more likely to begin combining basic strokes into letters.

You may be anxious to have your child begin to write letters. Avoid the temptation to teach your preschool child to write through drill. Instead, look for ways to include writing in everyday activities.

Observe and Respond

Make sure you have plenty of writing and art materials available. Don't limit writing activities to a table or desk. Let your child put paper on the floor or a lap desk, or tape big pieces of paper to a fence. Vary the size and shape of the paper by cutting it into squares, circles, or triangles. Have your child write on cardboard, wax paper, aluminum foil, and sandpaper just for the fun of it.

Find ways to include writing in your child's favorite activity. Paint with water outside (it's especially fun to watch the water evaporate on a hot driveway or sidewalk); suggest that your child draw a bike or a favorite toy or draw letters in the sand with a stick or a small car. Make signs to label buildings and towers. Encourage your child to write when you are pretending to go to a restaurant. Give your child paper and pencil to write down an order or a prescription when you play doctor's office.

Make a special writing bag to use when you are waiting for an appointment. Include items like recycled printer paper, crayons, stencils, paper punches, markers, and alphabet charts. Add new items like coupons, stamps and washable ink, letter puzzles, and magnetic letters to keep it interesting.

continued

Help your child develop the fine-motor control needed to hold a pencil or marker correctly by practicing activities that bring together index finger and thumb. Let your child lace sewing cards, string beads, place pegs in a board, pinch clothespins, or tear strips of paper for a pet's cage. Model the appropriate grasp for your child. Describe the placement of your fingers when you pick up a writing tool.

Many children learn the letters in their own names and the names of their families first. Once children learn these letters, they can easily transfer the strokes to other letters. Make name cards of your child's name and those of friends. Make a favorite word book by pasting pictures on index cards, writing a word under each picture, and placing the cards in a plastic photo album. Let your child practice copying favorite words.

Let your child see you write for a variety of reasons such as writing a thank-you note or making a list of things to do the next day. Then give your child meaningful opportunities to write. He or she can make a greeting card for a sick friend, write a letter to a grandparent, or sign a birthday card along with the rest of the family. Ask your child to write a grocery list or cross off the items on the list once you find them at the grocery store.

CONNECTING WITH SUPPORT

Work with your child's teacher to understand your child's developmental level in writing skills. Discuss the ways you can help your child reach the next level. If you are concerned about your child's skill development, pay attention to fine-motor skills like squeezing your hand firmly, holding objects tightly, snapping a jacket, or turning knobs. If your child is struggling with these skills, schedule an appointment for skills screening by your school district or health care provider.

Information on Numbers

WHAT IS IT?

Children are learning about math and numbers from a very early age. They are learning about numbers when they ask for *more* and get another strawberry and when they hold up their fingers to indicate their ages. To bridge this informal understanding of numbers to the more formal understandings used in school, children need parents and teachers to provide many experiences with numbers.

Observe and Respond

Occasionally a child doesn't show an interest in numbers. If this is true of your child, use fun, nonthreatening counting activities like board games, measuring height, and singing counting songs to reinforce numeric concepts. When riding in the car, count the numbers of trucks or stop signs. When you are on a walk, count the number of stores, houses on your block, or cars on your street. Around your home, count the number of windows in a room, people in your family, or crackers on a plate. Don't pressure your child—more than likely, seeing you use numbers to cook or to consider the price of something will spark interest in how numbers are used.

Play store with your child. Collect empty cereal, oatmeal, and cracker boxes. Make play money together. Pretend to shop and then pay for the items. Ask your child how much you owe. Help your child count out the change. Cook with your child. Read aloud the numbers on measuring cups and tablespoons when you measure with them.

The ability to count from memory is an important step before learning to count objects. Young preschoolers can usually count up to four. An older preschooler can count to ten and then twenty (Copley, Jones, and Dighe 2007). The English words *eleven*, *twelve*, *thirteen*, *fourteen*, and *fifteen* are difficult for children to remember because they don't follow a recognizable pattern. Often a child will skip some of these numbers to get to twenty, since counting becomes easier after twenty because the numbers form a pattern he already knows (twenty-one, twenty-two, and so on).

Read books involving counting, such as *Five Little Monkeys Jumping on the Bed* by Eileen Christelow and *Five Green and Speckled Frogs* by Constanza Basaluzzo. Read *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* by Eric Carle and count the food items the caterpillar eats.

continued

Counting out objects one by one is called one-to-one correspondence. As children are first learning to count objects one by one, they make a number of mistakes: they keep counting even though they have reached the correct number, mix up the order of numbers, or count an object twice.

Matching an object to an object can help your child learn one-by-one counting. Put out one block and ask your child to put out one block. Or ask your child to pull two objects out of a bag. Use objects your child likes, such as small cars or animals. When your child sets the table, see that one plate is put at each place. Have your child place one liner in each well in a muffin tin.

A child who has learned to count objects one by one is ready to learn to attach a number name to a symbol called a *numeral*. Point out numerals on the calendar, telephones, calculators, planning books, and rulers. When you are driving in the car, point out numerals on signs.

As children increase their math knowledge, they develop the ability to recognize sets of two, three, and four without counting them. Play a game with your child by placing three blocks on a table. Cover them with a towel and ask your child to remove it and tell you how many objects there are. A child who can't recognize the number quickly can count the items. Vary the numbers of objects up to five. Keep the game short and fun.

Most young preschoolers begin to develop a sense of the numbers one through four, while older preschoolers can understand both counting and one-to-one correspondence with the numbers one through ten. You may be surprised by how much math your child is already learning during everyday interactions.

CONNECTING WITH SUPPORT

If your child isn't showing interest or isn't progressing as expected, talk with your child's teacher. Ask her what she is observing and doing to help your child. Develop the Plan of Action with your child's teacher so you are working as a team. If your child's difficulty with math concepts seems linked to difficulties in other cognitive areas, seek a developmental screening through your school district.

Information on Patterns

WHAT IS IT?

Patterns are all around us. They can be found in checkers on a tablecloth, yellow dashes down the center of the highway, and the stripes of mowed grass on a baseball field. Patterns can be simple or complex. Once children start to see patterns, they enjoy finding new ones. First they begin to recognize patterns, and then they learn to copy them. Eventually they create their own patterns. Not only can you help your child recognize patterns—you can also help him or her label and verbally describe them. Learning about patterns is an important component of early math. Seeing and making patterns helps children understand how things work together and helps them predict what comes next.

Observe and Respond

Help your child recognize that the daily schedule, the passage of day and night, and the “Hokey Pokey” contain patterns. Use the word *pattern* frequently so your child becomes familiar with it. Keep the patterns simple—at first, use only two or three items.

Read the book *I See Patterns* by Susan Ring, which illustrates patterns that can be easily identified in colorful pictures of animals, insects, fences and posts, and rows in a field of corn. Go on a pattern hunt around your house. Point out patterned dishes, wallpaper, and quilts. Keep a list of the patterns you observe. Ask your child to draw some of these patterns.

Point out patterns on your child’s clothing. For example, if your child has a blue-and-white-striped shirt, point to the stripes and say, “Look! Here is a pattern: *blue stripe, white stripe, blue stripe, white stripe, blue stripe.*” Then ask your child to repeat your words or point to each stripe as you describe the pattern.

Children who can identify patterns can begin to copy them. Most likely your child will start with simple patterns involving just a couple of colored items or shapes and then move to more complex ones. Try making patterns

continued

from buttons, leaves, shapes, or plastic animals. Sing songs with word patterns that repeat, as in “Old MacDonald”: “Ee-I-Ee-I-O.”

Set colored cube blocks in a pattern or use markers on paper to create various patterns. Ask your child to make one just like it. Limit the pattern to only five to seven blocks so your child can use one-to-one correspondence to copy it. *Yellow, green, red, yellow, green, red* is a simple three-part pattern. When your child successfully identifies a pattern, point it out. For example, say, “Look! You made a pattern. You have a yellow block, green block, and red block, and then you have a yellow block, green block, and red block.”

After your child can identify and copy patterns, take an outdoor pattern walk to look for patterns. Your child may notice patterns in apartment windows, rectangles in sidewalks, or patterns in nature, such as the brown and orange stripes on a caterpillar. Take pictures of the patterns. Print the pictures and ask your child to draw the pattern. If this proves difficult, sit down with your child and point out the pattern: “See, here are three windows; underneath them are three more windows.”

Start a string of beads with a simple pattern and ask your child to repeat the pattern. Point out again how the pattern develops if your child doesn’t see the pattern. Don’t indicate mistakes; instead, show your child the right order. Then say, “I wonder if this blue bead matches.” Your child is likely to see the broken pattern and self-correct.

Invite your child to create new patterns using rubber ink stamps. Or use long narrow paper and bingo daubers or stickers. Create patterns using small plastic links or plastic disks like checkers.

CONNECTING WITH SUPPORT

If you have been working on patterns for some time and your child is still having difficulty identifying or copying them, particularly if he or she is four years old or older, look carefully at other measures of cognitive development. If you notice other cognitive difficulties, have your child’s skills screened through your school district.

Information on Observing

WHAT IS IT?

Children engage in science when they explore their world. They work on the concepts of gravity, symmetry, and balance when they build block structures. They learn about physical changes while they mix sand or soil with water. They deepen their understanding by talking with people about what they see, hear, touch, or experience.

Observe and Respond

Many everyday experiences offer you and your child opportunities to explore science together. Children are active learners. They do more than look at an object; they engage all of their senses to learn about it. To explore an object's physical properties, your child will look at it, give it a sniff, listen to see if it makes a sound, touch it, and if it's something edible—taste it! Your child will manipulate an object to see what it does, how it acts, or how it reacts. Help your child learn to use the sense of taste by offering different foods to eat. Introduce words that describe various tastes, such as *bitter*, *sweet*, *salty*, *spicy*, and *sour*.

Provide opportunities for your child to use the sense of sight by collecting a number of similar objects, such as pinecones, rocks, or leaves. Give your child a magnifying lens, paper, and pencil to record observations. Rope off a section of grass with string and craft stick stakes, and ask your child to draw what he or she sees. Go on a fall walk together. Gather different types of leaves. Trace around their outside edges or sort them.

Give your child opportunities to tune in to sounds. Collect different-sized metal cans. (Be sure there aren't any sharp edges.) Let your child experiment with the sounds they make by tapping on them with different items, such as a pencil eraser, a metal spoon, and a wooden spoon. Go on a walk with your child and listen to the sounds. Make a list of all the things you hear.

Grow herbs and let your child rub the leaves and then sniff the aroma. When you cook together, talk about the different smells: vanilla, when it is added to cookie dough; orange, when you pour juice; lemon, when you make lemonade.

Fill a tub with water. Let your child splash, pour from various containers, or make bubbles by blowing through a straw. Go on

continued

a touch scavenger hunt; find something that is rough, smooth, hard, or soft. Help your child describe things that are jagged, smooth, rough, round, slimy, and bumpy. Children first learn to identify and describe objects by a single characteristic. They say something is red before they say it is red, round, and a ball. Provide your child with collections of objects that can be matched and sorted. If your child doesn't spontaneously describe physical characteristics of the items, ask, "What do you notice?" If you do not get a response, ask, "What color is it?" or "How does it feel?"

Children are often amazed by changes they see. Your child can experience changes by painting with water outside on a hot day—the water disappears. Bring snow in the house—it melts! Plant seeds—they grow! Talk with your child about how playdough changes shape when it is squeezed, rolled, or pounded. Take note of the signs that seasons are changing—for example, how dark it becomes on your way home from child care, if it is colder outside, or if grass is turning green. Talk about appropriate clothing for the season.

Cooking teaches children how substances change. Cook together and talk about how batter becomes runny when you add more milk and turns solid when you bake it. Let your child make juice by squeezing an orange.

CONNECTING WITH SUPPORT

If your child is not yet demonstrating an interest in science activities, look for science taking place around you. Share your enthusiasm for things you discover. Ask your child's teacher what else you can do to help your child learn to gather information through the senses. If your child regularly wanders around without becoming occupied in an activity other than television or electronics, is overly fascinated by something and cannot be drawn away, tastes or puts nonedible items in his or her mouth after the age of three, or is unable to describe one or more characteristic of an item by the age of four, consider having your child's skills screened by your local school district.

Information on Investigating

WHAT IS IT?

Making sense of the world starts with children's natural curiosity. Their drive to learn helps them focus on a question, make predictions about what they might find out, and set up an investigation. Children use all of their senses and tools they have available to collect and record data. Once they have gathered data, they analyze the evidence and make comparisons. They reflect on new information that challenges their current understandings and develop additional ideas and theories. When adults around them encourage investigation, they revise their thinking until they arrive at plausible explanations.

The process of scientific inquiry involves a number of steps:

1. Ask a question
2. Observe and gather data
3. Make a prediction
4. Decide how to test your prediction
5. Conduct your investigation
6. Reflect on and analyze your data
7. Develop additional ideas and theories

Many everyday activities help children learn these important skills.

Observe and Respond

Children ask questions and search for answers when they feel free to risk making mistakes. You can help your child feel free to ask and answer questions by accepting even the wildest guesses. Provide a model for asking questions and trying different approaches. For example, if you are trying to place something on the top shelf but can't reach that far, say, "I wonder how I can get this up on the top shelf. Maybe I can reach it if I stand on my tiptoes, maybe I can ask Dad to put it up there, or maybe I can use the stool."

Does your child seem to have a question he or she is trying to answer? Does your child restack a tower of blocks that have fallen using a new approach? Model asking questions for your child by guessing what such questions might be. Say, "Which blocks do you need to put on the bottom so your tower won't fall?" Encourage your child to discover answers independently by asking, "What have you tried? What else could you do?"

Expand your child's thinking by asking open-ended questions. Open-ended questions include "What do you know about . . . ?" "What would happen if . . . ?" and "What else could you try?" Be sure to give your

continued

child time to think before expecting a response or before asking another question. Your child will feel successful if you accept his or her answers.

Provide tools your child can use to investigate. Offer measuring cups, a stopwatch, tape measures, funnels, sieves, flashlights, and a magnifying lens. Give your child a camera to take a photograph of the item; ask about your child's discoveries: "What did you do? What happened when _____? What will you try next time?"

Preschool children love to collect things. Collections may include rocks, leaves, pinecones, or shells. Provide containers like buckets, plastic food containers, egg cartons, or ice cube trays for sorting collections. If your child is not sorting items spontaneously, ask, "Do any of these go together?" or "Are there others like this one?" Help your child draw comparisons by asking, "What's different? What do you notice?"

Children make guesses as they attempt to understand what they see and experience. Their theories go through a number of revisions as they gain experience. Accept incomplete understandings and magical thinking (for example, the streetlight changes to green when I count to three). Your child's growing experiences will refine these theories and make them more plausible.

CONNECTING WITH SUPPORT

Ask your child's teacher what scientific explorations the children are doing in the early childhood setting. Find out what you can do at home. Look for opportunities to explore science in your community through classes for preschoolers and visits to a science museum and by getting outdoors. If after a few months of encouraging scientific investigations, your child remains fearful of science materials, does not engage in scientific exploration, or is overly fascinated by things that you cannot draw his or her attention away from, have your child's skills screened by your local school district.

Information on Large-Motor Skills

WHAT IS IT?

Young children are physically active in most things they do. Through their activity, they gain strength and coordination of the large muscles in their body. They also learn many of the skills that will be perfected for later use in games, work, recreation, and sports. Physical activity helps children concentrate and enhances their learning. It helps them release pent-up energy and gain a sense of pride in being able to participate in physical activities. Boys and girls need opportunities to move and to develop the skills and habits needed for a healthy lifestyle.

By the time children are three years old, they should be able to walk and run with an even gait. They should alternate feet when climbing stairs and should show increasing coordination while performing more complex activities like pumping their arms and legs on a swing. Once they develop the basic skills of walking and running, they begin to develop

additional skills like jumping, galloping, hopping, skipping, and leaping. They learn to coordinate their movements and their perception so they can go from one point to another without bumping into things.

Observe and Respond

You can do a lot to help your child learn these skills. Encourage different ways of moving, such as on tiptoes, squatting like a duck, or slithering like a snake. Play games that require your child to stop and freeze. Say, “Wiggle, wiggle, wiggle, freeze. Jump, jump, jump, freeze.” While your child learns new skills, offer verbal cues. To teach your child to skip, say, “Step, hop. Step, hop.”

Gather materials to use like beanbags, balls, plastic bats, hula hoops, movement CDs, and baskets for targets. Find ways to visit neighborhood parks regularly.

If your child is hesitant to use large-motor equipment, be encouraging. Your child might be afraid to catch a ball and get hit by it. Start with soft balls and stand close to each other until your child gains confidence. Find ways to ensure your child’s success. For example, use a large plastic bat to make it easier to hit the ball. Throw and catch scarves instead of

continued

a ball, because scarves float slowly, giving your child more time to grab them. Turn off the television and the computer and get moving. Here are a number of things you can do at home:

- ◆ Throw socks into boxes, baskets, or hoops; place the targets on the floor, chair, or shelf to change the angle of the toss
- ◆ Keep beach balls in the air by bouncing them off your head, elbow, knee, or hands
- ◆ Help clean floors by putting on old socks or standing on scraps of fabric and pretending to skate
- ◆ Chase bubbles
- ◆ Throw laundry, one piece at a time, into the washing machine
- ◆ Use plastic liter bottles and a soft ball to bowl
- ◆ Use an old pillowcase as a jumping bag, and set up chairs to hop around

Entice your child to become more active by being active yourself and inviting your child to join you. Be aware that young children aren't ready for long periods of strenuous activity. They need ten- to fifteen-minute bursts of activity rather than the thirty-minute vigorous workout that adults do. When you play together, be sure to emphasize cooperation rather than competition. Encourage your child to try activities and make improvements. Keep a log of the movement activities you do together.

CONNECTING WITH SUPPORT

Work with your child's teacher to learn more about how your child develops large-motor strength and coordination. Work together to think of simple ways to engage your child in physical activities. Have your child's skills screened by your local school district or an occupational therapist if your child exhibits more than one of the following.

- ◆ Muscles seem loose or floppy
- ◆ Complains about going for long walks or standing in long lines
- ◆ Has poor balance
- ◆ Lacks coordination

Early intervention that includes guided exercise can help your child live a healthy lifestyle and improve your child's skills.

Information on Fine-Motor Skills

WHAT IS IT?

As children grow and develop, they refine the use of the small muscles in their fingers and thumbs to make precise motions. Fine-motor activities require children to coordinate what they see in order to tell their hands what to do. Most children show great gains in fine-motor control as they play with small objects and use writing and art tools. These skills provide the base for later school activities.

Observe and Respond

You can do a great deal to help your child develop skills in this area. Building or playing with materials that require your child to grasp, hold, and place small objects helps to develop fine-motor skills. Examples include snapping together toys, using small building materials, lacing beads, and doing puzzles. If your child avoids these kinds of activity, don't force participation. Instead, find ways to work fine-motor activities into your child's favorite pastimes. For example, provide clothes for dressing and undressing dolls, or containers and shovels for digging in the sand. Encourage

your child to work in different positions: puzzles can be put together while lying on the floor, paper can be taped to a wall for drawing on, and small figurines can be played with while sitting cross-legged on the floor.

Encourage your child to play with playdough or clay to gain strength and dexterity by pounding, flattening, rolling, or squeezing. Model how to roll ropes, pinch a nest for pretend bird's eggs, or push cookie cutters into dough. Provide toothpicks or straws so your child can connect the parts.

If your child struggles with small items, encourage the use of big items first. This can help build success and the confidence needed to try something more challenging. For example, make domino tracks out of blocks before using actual dominoes. Or try pegboards and pegs with large knobs before trying the pegs for a Lite-Brite or other small peg toy. Take breaks before your child becomes frustrated.

By four and one-half years of age, most children who have used writing tools can hold a pencil or marker with a mature grasp. If your child finds holding writing tools challenging, offer large crayons and markers, which may be easier to grasp. Model the appropriate grasp. Describe the placement of your fingers as you pick up a writing tool.

continued

Your child may prefer to use markers because the color flows without much effort. If your child is reluctant to draw or write, try highly motivating activities like playing with bathtub crayons, sidewalk chalk, or a Magna Doodle. With practice, your child will learn to apply the right amount of pressure, make fluid strokes, and draw and print letters.

Give your child practice in activities that bring the thumb and forefinger together. Provide lacing cards, clothespins to pinch together, and place on the edge of pizza rounds or ice cream buckets, string necklaces made of cereal loops for a snack, play card games such as Go Fish or Concentration, and play board games with small pieces like Hi! Ho! Cherry-O. Encourage your child to use the keyboard as well as the mouse at the computer.

It usually becomes clear if a child is more proficient with the right or left hand by age four. Some children, however, may continue to use either hand up to age seven. If your child is unsure which hand to use, offer tools midway between your child's left and right hand. Let your child take it with either hand. Eventually your child will pick up tools with the hand that becomes stronger and more skilled.

Encourage your child to use fine-motor skills in everyday activities: turning the pages while you read a book; squeezing the toothpaste onto the toothbrush; using a spoon to eat. Give your child plenty of time to learn to button, snap, and zip while getting dressed. If your child is struggling, you can start the zipper and let your child zip it the rest of the way.

CONNECTING WITH SUPPORT

Work with your child's teacher to brainstorm activities and toys you can use at home to support your child's fine-motor skills. If your preschool age child lacks strength in his or her hand muscles, moves tools from one hand to the other rather than crossing the midline of the body, uses fingers to rake objects, or applies too much or too little pressure when using writing tools, ask your school district or an occupational or physical therapist to screen your child's skills.