

## Supporting your Preschooler through Play

Many parents feel pressured to focus on academic skills before their children begin kindergarten. However, pushing these academic concepts—such as reading, writing, and math—on children before they are developmentally ready can be counterproductive.

Your child will begin to build all of the pre-academic skills necessary for future school success through **play**, not through rote memorization or adult-led practicing. Children are concrete learners, who learn most effectively through direct, hands-on play experiences. They construct their own learning by following their natural curiosity and exploring the world around them. These early play experiences contribute to children's sense of confidence, competence, curiosity, independence, and a lifelong love of learning.

Play provides the foundation for all future learning, as young children are learning *how* to learn, rather than *what* to learn. Child-led play supports the development of creativity, self-regulation, and persistence—all skills that contribute to **divergent thinking**. Through enjoyable play explorations, children actively practice constructing knowledge: asking questions, making hypotheses, conducting cause-and-effect experimentation, and building on prior knowledge.



Traditional, academic-focused approaches to early learning encourage the development of **convergent thinking**, through rote memorization, verbal repetition, and closed-ended questions. While this type of learning can benefit older learners, convergent learning should not be the focus for young children. Pushing these academic skills on children too early can result in behavior challenges and poor problem-solving skills across the lifespan.

### **Convergent Learning:**

learning facts, following instructions, and solving problems with one right answer.

*A preschooler and an adult sit at a table together. The adult shows the child a number chart and points to the number three. The adult identifies the number three, and asks the child to repeat. After some practice, the adult asks the child to identify the number 3. Next, they practice tracing the number 3 with their finger. Later, the adult asks the child for three apples, and the child brings the whole bowl.*

**Divergent Learning:** generating unique solutions and seeing various possibilities in response to questions and problems.

*A preschooler and an adult are in a play kitchen when the child decides to make dinner for the adult. The child walks to the kitchen, opens the fridge, and pulls out a bowl of play food. The child asks "How many would you like?" and the adult asks for three. The child dumps the whole bowl on the plate. "Wait, I only need three," says the adult. The child asks "How many is three?" and the adult suggests placing them on the plate one at a time until they get to three. The child counts as they go, "One, two, three. There's three apples for you," and returns the bowl to the fridge.*

These anecdotes demonstrate how child-led play engages divergent thinking skills, as children are motivated to solve the problems that naturally arise within their play. A child who is asked to repeat and memorize, or engage in convergent thinking, has no concrete understanding of what's being learned. Learning through play provides the hands-on context for the knowledge and skills they are gaining.



Rather than deciding what your child "should" learn, you can expose your child to a wide variety of play materials, and allow them to explore. By taking your child's lead in this way, you are instilling a lifelong excitement for learning. Below are some ways you can incorporate play-based learning at home!

- Read to your children frequently, and provide books for them to peruse independently
- Act out stories together with props and costumes
- Provide geometric blocks, simple puzzles, and other manipulative toys for them to explore
- Participate in their dramatic play scenarios, asking questions and making suggestions
- Provide authentic materials to support children's play, such as measuring cups, magazines, notebooks, grocery lists, and other things that they might encounter in their daily lives