

TIPS FOR PARENTS & CAREGIVERS OF PRESCHOOL CHILDREN

How to Prioritize PDF: Playtime, Downtime, and Family Time

Children of all ages need playtime, downtime, and family time (PDF) every day for healthy development. Research suggests that play — especially when it is freely chosen, unstructured, and personally-directed — is linked to increased creativity, problem-solving skills, emotional regulation, language abilities, social skills, and empathy. Embrace your child's unique interests and strengths to determine how to create a balanced schedule that provides them ample time for free play, rest, and authentic adult and peer connections.



PLAYTIME

Play is so much more than simply having fun. Because preschoolers learn through play, offering opportunities to cultivate autonomy during playtime will come naturally if children are given the time and space to try new skills and be self-directed. Structured play, such as extracurriculars, should be chosen carefully.

- **Protect unstructured play**
- **Arrange regular (tech-free) playtime with other children**
- **Allow children to solve challenges without adult interference**



DOWNTIME

Good, consistent sleep is correlated with better physical and mental health, emotional regulation, and improved learning. Preschool-aged children need 10–13 hours of sleep each day. Naps count! Light from screens can interfere with sleep; be mindful of where devices are kept at bedtime.

- **Prioritize consistent bedtime routines**
- **Help children wind down with calm activities before bed**



FAMILY TIME

Family time creates a sense of connection and belonging. Research shows that when kids are part of a family unit that spends time together, they are more likely to feel supported, safe, and loved unconditionally, as well as have increased self-esteem and better academic outcomes. Strive to gather the family for 20–25 minutes at least 5 times per week (family meals, outings, and game/movie nights all count).

- **Show affection (even when children show challenging behaviors)**
- **Commit to simple family traditions & rituals**
- **Involve kids in organizing, & doing family service projects / activities**

SCREENTIME TIPS



- Limit screen time & preview/co-view age-appropriate content
- Avoid media 30–60 min. before bedtime & put screens away at night
- Model healthy media use. Unplug during meals, before bedtime, and during family activities.



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Addition Strategies for Supporting Positive Childhood Development

BE A “WARM DEMANDER”

The “warm demander” approach to caregiving is all about creating a nurturing environment filled with warmth, love, and support, while also maintaining clear and consistent boundaries. By offering praise for positive behaviors, and fostering open dialogue — such as setting aside time each evening to discuss the day’s highs and lows, and listening without judgment — caregivers encourage a safe space for growth and self-expression.

This approach values flexibility and responsiveness, allowing children to ask questions and explore while understanding the importance of natural consequences—such as losing screen time the next day if screen-time agreements are ignored or missing morning playtime at school if the child takes more time to leave the house. With clear expectations and encouragement for autonomy, this approach guides children to feel loved, capable, and empowered to make thoughtful choices.



SUPPORTIVE & NURTURING ENVIRONMENT



CLEAR & CONSISTENT BOUNDARIES & EXPECTATIONS



PRAISE FOR POSITIVE BEHAVIORS + NATURAL CONSEQUENCES



OPEN DIALOGUE + ENCOURAGEMENT OF AUTONOMY

CULTIVATE AUTONOMY



For preschoolers, developing autonomy means stepping into their own abilities, growing independence, and building a confident sense of self. When children are encouraged to do things for themselves, they experience less anxiety, more creativity, and greater intrinsic motivation, persistence, and self-regulation. Fostering autonomy can be as simple as offering choices and assigning age-appropriate tasks, like setting the table or helping with groceries.

Create opportunities for children to take risks in a supportive environment while framing mistakes as opportunities for growth. By explaining the “why” behind requests and patiently scaffolding new skills —like pouring milk from a cup into their cereal instead of pouring milk from a carton – we help children practice, grow, and eventually take pride in completing tasks on their own. In nurturing their autonomy, we are giving them the tools to flourish.