

# Preschool *Explorers*

Parenting Wisdom  
for Ages 3-5



Dr. Scott Turansky  
and Joanne Miller, RN, BSN  
with Diane Snyder



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By Dr. Scott Turansky and Joanne Miller, RN, BSN  
with Diane Snyder

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Dr. Scott Turansky and Joanne Miller, RN, BSN with Diane Snyder

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## About the Authors



### **Dr. Scott Turansky and Joanne Miller, RN, BSN**

Dr. Scott Turansky and Joanne Miller, RN, BSN are the co-founders of the National Center for

Biblical Parenting. Their heart-based approach to parenting is revolutionizing families. Turansky and Miller are also the co-founders of Biblical Parenting University, providing parents with easy access to parent training through online courses.

Scott Turansky is a full time pastor of Calvary Chapel, a multi-campus church in New Jersey. He and his wife Carrie have five adult children and three grandchildren.

Joanne Miller is a pediatric nurse, working at the Bristol-Myers Squibb Children's Hospital in New Brunswick, New Jersey. She and her husband, Ed, have two grown sons. Joanne also works full-time leading the National Center for Biblical Parenting.



### **Diane Snyder**

Diane Snyder has worked in preschool ministry for over 25 years. She and her husband Don have two grown children. Through her wisdom and expertise, Diane has equipped thousands of children, parents, and teachers.



[biblicalparenting.org](http://biblicalparenting.org)  
[biblicalparentinguniversity.com](http://biblicalparentinguniversity.com)  
[parent@biblicalparenting.org](mailto:parent@biblicalparenting.org)

A large, light gray decorative swirl graphic that frames the title. It consists of several overlapping, flowing lines that create a sense of movement and elegance.

## Introduction

The preschool years are an exciting time of exploration and discovery. In fact, many parents enjoy these years because of the things they learn as well. As teacher and coach you have the opportunity to guide your child to try new things, understand different ideas, and figure out how life works. Learning opportunities happen every time you turn around. Sometimes the learning takes place through correction, and other times it's with the encouragement to try something different or as you explain what's going on. In short, during the preschool years you'll likely view yourself as a tour guide on the great adventure of life.

Not only will your child learn from you, but you will learn as well. It was Jesus who said in Matthew 18:3, "I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." As you watch your preschooler grow and develop you'll see trust in action, true honesty, and the humility necessary to get help or admit weakness. God knows that all people, young or old, need to advance to the next level in their personal development and kids are great models to reveal the path. Children have a way of keeping parents on their toes, especially when it comes to faith and trusting in God.

In some ways preschoolers are like sponges, ready to

soak up everything within their sights and reach. They're excited about learning and curiosity drives them forward. You'll likely spend quite a bit of time trying to form answers to their questions in a way that they can comprehend. You'll want to allow extra time in your schedule so you can stop to touch the caterpillar on the sidewalk, or watch the butterfly land on a flower and drink the nectar, or observe a dump truck spilling its load, or watch the fish in an aquarium swim and eat.

It's during the preschool years that children learn basic heart qualities to help strengthen them for life. They learn responsiveness to authority, the ability to cooperate with you and others, and self-control to manage their impulses and emotions. Preschoolers also begin learning about responsibility and independence. Sometimes children struggle to learn these qualities because of their strong desires or the intense emotions in their hearts. You'll want to keep the heart qualities in mind as you make choices and decisions for your preschooler. Learning to live on a schedule and respond to authority doesn't come easily for most. But these skills will develop the character in your child's heart to help him be successful in life and in relationships. Teaching self-control and responsiveness to authority can be a challenge, but your persistence will be worth it in the end. Parenting is hard work and requires wisdom that only God can provide.

Proverbs 22:6 says, "Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it." The word "train" literally means "to dedicate" and implies a commitment to the task. The work of training a preschooler is strategic so you'll want to have a plan. Preschoolers need to learn how to think, how to act, and understand how they fit



into this world. Your discussions, guidelines, and teaching are the primary vehicles God uses to accomplish this task.

One of the ways preschoolers learn is by watching what others do. They'll often imitate what they see, especially in their parents, providing you with a sense of personal accountability regarding your own habits and mannerisms. You'll sometimes see yourself through the words and actions of your preschooler, and just hope that what they reveal is what you'd like them to see. When you fall short, use it as a teaching opportunity. Don't hesitate to apologize to your child, and then re-teach a better way to handle a situation.

One of the greatest gifts you can give to your preschooler is to keep learning fun and exciting so that your child will enjoy being a lifelong learner. Use these years to get to know your child, have fun teaching, and give your child an excitement for learning. You'll want to look for ways to enjoy these years with your preschooler. Cherish the time and make it special, to be remembered by both you and your child. Make memories and hold on to keepsakes to reflect on later.

Much of the initial understanding of God comes through the parent/child relationship as children understand love, forgiveness, firmness, and what relationship is all about. The way you handle offenses, teach lessons, and take time to interact, all prepare the way for your child to understand how God wants to relate. You'll likely have many opportunities to introduce who God is and how he interacts as you build a relationship with your child.

We have lots of ideas and strategies to help your preschooler grow and develop. We'll show you how to build good habits, start new routines, and encourage healthy pat-

terns with your child. But as you look at all the details and practical advice in this book be sure to take time to formulate your overall philosophy of parenting. You'll have many choices to make about how to handle a particular situation, or what approach to take this time. The choices you make in your parenting are significant. There are a lot of good ways to parent, but not all of them are best for your child. This book will give you tools that you'll use over time to help your child grow and develop most effectively. We'll help you think biblically and practically as you coach and train your child during the preschool years.



## Use Life as a Classroom

Preschoolers are eager to obtain facts to fill their data banks. New information facilitates learning, exploring, decision-making, and language development. In fact, providing a variety of learning experiences that appeal to multiple senses actually increases a child's intelligence. Look for ways to explain life to your child and encourage your child to ask questions. You're a great teacher and you'll enjoy seeing the world through your child's eyes as new information takes hold.

Preschoolers have so much to discover and learn, and your observations may be just what it takes to get the wheels turning inside their heads. Solomon knew the value of learning from life. In Proverbs 6:6-8 he says, "Go to the ant, you sluggard; consider its ways and be wise! It has no commander, no overseer or ruler, yet it stores its provisions in summer and gathers its food at harvest." Even the bugs and insects can teach valuable lessons to the inquisitive mind.

Stating simple facts to preschoolers encourages their curiosity. They often want to know why and how. When you answer their questions, they learn that asking ques-

tions is good. If you stifle their questions, you hamper this curiosity and teach them that questions are an interruption. Questions are a key to learning and kids who find encouragement with answers develop confidence in the learning process. Those who don't, often learn to stay quiet, wondering about things that pique their curiosity but not wanting to ask, for fear of disturbing others. The preschooler who is allowed to take time and explore is usually the one who shows curiosity and is more inquisitive about things in general. This develops a love for learning that grows inside. By stating facts about what you see, hear, taste, touch, or smell, you teach your child about the five senses that God has blessed us with to enjoy the world.

Sometimes a preschooler will ask "Why?" over and over again. This question is sometimes just a request for you to talk more because your child knows that the word "why" keeps the dialogue moving. You may not need to answer the actual question but continue to talk about a related issue or concept. You can always turn the conversation around by asking your own question to encourage your child to talk as well.

When you speak to your preschooler, remember that everything you say is received in a literal manner. We often make jokes or insinuations with each other as adults, and preschoolers can become confused by what they hear. Watch a child's face when someone says something like, "It was so hot, I thought I was going to melt," and you'll often see the look that speaks volumes about what the child thinks was meant by what was said. You might want to translate adult conversation for a preschooler to encourage the right interpretation.

It's important to be truthful with your child, even when

it might be difficult. If, in order to encourage your son on the way to a doctor's appointment, you say, "It's not going to hurt," you may find that the doctor decides to give him a shot. By telling him that it won't hurt and then it does, you've violated trust.

When explaining life to your child, don't give more information than your child can comprehend at a given time. For example, telling a child that Grandma has cancer and giving all of the details about what will happen, her treatment, and how she will feel, is likely too much. Explain the information that your child can comprehend in small portions and leave out the confusing details. Giving preschoolers small bits of information at a time may help them to digest what's being said. Remember too, that children in this stage take your words literally and often don't understand multiple meaning for the same word, so it might be better to say, "Grandma's hair is falling out" as opposed to "Grandma lost her hair."

On the other hand, it's helpful to give your child a lot of information about a subject that he's interested in. Bobby wanted to learn about sharks. Mom didn't know much about them, but as she did research, she continued to give more and more information to her son. He was able to understand a tremendous amount and continued to hunger for more. It's amazing the amount of details a preschooler can memorize. It's important to go with the needs, desires, interests, and abilities of your child in order to teach, not only about the world and how it works, but also to encourage the learning process. Answering questions is a great way to build your child's data bank.

Remembering that preschoolers are literal also helps us understand why they say what they mean. They're of-

ten brutally honest, even though it might not be socially appropriate at times. Telling someone that their breath stinks or their teeth are yellow, or asking why someone is so fat, is not intended to be hurtful, but is a demonstration of a desire to be honest. Parents are often embarrassed by a preschooler who is too honest, but remember that your child is learning about life. Using these awkward social encounters to teach your child the appropriate response is a great teaching tool.

Kids need facts and like to anticipate what's to come. They like to know how things develop and what to expect in their own lives. Some preschoolers are easygoing and go with the flow of life, but most benefit from an understanding of what's on the schedule for today. Preparing preschoolers for what's to come is helpful. In a preschooler's mind, knowing the schedule and what's coming up represents security. The preschooler is often more willing to cooperate when expectations are clear. When they know what's to come they're less likely to resist.

Of course, some children have pretty strong opinions of their own and warning them of the next event seems to have little benefit, but that's because they need some more training in other areas of their development. Keep in mind that self-control and responsiveness to authority come into play when it's time to stop one activity and begin another. So, your day is filled with character-building opportunities. To help in the transition process, it's good to give information about the upcoming schedule. You may want to try a picture chart if you have a particularly busy day. Draw pictures of what will happen in what order and allow your child to cross each one off as it is completed. This helps the preschooler feel more a part of the activities of the day.

Older preschoolers are usually ready to learn the basics of telling time, working with money, and information about the weather. As you introduce these concepts, your child will learn more about how the world works, laying the foundation for deeper understanding in the coming years.

Keep in mind that life is a classroom and that you are the teacher. Preschoolers learn a lot about life. Daily experiences provide new information for the present as well as to build on for the future.



## Four Things to Avoid

**Y**ou can get your kids to do what you want using a number of different tools and strategies. Here are four that you'll want to avoid because of the dangers associated with them.

Reverse psychology coaxes a child to do the opposite of what you're actually saying. You tell a child to do what you don't want him to do, in order to motivate him to do what you want instead. For example, Dad, wanting his son to eat the green beans, says playfully, "I'll be right back. Don't eat those green beans while I'm gone." When he returns, and his son has taken a bite, he reacts with shock and playfully says, "You ate those green beans. Don't eat any more. I'll be right back." Upon returning he sees that his son has taken another bite.

Reverse psychology works because it appeals to a child's desire for play and sometimes appeals to the desire to do the opposite of what the parent has asked. Although it may seem cute and harmless, it's a dangerous tool because it encourages children to oppose your words. Encouraging kids to disobey, even in play, builds unhelpful patterns and can have negative results over time.



Another tool that may work, but that you'll want to avoid, is bribes. "If you're quiet in the museum I'll give you some gum," or "If you clean up your toys I'll give you a quarter," are simple attempts to motivate kids—and they work. The problem is that bribes appeal to a child's selfishness and actually encourage children to think about "What's in it for me?" Getting kids to change behavior to gain a reward often misses the heart. Remember that your goal is to develop an internal responsiveness to authority. We want children to do what's right because it's right, not just to gain a reward.

Instead, teach children about self-control to be quiet in the museum or train children to be responsible to clean up after they play, and you'll be advancing the character they'll need in other areas as well.

A third technique you'll want to avoid is motivating your child with threats. This strategy appeals to a child's fears by stating exaggerated consequences. "If you don't come now, I'm going to leave you here," or "If you don't clean up those toys, I'm going to throw them all away." Replace bribes and threats with firmness. Many children lack the internal character to do what's right. Working hard to teach children what's appropriate can be challenging at times but parenting shortcuts rarely build positive character.

In a similar way, yelling is counterproductive. Yes, it too works in the short run. If you're trying to get your kids in the car, raising your volume level will do the job. Or if they're getting wild, you can yell at them to settle down. The problem is that yelling takes a toll on the relationship, building distance between parent and child. Children who live with yelling hear messages in the tone of voice that

says they are inadequate, unloved, and incompetent.

Some parents use yelling to try to teach respect. Their underlying idea is that children will turn their fear of the intensity into some kind of respect for authority. Respect is a good thing to teach children but yelling and anger aren't good vehicles to bring it about. In fact, the approach won't work for long. Kids actually develop a disrespect for a yelling parent. It may seem to work in the short run, but yelling damages relationships over time.

Again, firmness is the key. Teach children how to respond to your words without having to raise your voice. You do this by following through on your instructions. Most parents need to develop a way to communicate firmness without some form of manipulation attached to it. Often that involves a clear and authoritative voice, moving close to the child, or actually physically redirecting the child to indicate that resistance isn't an option. Although the child may react emotionally, that doesn't mean that you have to be drawn into the intensity. You're simply showing your child what you expect and what self-control and responsiveness look like in practical terms. Children learn that you mean business when you act upon your words, and yelling doesn't have to be part of the equation.

Reverse psychology, bribes, threats, and yelling are all shortcuts. When parents don't have good strategies they sometimes resort to less-than-helpful tools and end up paying a significant price later on. Because you're looking at life as a classroom, you're the teacher or coach, and responsiveness to authority and self-control are the curriculum, you'll want to help your children practice doing what's right. Parenting is hard work but the pressure you put on your child helps develop character in strate-

gic ways. Hebrews 12:5-7 says it this way, “My son, do not make light of the Lord’s discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son. Endure hardship as discipline.”

If you view discipline as training then you’ll think more strategically about your parenting. Many parents take shortcuts with their kids when they are preschoolers, only to find out a few years later that they’ve done some significant damage to the training process.

As you continue through this book you’ll discover many practical strategies that are far more effective in building character and maturity in your child. Look for ways to reach your child’s heart. Teaching character and maturity take work and the effort you exert is strategic. Choose your approaches wisely in these early years and you’ll build significant patterns that will last a lifetime.



## Teach About Authority

“I was surprised by his comment and I didn’t know how to respond,” said Rhonda. She was confused. “I told my four-year-old, Jake, to take a Break. He wasn’t responding to my instructions and we had exchanged some heated words. He turned to me and yelled, ‘Mommy, you go take a Break.’”

It was true I needed to cool off, but can kids put their parents in a Break? I want to be friends with my son so we can work together and enjoy our relationship. I want us to be a team, but something seems wrong here. How should I respond to him when he tries to give me an instruction or discipline me?”

That’s an interesting question. Here are several things to keep in mind. First, parents need to apologize to their kids when they’ve done the wrong thing. Rhonda’s angry words are out of place and hurtful, and asking forgiveness from Jake is healthy for their relationship. Furthermore, as parents, we recognize that God sometimes disciplines us through our kids and our response models a positive way to handle offenses.

It’s important for parents to look for ways to be friends

with their kids, but in this case, Jake has a problem. Rhonda's desire to be a friend with Jake has blurred the issue of authority for him. A parent has responsibilities and privileges that a child doesn't have. People in authority use their positions to correct and instruct and set limits in a way that a person under authority can't. That's not only true in the family, but is also true in government, work, and other areas where authority exists. The family isn't simply a group of housemates living together as equals. Both parents and children have a job to do. Parents have the responsibility to pass values on to their kids and to teach them what it means to be mature. Children have the responsibility to learn those things. Preschoolers in particular need to learn self-control and responsiveness to authority.

Proverbs 1:8 is just one of eleven times in the book of Proverbs that God gives instructions to children to listen to their parents. It says, "Listen, my son, to your father's instruction and do not forsake your mother's teaching." You have many things to teach your child. Some of those will take place in dialogue and discussion, while others will happen when you give instructions, correct, or set limits.

Rhonda's desire to be a friend to her son is a good one. Playing together, talking and listening, and making cooperative decisions foster cooperation. It's helpful for strengthening the relationship. But sometimes the desire to be a friend leads parents to avoid conflict, become more lenient than is helpful, and give in when a child is demanding. In those moments, the desire to please has crossed a significant line.

A careful balance must take place in the parent/child relationship in order to maximize a child's growth and understanding. If you overemphasize authority your child

may miss some of the benefits learned through fun, play, and working together. If, however, parents don't teach their children how to respond well to authority then all kinds of problems develop.

You'll want to monitor your child's perception of you and your relationship together. Teaching children what cooperation is in practical terms is helpful. Cooperation means that individuals give and take in order to accomplish an objective. However, some children only give when it's convenient and many haven't learned what it means to sacrifice or give up their agenda for others. Older preschoolers are just coming into the ability to understand what that looks like in everyday life. If you see your child taking advantage of the relationship by becoming demanding and self-centered, you'll want to pull back and require changes.

It's interesting that children who have a healthy understanding of authority, balanced with strong relationship, actually have a closer relationship with their parents than those who are indulged. Parents sometimes think that being permissive or lenient with their kids will increase relationship, but, in the end, those approaches diminish respect and increase a sense of entitlement.

Playfulness is a great quality. Tickling, teasing, and enjoying life together with your child fosters closeness. Take time to enter your child's world, allow her to lead in a game, and create ways to laugh and play together. Undivided attention is a tremendous gift you give to your child, and listening attentively and sharing stories demonstrates your love and the high value you place on your relationship. Even in the midst of those bonding times, however, it's important that you remain the parent. When a child crosses the line and won't stop the teasing or tickling game, you're

the one who must exert your authority to communicate that that game is over.

When parents set limits and stick to boundaries, kids learn to trust, and the parent/child bond develops naturally with respect and obedience in their proper perspective. It's often helpful to explain to your child what you're doing as a leader and why you're making the decisions you believe to be necessary. But don't feel you have to convince your child to agree with you. In the end, whether your child agrees or not, you need to decide what's best and your child needs to follow. Taking time to have fun and to spend time with your preschooler will go a long way to build the healthy and strong relationship you desire.

Remember that when you're in a group setting your child may behave differently than when you're at home. Preschoolers are still trying to figure out their place in the family and often don't understand the dynamics of a group setting. Parents who volunteer to teach in the classroom may find that their children don't quite know how to respond. In those situations, they're trying to apply what they've learned about authority and relationship in a new situation. Your children may need to limit their interaction with you as the teacher, allowing others to receive individual time, and not get some of the same "Mommy privileges" that they're used to at home. This provides another teaching opportunity about authority, roles, and responsibilities in life.

Maintaining a close relationship while still demonstrating authority will help your child develop trust and faith. Look for ways to balance authority and relationship with your preschooler and you'll have the strongest friendship possible.



## What to Expect from a Three-Year-Old

Significant changes take place in a three-year-old's development. The two-year-old spent a lot of time wrestling with control, having found the ability to walk, talk, and start to do things independently. The three-year-old has typically worked through some of those control issues and is finding more of a balance between self-control and the need to be controlled by others. Now your child, can explore and use the skills developed earlier to learn more about the world and how it works. There are times, however, when the three-year-old reverts back to the two-year-old behaviors, so you'll want to be ready and not overreact. Often you'll need to retrain your child to get back to where you are now, so just take it in stride and don't be disappointed. It's part of the normal work of parenting.

Three-year-olds are usually eager to please Mom and Dad and they try very hard to do things the right way. Because three-year-olds can speak and communicate with an increased vocabulary, frustration levels reduce and the



child is often more willing to cooperate.

Now is a good time to teach manners and other social skills. Your preschooler will likely be surprisingly responsive to your teaching. A three-year-old trusts caregivers to do what they say, so it's important to keep your word and follow through to show you mean it. You don't have to become a sergeant, but you do want your child to know that when you say it's time to go out to do errands that you are actually getting ready to leave. Some parents talk and talk and talk with no action, and the child then learns that the parent doesn't mean it. Then parents have to resort to emotional intensity to get a child moving. Stick to your word and do what you say and you'll be pleased how well your three-year-old responds.

Three-year-olds learn to problem-solve and will often try to negotiate with others, including you. That's not necessarily wrong, but you'll want to have a way to communicate when dialogue is not appropriate and that this is a time to simply obey. Because language skills are much improved, three-year-olds begin to socialize and play together with other kids. The three-year-old can also begin to verbalize feelings, so taking time to talk about a situation is often helpful as you empathize with those emotions.

Because a three-year-old understands life in a more complex manner than he did when younger, fears may surface. It's usually helpful to talk about what's going to happen and imagine positive outcomes to upcoming experiences. In this way your preschooler will develop greater confidence to try new things and to overcome apprehension. You might say, "We're going over to Jillian's house today. I'm glad they have a nice dog. You're learning how to enjoy animals like Chewie. This'll be fun."

Because a three-year-old is able to think on a more detailed level, imagination increases and you child can now pretend. Sometimes you'll find the imaginary intermingled with reality. A three-year-old may tell a story that has some real parts and some made up parts and even have difficulty determining what part of the story is true and what part is not. This area of development can sometimes be difficult for a parent when trying to piece together what happened in a situation. Just remember that in the child's mind it may all seem true.

Your three-year-old may develop an imaginary friend. Playing along with the idea is usually better than ignoring it or chastising a child for having one. Imaginary friends come from a vivid imagination and a desire for relationship. They aren't necessarily bad. They're usually short-lived and can be a fun way to help teach a three-year-old about many experiences since an imaginary friend can do good or bad things and help your child learn what is appropriate and not.

Because a three-year-old is still learning social graces, you'll likely need to do a lot of teaching in the area of relationships. Often the child doesn't know how to deal with another child or adult, so you'll want to come a long side your child to interpret social cues and explain what's appropriate. Take time to practice greetings and to prepare a child for conversations with adults and children. Since preschoolers love to play, role-playing social situations is a great way to teach. Three-year-olds also develop a sense of humor and will begin to laugh at funny things. They may try to tell jokes and can get silly and do outlandish things to make others laugh.

Three-year-olds respond well to praise and compliments. Because they enjoy pleasing others, they love to receive praise. Many of the things a three-year-old does to gain adult approval will merit your praise, so give it generously. Be sure to praise the character you see developing, not just the fact that the child is pleasing you. Rather than saying "I like it when you obey," say, "Oh you obey so nicely, that must feel good in your heart."

Three-year-olds benefit from many experiences that develop large and small motor skills. Learning to hold a pencil or crayon can be a challenge, but it's good to offer experiences to help preschoolers develop these skills. Show them how to use child safety scissors and give them magazines or sale ads to snip. Allow preschoolers to finger paint, paint with a brush, play in the sand, and explore with a variety of objects while you supervise. A young child's intelligence is enhanced with a diversity of activities and experiences. You're filling the internal library your child will draw upon for solving problems and developing more advanced conclusions about life.

Three-year-olds benefit from books to look at by themselves as well as reading times with you. Reading develops vocabulary, increases knowledge, and provides a bonding experience with Mom and Dad. Learning to follow the words with their finger or to turn the pages helps to develop pre-reading skills, as children learn how books are set up. Three-year-olds love finger plays and simple rhymes. They love learning about colors, shapes, and numbers and enjoy working puzzles and playing simple games. All of these activities will help develop cognitive skills that prepare a preschooler for academic work, so make these times plentiful and fun.

Music is a great source of fun and learning for three-year-olds. Teach your child what it means to praise the Lord. Psalm 150:6 says, "Let everything that has breath praise the LORD. Praise the LORD." In fact the whole psalm is a fun one for preschoolers to act out in order to demonstrate praise. It talks about using stringed instruments, cymbals, a tambourine, and dance.

Music helps children learn. You can make up simple songs to go with an activity you're trying to teach. It doesn't matter whether you can sing well or not. The tune helps a three-year-old engage both sides of the brain and improves memory. Add movement and you will help to teach coordination and other skills as well. Dancing along with the song makes learning fun and easy.

Enjoy your three-year-old. It's a treasured year of childhood.



## What to Expect from a Four-Year-Old

**F**our-year-olds are excitable, inquisitive, and tend to be very social. They often like to be silly and fun one moment, and then ask difficult or serious questions the next. They can speak with honesty, and may express emotions intensely.

This is a great time to teach “academics,” because four-year-olds often have a significant interest in reading and learning. They love to explore and to figure out how things work. They learn quickly and thoroughly. Their reasoning and self-help skills improve rapidly at this age and they amaze you with what they know and how quickly they catch on to new ideas. They also begin to ask more detailed questions, so you may need to study the subject you are discussing in order to accurately satisfy their curiosity.

The most important academic thing you can do with your child is to make learning fun. Stop before it gets tedious, find fun ways to learn, applaud self-discovery and mastery of small incremental steps. Your excitement about learning will go a long way as your child continues to face educational experiences.

Four-year-olds often express emotions strongly. They may experience hurt, anger, or sadness as they encounter various situations. You might hear exaggerated statements such as “She won’t be my friend” or “I’m not going to invite you to my birthday party” or “I hate this family.” They’re trying to learn how to appropriately express themselves and are discovering what’s appropriate and not appropriate in a social setting. Don’t overreact or take the comments personally. Rather, teach your child that emotions aren’t wrong but what we say or do with them is important. Often four-year-olds will need guidance to learn how to handle emotionally disruptive situations, and correction can involve more dialogue to explain why.

Four-year-olds have now acquired the skills necessary to share toys and take turns, but that doesn’t mean they’ll always want to do so. The four-year-old can understand how to wait for an adult’s attention and begin to see situations from the perspective of others. Because of this new step in their understanding, they can often get along with each other, learn to solve their own problems, and figure out appropriate ways to handle new situations. Because they can do all of these things, they can also interact more with other children and with adults.

Four-year-olds are very observant and aware of what’s going on around them. They imitate the actions, words, and personality traits of adults. They love to please, so they’ll still do things to make you happy. But they’ll also start to show their own personalities and may begin to question your authority. A four-year-old may get angry easily, and may respond as she did when younger, but often will pull out of a tantrum and an angry spell faster. Your patience is an asset as you help your child move to the next level of

development in so many areas all at the same time.

You'll want to take time to share spiritually with your preschooler. Allow your child to make up prayers, instead of using memorized prayers. Your child will soon learn that prayer is simply talking to God. You might share a verse such as Psalm 55:16-17 that says, "I call to God, and the LORD saves me. Evening, morning and noon I cry out in distress, and he hears my voice." Not only can we bring our problems to the Lord as the psalmist does in this passage, but we can also share our delights and have open dialogue with him all day long.

Because a four-year-old is more proficient in the use of words, frustration levels can be defused more easily with dialogue and calm responses. A four-year-old is excited about using new words and may even try out some inappropriate words just to see what kind of reaction it brings. Be prepared to guide your child to avoid "potty talk" or words like "stupid." You might say something such as, "We don't use those kinds of words in our home." If the talk persists and you sense that it's moved to defiance, you'll want to use some form of correction to extinguish the behavior.

You can teach your child about sounds of letters even before they learn how to identify the letters visually. Rhyming and alliteration become more frequent as they try out new words, learn how to put words together to make other words, and begin to have an interest in reading. You might say, "Cat and rat sound similar. What are some other words that rhyme with them?" This is also a good time to introduce the awareness of the alphabet, teaching letter sounds and playing games like "Can you find a letter D?" or "Ball begins with what letter?"

Four-year-olds are often curious about body parts and

bodily functions. You'll want to talk openly and honestly about biology and teach what is appropriate and not appropriate to say or discuss with others.

Four-year-olds tend to have good coordination, being able to run, hop, jump, gallop, and sometimes even skip. They love activity so plan lots of movement in playtime to help exercise these skills. Don't expect preschoolers to sit for long periods of time without having behavior issues. It works well to alternate active, then quiet, then active times throughout the day.

Fine motor skills are developing rapidly for four-year-olds. This is the time to introduce pencil and paper, coloring and painting, and lacing experiences. The four-year-old delights in doing things independently, so allow many experiences for your child to be self-sufficient. Kids at this age can learn to button, zip, and snap and often dress themselves easily. In fact, a four-year-old may take offense with an adult who doesn't allow independence in this area.

Because the four-year-old has reached significant cognitive and relational milestones, now is usually the time to encourage social and academic learning experiences. If they have not yet become a part of an organized group or activity, this may be a great time to introduce it. Children learn much from exposure to a group-learning environment, both academically and socially. They use these opportunities to learn more about themselves and how they fit into the world around them.