

How to Prepare Your Child for Preschool

Teacher to Parent - What is the 'theme' of your family's story?

By Jody Stallings Special to the Moultrie News
Feb 13, 2018

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Q. Most of your questions are about school-aged children, and your advice has helped with my teen. But do you have any advice on one-to-four-year-olds (as far as preparing them for school)?

Thank you for the kind words. I wouldn't presume to suggest that I offer the best advice, or even good advice. But I can give you seven precepts that I used with my own preschoolers who have turned out pretty well. I've also noticed that the most successful students I teach seem to have been raised with at least some of these values. So for what it's worth, here you are:

1) Simplify the rules.

Most parents don't start implementing "family rules" until the kids get older, but it's good to start them off by setting one or two character-anchoring principles. In my family we only have one rule from which all other rules spawn: "Never do anything that shows we don't love each other." If you can find a similarly all-encompassing family rule, it will start your child on the right path.

2) Be the person you want your children to become.

Young children learn more from watching how we act than from listening to what we tell them, so you must be a role model at all times. Teach your kids how to be honest by always showing integrity. Teach them kindness by being kind to everyone. If you make a mistake, own up to it. If you hurt someone, apologize. Swallow your pride. Work hard. Watch your mouth. It won't be easy, but expecting your children to have better character than you do is just wishful thinking.

3) Encourage your children not to be self-centered.

Have you ever been talking with friends when their young child barges into your conversation, yanking on their pant leg, demanding their attention? What are parents teaching a child by stopping the conversation to give him their full attention? And what is accomplished when parents become so focused on their children that they lose their relationship with each other? There's a fine line between having an occupation as a parent and having a preoccupation with your child. Constantly doting on and giving in to a child's every whim teaches him that he —above everyone else — is the most important person in the world.

4) Eschew technology and immerse your child with books and creative toys.

Scientists are becoming more certain that early exposure to screen technology damages children's brain development. But who needs it anyway? Let your children's minds grow through the problem-solving of play and the stimulation of reading. It should be daily practice to look at picture books together and to have both parents read aloud. Take children to the library weekly, going as a family as often as you can. Pre-readers need to see books as part of the family from the beginning, not as weird foreign objects when they finally get to school.

5) Mold the clay.

Kind of like a sculptor, begin with the end in mind. Discourage behavior that will lead to your pre-schooler becoming an annoying child and insufferable adult. Never give in to tantrums, and never allow selfish behavior to go unchecked. Reinforce good behavior with genuine (not empty) praise. You want your child to grow up to be his own person, but you want him to do so within the boundaries of good values.

6) Find your center of gravity.

What is the "theme" of your family's story? Every family should have an ideal that binds them together no matter how far their individual interests drift over time. For my family, it was our Christian faith. For others it might be family itself. Find the one thing as the center that will always pull your family together and will stand the test of time.

7) Love is the most important thing.

Love is the blood that courses through the body of your family. For parents, it should be what causes every action and decision. The highest love is what the Greeks called "agape," which is love that does not demand anything in return. It is unconditional. But don't think that unconditional love means unconditional approval. Such love means you, the parent, must instill discipline, make unpopular choices, and enforce the boundaries. It means sometimes enduring your child's short-term bitterness in order to fulfill your long-term responsibility toward their greater good.

Dickens once said, "A loving heart is the truest wisdom." Search your heart, your experiences, and your conscience for the principles to guide you as a parent, and then follow them wherever they lead.

Permission to reprint granted by author March 2018