

Active Learning for Preschoolers

When a 3 year-old won't sit still to learn letters, find more active ways to encourage learning.

By [Susan Canizares](#)

Q: My 3-year-old son can't seem to sit still when we try to teach him letters or numbers. He gets frustrated and distracted easily and asks us to answer our own questions. We're concerned that he's not learning at the right pace or may have attention deficit disorder. How do we know if these behaviors are normal and what he should and shouldn't have already learned?

A: Because there is so much pressure on children today to perform well at school and learn to read as early as kindergarten, it is quite natural for you to want to give your child a strong early start. The most important thing you can do to help him is just what you've done: observe your child closely to discover what interests him and how he learns, then seek guidance to support your findings.

The range of normal behaviors in children age 3 to 5 is quite wide. There is nothing that your child is doing at this time that I would characterize as an indication of a disorder. Instead he strikes me as a typical 3-year-old who has definite ideas about what's around him and how he would like to go about learning more. To help him, consider the following strategies:

- **Build on what motivates and interests him.** His response to you to "answer your own questions" may be a sharp signal that he does not see the relevance of some of your questions to what he is involved with or interested in. Some toddlers and preschoolers enjoy a kind of work session in which they sit with a parent and identify letters and numbers, but many others do not. Your son may be among the multitude of normal preschoolers who learn by running around, touching, exploring, and simply making a mess. It is quite possible that he is easily distracted when you initiate a task, but that he sustains long and deep attention to tasks he invents or creates on his own.

The trick is to **build learning opportunities into his world** — such as counting dogs you pass by or picking out letters in signs you see on the street. Inside, discover the pretend games he likes to invent and incorporate letters and numbers in them. For example, invent a parking-lot system in pretend play where each of his cars, trucks, or other toys has a letter or number written on a piece of paper to identify where it can go.

Your goal: **Don't let him lose his motivation and eagerness to learn.** Without it, he faces a school career of tediousness and drudgery — which will severely impair his ability to learn.

- **Make learning active.** There will be plenty of years during which your son will have to sit at a desk. Until then, he needs plenty of experiences using his whole body and all five senses to make important learning discoveries. If you have goals in mind about learning letters and numbers, make reaching them fun and multisensory. Draw letters and numbers in shaving cream, sand, or on a mirror covered in steam from the shower. Look for them in alphabet soup and gobble them up. Play with his fingers and toes by making a counting game as you go. Let your imagination (and his) run wild.

Your goal: **Discover the deeper talents your son has** and what his particular strengths are. Help him rely on these strengths to solve problems.

By making these goals primary in your interactions with your son, you may soon have a child who is focused, eager, and asking all the questions of you!