

Getting Started: Preschoolers

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ingredients for growing a brain

All of us are homeschoolers for at least the first few years of our children's lives (and I certainly concur with those who maintain parents are *always* their children's primary teachers no matter how they are formally educated). So what is really important during these years, especially as it pertains to getting our kids ready for formal learning? There are a few essentials we can summarize from the research:

The soil matters – take two identical plants and plant one in depleted, dry soil and the other in rich, moist soil. Would you expect any differences? You bet. The same goes for kids. If you want to grow tomatoes, you need soil enriched with the nutrients tomatoes crave. If you want to grow a brain, then kids need to be planted in an environment that's filled with the food a growing brain feasts on. What are those nutrients? Well here's my food pyramid for cognitive growth:

LANGUAGE

WARMTH

EXPERIENCE

That's the big 3. Language means "live" speech, especially interactive speech – not the television buzzing in the background. The latter's a passive form of language acquisition and may provide some benefit if interactive conversations with caring adults are not provided, but it's a poor substitute at best. Why language? Because preschoolers need language in order to "think" about the experiences they are having. Try capturing and storing an event in your memory where you do not have words to describe what you are seeing. Near impossible, right? That's why human brains work so much better than animals' – we have the words to capture those memories and pass them on to the next generation. Language is how we encode our experiences so we can *learn* from them.

30 million word gap. Do you think a difference that big might matter? That's the difference in the amount of spoken language heard by preschoolers from middle class homes by age 3 and those born into poverty, a number of studies have repeatedly found. (Read the initial one [here](#).) Is it the money making the difference? Not really. It's the amount of interaction between these preschoolers and their parents and the quality of language the more privileged kids are hearing. The vocabulary is more extensive, the interactions are longer, and the range of topics broader. I know a lot of my readers may not consider themselves middle class. Actually plenty of us chose homeschooling because the cost of a quality education seemed out-of-reach. Well, it doesn't take money, fortunately, to ensure our young children get plenty of nutrients to help their brains develop fully. Rather, we just need to mimic the actions of these middle class parents. Talk to your kids about everything, even things you don't know a lot about. Let them hear you thinking aloud and pondering the mysteries of the world around you. Ask them questions to help them use the words they do have and acquire new ones. Beyond that, read aloud. This is the richest vein of nutrients you can mine to open up new worlds and give them words to think and learn.

Coming up: warmth, experience

Warmth – an essential nutrient for early learning

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A necessary, but often overlooked, component of learning is emotional arousal. In laymen's terms, that means we learn more when feelings of pleasure and interest are associated with a learning experience. Our memory system encodes what we are experiencing more deeply, more lastingly and in greater detail when we are not just cognitively engaged but also emotionally engaged. You know this positive force is in effect when your kids say, "this is fun!"

What can we do to trigger this powerful force? **Set the temperature to warm.** I'm referring, of course, to the emotional tone of our relationship with our kids. You trigger their pleasure and engagement when you hug them, encourage them, smile, laugh and give full expression to your love and enjoyment of them, especially while they are exploring and challenging themselves cognitively. I think this truth explains why young children love to be read aloud to — this is almost always accompanied with sitting in a parent's warm embrace. That, more than the gripping plot line, explains the constant refrain, "more, Mommy, more!"

Unfortunately in the modern classroom, teachers are often prohibited from touching children. The potential for misunderstanding or false accusation of impropriety has led to this over-reaction and we've just impoverished the soil for learning in this setting even more.

This is one reason I say if we were to build a school from the ground up based upon what the research shows is how children learn best, we'd build a home. The three ingredients necessary for young children to learn — language, warmth and experience — are easily provided in a home environment. But in a classroom, there are many constraints that get in the way.

Experience – the Early Learning Advantage

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The final nutrient needed to cultivate a rich soil that feeds your young child's early cognitive growth is **experience**. God has created a marvelous environment to promote this — it's called "outdoors." Further, He has given your kids five intake valves through which to process this information. These are called the 5 senses: hearing, seeing, touching, tasting and smelling. The more intake valves processing information, the more brain-building this information promotes. **Your job?** Allow your young kids the freedom to immerse themselves for long periods of time in a rich, multi-sensory environment that is always refreshing with new and delightful adventures and experiences. Don't overly-control the situation. They do not need you to manage this exploration. Rather join them in the

inquiry.

What's the one support you can provide? Direct their attention to intriguing sights they might not see — the butterfly emerging from its chrysalis, the tadpole swimming just below the surface, the ants working industriously to build their colonies. Focus is a skill you can help them to develop. You can aid in this by showing them (gently) how to take their time, study the environment and pick out the individual parts of the whole. Perhaps everyone, including you, might spend a sunny afternoon in a field with a sketchpad and drawing pencils in hand. (If this sounds like [Charlotte Mason](#), then you are right — despite living a century before much of what neuroscience has learned about how the brain develops was known, Charlotte Mason's insights into how children learn are amazingly accurate.)

Working from the backyard out, take them further afield to discover how each place has its similarities and differences. If you spend a lot of time in the car, don't short-circuit the opportunities to look out the window with media players. Listening to music, yes; watching a video, no. Playing "I Spy" — absolutely.

In addition to heavy doses of the natural world, open wide the windows of their budding imagination through books. Curling up together on the bed or in a special reading nook brings together all three essential ingredients: language, warmth and experience. Here is where you most potently lay the foundation for later formal studies: reading aloud from the world's treasury of classical children's literature. The books by Beatrix Potter and E.B. White, for example, put your kids in the hands of two of the most talented writers for children. They use language inventively and expansively. No controlled vocabulary here. Your children do not need to understand every word to grasp the storyline. In fact, learning new words in context is the best way to build their vocabulary. Hearing the same word in a variety of different situations is an even better way for them to recognize that words have multiple layers of meaning and connotations. So read, read, read aloud and let the music of the words wash over your kids in leisurely abundance.

Finally, what haven't I said. I haven't said send them to preschool, have I? Playschool, perhaps (if you must). But certainly not a place where structured formal learning is promoted. I've also not encouraged you to teach them to read yet. The brain is not ready. It is a modern idea that young children need a highly structured and restrictive environment in order to learn. It's also a modern notion (invented by Madison Avenue) that young children need expensive, complicated toys to promote brain growth. No, they need *imaginative* play. And that is better accomplished with sticks, old clothes, blocks, puppets, pets, stones, water, sand, paint, brushes, rag dolls, homemade play-doh, any item with endless possibilities, etc — all the more natural elements we've been using for generations.

Play Is The Work of the Child ~ Maria Montessori

