

Parents = the Difference

a monthly parenting newsletter

Hallelujah! The schools have reopened. This has been a most challenging academic year. By now you have made your decision between a blended or remote learning experience for your child. You may be wondering if you made the right decision. Rest assured that only you know what is best for you and your family. You made the right decision. No matter remote or blended, now is the time to partner with your teacher. Because of all the back and forth, children are understandably confused and stressed. It is more important than ever to partner with your teacher to support your child's growth and development.

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The Ups and Downs of the School Year

Let's take a look at the school year thus far:

Summer 2020—

Adult: I don't know what is going to happen come Sept.

Child: I'm 4! I'm going to big kid school!

Sept. 10, 2020—

Adult: If things were normal, school would be starting now. It is so hard not knowing what's going to happen.

Child: Mommy says I can't go to school yet because of the virus. I don't like the virus. I want to kick it.

Sept. 21, 2020— beginning of remote learning

Adult: I can't see my child learning this way.

Child: I sit in front of the computer but I don't get to play my games. I see kids and grownups in little boxes. How come everyone is together and I'm home?

Sept. 29, 2020— beginning of blended learning

Adult: I am anxious about safety and scheduling.

Child: Daddy says I will go to school this week, but I don't know when. Will the teacher still be inside the computer?

Nov. 19, 2020— in-person school closed

Adult: Now what? How long will this last?

Child: I like school, but I can't go anymore. What did I do wrong? Mommy makes me sit at the computer, but 'school YouTube' videos are soooo boring.

Dec. 7, 2020— blended learning resumes

Adult: All this back and forth causes me to second guess safety. Have I made the right decision?

Child: I guess the teacher isn't mad at me because

she's letting me come back to school. I want to see my friends but sometimes Mommy and Daddy don't take me. I don't understand.

It is challenging for young children to see the world from any perspective but their own. They base their understanding on what they experience through their senses: what they see, hear, smell, taste and feel. While the four-year-old brain is rapidly growing, their development primarily supports concrete connections. They live in a literal world. To a four-year-old, "let's hop on the bus" means let's jump up and down on the bus.

Do you know how your child understands the ups and downs of school? What do they make of their schedule? What is expected of them? When we as adults have trouble keeping up, you have to wonder how little brains are processing this unpredictable experience. Children develop resilience because they face difficulties and are supported by adults who ensure their wellbeing and safety. We protect them and foster their resilience when we parent warmly, offer support when they are stressed, and model healthy ways to cope when things get tough. We provide routine and structure, hold them to age appropriate expectations (hanging up their coats and going to bed on time), and providing ongoing supervision.

You cannot change your child's experience of their school year, but you can use this unfortunate set of circumstances to support their growth and build resilience. Talk and play with your child. Find out what they understand and correct any misperceptions. I bet they have a few!



Early childhood curriculum focuses on four areas of learning: physical, cognitive, social and emotional. If you ask any kindergarten teacher which is the most important readiness skill, they will unanimously say both social and emotional. Last month's newsletter addressed cognitive development, language acquisition, and listening skills. Now, let's take a look at social and emotional learning.

Developing Social Skills

Pre-K is the year children learn to socialize. Their focus begins to shift from family to friends. It is when most children have their first "best friend." Spending time with other children gives them the chance to share, comfort, and help one another and control their reactions. Learning how to play with each other is the foundation for all future cooperative activities.

Going to school introduces a set of rules that don't exist at home. They learn to listen to new adults. They begin to understand the importance of rules and why they must follow them. For many it is the first time they have to navigate social situations without a parent's help.

This topsy-turvy school year is causing parents a good deal of anxiety about the lack of socialization opportunities. Children participating in blended learning have opportunities to practice socially-distanced socialization. Those in remote classrooms have fewer opportunities. As a parent, what can be done to fill in the gaps?

The good news is you are your child's first and most important teacher and the home is where socialization skills begin. Children learn how to share by watching you. Children learn empathy through your loving caretaking. They understand limits when you set fair consistent boundaries and hold them accountable for their choices and actions.

The pandemic has blown up the routines of our daily lives. Everything feels upside down and sideways. Nonetheless you can still foster their socialization skills, but it requires an ongoing awareness of the influence you have on your child. Because we are spending so much time together, children are in a position to continually observe the workings of the family. They listen to how we speak to each other. They watch how we cope with frustration, disappointment, and conflict. They notice when we comfort and support each other. Children bask in our love. It's a big responsibility being a parent and because children are often with us all day, the burden can feel bigger than ever.

Continue to look for safe ways for your child to socialize. If you are enrolled in blended learning, take them everyday in-person school is scheduled. If you are engaged in remote learning, attend as many classes as offered. Teachers work on social skills during small group activities. Never as good as the real thing, but set up virtual playdates. At first you may have to sit in on the playdate to facilitate exchanges, but children are fast learners. Don't pass on going to the playground just because it's gotten cold. We adults don't like the cold but if your child is bundled up, they don't seem to mind. They run around and quickly generate their own heat!



Developing Emotional Skills

Pre-K children work super hard to develop self-control. Their need for independence is strong and when they can't do what they are working so hard to accomplish, they sometimes lose control. Losing control can result in feelings of anxiety, guilt, or shame. A four-year-old experiences a full range of emotions but they don't always know what feelings are or what to do with them. Their ability to regulate their emotional responses grows as they gain understanding of their own and other's feelings and discover that emotions can be described using words. *You can't tame it until you can name it.*

A four-year-old has a greater ability to wait than a three-year-old. That said, when frustrated they can still melt down if their needs aren't met quickly. Young children tend to get cranky and irritable when they are tired, hungry, or not feeling well. When feeling stressed they may slip into baby talk. They may not know the words to describe how they feel. When this happens ask them to speak in a regular voice and help them find the words to describe their feelings.

Fears are common. They want to take on the world, but everything is so much bigger than they are! It's hard being stuck between toddlerhood and school-age. Because friends are becoming important, exclusions can be devastating. Young children are known to call each other names, "You're a poopy-head." These insults hurt deeply because four-year-olds fear it may be true. They react with both humiliation and rage.

Four-year-olds tend to be self-centered (egocentric), but they are also beginning to tune into other people's feelings. They run to throw their arms around a crying friend. They use words of comfort when they notice you don't feel well, but then start bugging you because they are quick to forget.

Jealousy is a natural part of childhood. Children tend to feel jealous over siblings (the root of rivalry), the affection parents show each other, a teacher's attention, etc. Children need to feel special. The best way to address feelings of jealousy is to make sure each child gets special attention. Children need to be assured of your love. If you express anger at them, they fear it might be forever. As psychologist Arnold H. Glasow said, *"The best thing to spend on your children is time."*

The four-year-old typically defends themselves by denying they did anything wrong, blaming someone else for their error, believing someone else caused them to feel the way they do, or temporarily slipping back to an earlier stage of childhood when they were more reliant on your tender caretaking. These unconscious reactions are to save face and ensure you will continue to love them no matter what they do. The worry of losing your love is their greatest fear.