

Preschool Interactions Guide



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Positive Climate

Build a Caring Classroom Community



Build close relationships with children.

Take time to know each child and show genuine interest in their lives, thoughts, and feelings. Listen to what children share about their families, interests, hobbies, and experiences, and communicate that you care about them. Ask the children questions about their home.

Support positive peer relationships.

Create opportunities for children to connect, collaborate, and help one another. Model caring interactions, provide activities that require teamwork, and encourage children to talk, play, celebrate, and support each other.

Enjoy time together and have fun.

Make everyday activities enjoyable for both children and adults. Join children in play, games, conversations, movement, or silly moments. Fun can be calm and social or active and energetic.

Show warmth and positive communication.

Use friendly words, facial expressions, gestures, and tone of voice to communicate that you enjoy being with children. Make sure your warmth and affection are genuine and welcomed by children.

Demonstrate respect for children.

Honor children's voices, experiences, needs, language, and personal space. Listen closely without unnecessarily correcting how children speak. Use polite language and show children that you trust and value what they say.

Make sure every child feels included.

Pay attention to how each child experiences the classroom community. Create safe ways for quieter or more reserved children to participate, and make sure children with different abilities have the supports and materials they need to join activities.

Respect children's cultural and individual differences.

Learn and correctly use children's preferred names and pronunciations. Avoid assumptions about children and their families, and recognize that ways of communicating, showing affection, and participating can differ across cultures.



Quick Reminder: What to Look For

Look for a classroom where children feel cared for, respected, included, and connected. Notice how adults communicate warmth and whether every child feels valued and supported.

Negative Climate

Reduce Negativity in the Classroom

Build strong connections with each child.

Take time to connect one-on-one with every child. When children feel seen, cared for, and safe, they are more likely to cooperate and less likely to act out to get attention. A strong teacher-child relationship supports trust and positive behavior.

Set children up for success.

Use clear expectations and predictable routines. Give one-step directions, prepare materials ahead of time, minimize waiting, and offer individual support when needed. Consider what might be confusing, overwhelming, or unmet for the child.

Stay flexible and respond to individual needs.

Encourage children to help one another. If children lose interest or become distracted, shift to a more hands-on or engaging activity connected to their interests. Be aware of individual sensitivities.

Understand that behavior is communication.

Challenging behavior can be a way children express a need, such as movement, attention, clear directions, emotional support, or engagement. Approach behavior with curiosity and kindness and ask, "What is this child trying to tell me?"

Work with families and fellow educators.

Share information to better understand each child's needs and identify strategies that work best for them.

Stay calm and model self-regulation.

Young children learn how to handle emotions by watching you. Stay calm, practice simple calming strategies, and talk through your own feelings to model problem-solving.

Repair relationships after strong reactions.

If you react strongly, apologize if needed, reconnect with warmth, allow children to share their feelings, and validate their emotions.

Take care of yourself, too.

Take scheduled breaks, ask for help when you need it, and be kind to yourself on difficult days. Notice positive moments and remember that patience, care, and consistency help children feel safe and grow.



Quick Reminder: What to Look For

Create a safe, supportive environment where children feel seen and cared for through strong relationships, clear expectations, and predictable routines. When challenges arise, stay calm, consider what the behavior may be communicating, and reconnect with the child by acknowledging and validating their feelings.

Educator Sensitivity

Notice, Respond, and Support

Pay attention to what children are showing you.

Watch for children's words, facial expressions, body language, behavior, and level of engagement. Notice when a child may be looking for help, encouragement, comfort, connection, or another type of support.

Respond when children need you.

Acknowledge children's feelings and needs and respond in a timely, caring way. When a child is having a difficult moment, offer the kind of support that will help that child feel understood and able to continue.

Adjust your response for each child.

Children may need different kinds of support. Consider the child's individual needs, communication style, and what seems to work for that child. If one approach is not helping, try another.

Support children as they work through problems.

When children have difficulties with a task, a peer, or a classroom situation, help them think about what they can do next. Give children opportunities to work out solutions on their own when they are ready, while stepping in when they need more help.

Act quickly when a child needs immediate help.

When a child is hurt, upset, or needs immediate assistance, respond promptly. Let children know that you are paying attention and that they can count on you for support.

Create a classroom where children feel secure.

Build warm, dependable relationships so children feel comfortable approaching you. Encourage children to ask for help, talk about their feelings, take reasonable risks in learning, and make mistakes without feeling embarrassed or afraid.



Quick Reminder: What to Look For

Notice: Am I paying attention to children's words, actions, emotions, and other signals?

Respond: Do I recognize children's needs and provide support when they need it?

Individualize: Am I adjusting my response to fit the child and the situation?

Support problem-solving: Do I help children work through difficulties while allowing them to try for themselves when appropriate?

Build security: Do children feel comfortable coming to me when they need help, reassurance, or connection?

A simple question to keep in mind:

Do my interactions help children feel noticed, understood, and confident that I will be there when they need support?

Regard for Child Perspectives

Make Space for Children's Ideas

Let children's interests help shape the experience.

Pay attention to what children are curious about, talking about, and excited to explore. Whenever possible, use their interests and ideas to influence what happens during activities instead of following a teacher plan so closely that there is no room for their input.

Invite children to share and build on ideas.

Give children time to explain what they think, wonder about, or would like to try. Listen carefully and encourage children to hear and respond to one another. Different ideas and approaches can become opportunities for children to learn together.

Use children's suggestions when making classroom decisions.

Ask children for their input when deciding how an activity might work, what materials to use, or what the group could do next. When a child's suggestion can be used, follow through and let children see that their ideas can make a difference.

Offer choices that are meaningful.

Give children appropriate options about what they do, what they use, or how they participate. When possible, let children have a say in book choices, songs, materials, activities, or ways of completing a task. Leave room for children to come up with their own approaches.



Regard for Child Perspectives

Make Space for Children's Ideas



Quick Reminder:

What to Look For

Children's ideas: Do children's interests and suggestions have a real influence on what happens?

Choices: Do children have appropriate options in what they do, use, or how they participate?

Expression: Do children have time and encouragement to communicate their thoughts in different ways?

Leadership: Do children get genuine opportunities to make decisions, help, and take responsibility?

Take children's ideas seriously.

Show children that their thoughts and experiences matter, even when their idea does not work the way they expected. Let them test ideas, make adjustments, and learn from what happens. Remember that children may communicate their thinking through words, actions, gestures, facial expressions, or other forms of communication.

Give children jobs that really matter.

Provide classroom responsibilities that contribute to the group, such as helping organize materials, caring for the classroom, assisting with routines, or taking a meaningful role in an activity. Help children recognize that they can contribute and be trusted. Be willing to teach them how to maneuver through learning new skills in order to learn how to do things on their own.

Make room for appropriate movement.

Allow children reasonable opportunities to change position, stretch, wiggle, stand, or move while participating, especially in whole group activities. A flexible classroom structure can support children's comfort and engagement as long as the movement is not keeping them or others from participating.

Let children take the lead sometimes.

Look for opportunities for children to make decisions, take responsibility, and guide parts of an activity or routine. Use children's strengths as a starting point for leadership rather than having adults make every decision.



Behavior Management

Help Children Know What to Do

Set expectations children can understand.

Keep classroom expectations simple, realistic, and appropriate for the children in your group. Think about their need to move, talk, play, and interact. Use familiar wording and revisit expectations when children need a reminder.

Give children a voice in classroom expectations.

Talk with children about what helps everyone stay safe, feel included, and learn together. Invite their ideas about helpful and unhelpful behaviors, and turn those ideas into simple classroom agreements. Make room for different ways children communicate and participate.

Help children understand why expectations matter.

Whenever possible, briefly explain the purpose behind a classroom expectation. Instead of only saying what children should do, help them understand how the expectation keeps people safe, helps the group work together, or makes an activity easier. Make sure you are consistent in upholding those expectations. Consistency is key for keeping up with behaviors.

Notice problems before they grow.

Pay attention to situations, transitions, or individual cues that often make behavior more difficult. When you see a child beginning to struggle, offer support early and make the next step clear.



Behavior Management

Help Children Know What to Do

Respond calmly and show children what to do.

When a behavior needs to change, respond without making the situation bigger than it needs to be. Give the child a clear alternative and use whatever support is most helpful—such as a brief reminder, a gesture, moving closer, saying the child's name, or showing the expected action.

Match your support to the child.

There is not one redirection strategy that works for every child or every situation. Consider the child's age, communication abilities, needs, preferences, and the activity. A child may understand best through words, while another may benefit from a visual, gesture, demonstration, or extra time to respond.

Teach the behavior you want to see.

Don't make behavior support only about stopping an unwanted action. Notice and reinforce helpful behaviors, model social skills, and give children opportunities to practice them. The goal is for children to become increasingly able to manage classroom situations with less adult help.

Keep behavior concerns from taking over the classroom.

Effective behavior support helps children stay involved in play and learning. Address problems promptly and calmly, while avoiding unnecessary interruptions to the rest of the group. The goal is not a perfectly quiet classroom—it is a classroom where children can participate because adults provide clear, supportive guidance.



Quick Reminder: What to Look For

Expectations: Children know what is expected because adults use clear, consistent, age-appropriate guidance.

Watch ahead: Adults notice situations or cues that may lead to difficulty and provide support before problems grow.

Guide: Adults calmly help children move toward an appropriate behavior instead of concentrating only on what to stop.

Adjust: Adults change their approach when a child needs a different type of prompt or support.

Teach: Adults explain, model, practice, and notice the behaviors that help children participate successfully.

Productivity

Make the Most of Learning Time

Create consistent, engaging learning experiences.

Use clear, predictable activities that help preschoolers feel confident and ready to participate. Offer meaningful extension activities for children who finish early.

Be prepared and plan with intention.

Have materials ready before activities begin. Thoughtful planning helps the day flow naturally and leaves more time for meaningful interactions. Use pictures, visuals, or routines to help children know what comes next.

Help children stay focused and connected.

When distractions occur, use positive redirection, songs, visual cues, or encouraging reminders to help children reconnect with the activity.

Maximize time for meaningful interactions.

Complete managerial tasks quickly or when children are engaged independently or with another adult whenever possible. Use the time to observe, encourage, and connect with children.

Turn transitions into learning opportunities.

Use consistent routines to help children move smoothly between activities. Add songs, movement, counting, letter recognition, or simple conversation prompts to keep children engaged.

Quick Reminder: What to Look For

Materials and routines are ready, children remain engaged, and transitions are used as opportunities for learning. Look for meaningful interactions throughout the day, making every moment purposeful and connected to learning.

Instructional Learning Formats

*Keep Children Engaged
in Learning*



Be an active partner in children's learning.

Join children's play and learning when your participation can help move the experience forward. Ask questions, make comments, offer ideas, and respond to what children are doing. Also recognize when children benefit from having time to explore on their own.



Change up how children participate.

Use a variety of approaches to help children stay involved. Depending on the activity, this might include materials children can handle, movement, music, visuals, games, conversation, or opportunities to use their senses. Choose approaches because they support the learning—not simply because they add variety.



Connect learning to children's interests.

Look for signs that children are curious, focused, and participating. When possible, build activities around children's interests and experiences. Give children opportunities to actively do, explore, talk, move, make choices, and interact rather than spending most of the experience watching or listening.



Make the purpose of learning clear.

Help children understand what they are working on and why it matters. Briefly connect an activity to its purpose so children can see the reason behind what they are doing. For example: "We're measuring the table so we can find out how long it is."

A simple question to keep in mind:

Are children actively involved in something meaningful, and is my teaching helping them stay connected to the learning?

Quick Reminder: What to Look For

Active involvement: Are children doing, exploring, talking, moving, and participating?

Teacher support: Is the educator joining in when helpful while also giving children space to explore?

Variety: Are there different ways for children to participate when the learning calls for them?

Interest: Does the experience connect with children's interests and keep them engaged?

Purpose: Do children have some understanding of what they are learning and why?

Concept Development

Enhance Children's Thinking Skills

Focus on thinking, not just answers.

Give children chances to figure things out instead of doing the thinking for them. Invite them to explain their ideas, describe how they know something, or talk through what they are wondering about. Try prompts such as “What makes you think that?” or “What could we try?”

Help children work with ideas.

Invite children to notice differences and similarities, put things in an order, make a guess about what may happen, explain their thinking, and work through challenges. The goal is to hear children use their own thinking—not simply repeat an answer.

Make room for different ways of solving or exploring.

Encourage children to make guesses, test ideas, try a different approach, and talk about what happened. When more than one approach could work, invite children to share another possibility or strategy.

Support children in developing their own ideas.

Offer materials and experiences that allow children to design, build, draw, pretend, create, and use materials in flexible ways. Give them time to come up with ideas, and offer support when they need help getting started.



Quick Reminder: What to Look For

Invite: children to explain, wonder, predict, compare, try, create, and work through challenges.

Listen for: children's ideas and explanations—not just correct answers.

Build connections: link new learning with children's experiences, earlier learning, and other classroom experiences.

Give time: pause and let children think, explore, and try before stepping in with the answer.

Build from what children already know.

Before introducing a new idea, find out what children have noticed, experienced, or learned before. Use those experiences as a starting point for new learning.

Make learning meaningful to the children.

Relate new ideas to children's interests, experiences, routines, and the world around them. Invite children to share examples from their own lives, while avoiding assumptions about what happens in their homes.

Give children repeated opportunities to explore an idea.

Let children learn through doing, investigating, playing, and working through real classroom challenges. Revisit important ideas over time so children can add to their understanding instead of experiencing the concept only once. Connect their learning to either previous learning from your classroom or learning from their home life. These connections are important for children when learning new concepts.

Quality of Feedback

Help Children Build Understanding



Give children the amount of help they need.

When a child is working on something challenging, offer support that helps the child move forward. You might break the task into smaller steps, demonstrate part of it, offer a hint, or ask a helpful question. Try to support the child without taking over the thinking or doing.

Keep the conversation going.

When children share an answer, idea, or observation, respond in a way that invites another turn. Ask a follow-up question, comment on what they said, or connect it to something they have experienced. Give children opportunities to explain and add to their ideas.

Invite children to explain how they figured something out.

Ask children to describe their thinking, choices, strategies, or steps. Questions such as “What helped you decide?” or “What could you try next?” can encourage children to think through a problem rather than simply wait for the adult to provide the answer.

Add information that helps children make sense of learning.

Offer useful facts, vocabulary, explanations, examples, or demonstrations when they fit the child's current learning. Connect new information to something familiar when that can help the child understand the idea.

A simple question to keep in mind:

Is my response helping the child understand more, explain more, or keep working?

Notice and describe children's effort and progress.

Pay attention to what children actually do, attempt, change, or accomplish. Be specific when you acknowledge their work so children can understand what was successful. Recognize progress even when the child has not yet reached the final answer.

Encourage children to stay with challenging tasks.

When something is difficult, help children see that they can keep working, try another approach, or learn from what happened. Encourage persistence and celebrate growth rather than focusing only on whether the answer is correct.

Quick Reminder: What to Look For

Support: Am I giving children enough help to move forward without doing the work for them?

Continue: Do I build on children's responses instead of ending the interaction after one answer?

Thinking: Do I invite children to explain their ideas, choices, or problem-solving?

Add information: Am I providing useful details, examples, demonstrations, or vocabulary that strengthen understanding?

Be specific: Do children know what they did, tried, or improved because of my response?

Encourage: Do I help children keep working and recognize progress when learning is challenging?

Language Modeling

Give Children More Opportunities to Communicate

Keep conversations going.

Talk with children about what they are doing, noticing, thinking about, or experiencing. Listen to their responses and give them enough time to answer. When a child shares something, respond in a way that invites another turn instead of ending the exchange after one response.

Invite children to share their thinking.

Use questions and comments that give children room to explain, wonder, predict, describe, or share an idea. Questions do not always need one correct answer. Try prompts such as “What do you think?” “What makes you think that?” or “What might happen next?”

Build on what children say.

Use a child's words as a starting point for adding language. You can repeat an important word, add a little more detail, or introduce related information. This gives children a model for expressing ideas in more complete or detailed ways.

Put language to what is happening.

Talk about actions and experiences as they occur. You can describe what you are doing or put words to what a child is doing, noticing, or experiencing. This helps children hear language connected to something meaningful in the moment.

Introduce interesting and useful words.

Use a range of descriptive and specific vocabulary during everyday interactions. When you introduce a less familiar word, connect it to words or ideas children already understand. For example, instead of only saying something is “big,” you might use “enormous” and explain what the word means.

Use language throughout the day.

Language development can happen during play, routines, meals, transitions, outdoor experiences, books, and planned activities. Look for natural moments to talk, listen, add language, and respond to children's communication.



Quick Reminder:

What to Look For

Talk: Are there frequent opportunities for meaningful conversation with children?

Ask: Do questions and comments encourage children to share more than a short answer?

Build: Does the educator add language to children's ideas and communication?

Describe: Does the educator connect words to what is happening in the moment?

Add words: Are children hearing varied, specific, and useful vocabulary?

A simple question to keep in mind:

Am I creating natural opportunities for children to talk, share ideas, and hear language that helps them communicate more?