

# MIND in the Making

The Seven Essential Life Skills Every Child Needs

## Focus and Self Control for Pre-K

Children need Focus and Self Control in order to achieve their goals, especially in a world that is filled with distractions and information overload. It involves paying attention, remembering the rules, thinking flexibly and exercising self control.

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### Beat and Repeat

Create a beat by clapping your hands 2 times. Invite your child to copy this beat. Repeat until he/she gets it. Now do the same beat with 3 claps. When your child gets that, do the opposite! When you clap 2 times, your child should clap 3 times. If you clap 3 times, he/she should clap twice. If this becomes easy for your child, then change the number of claps to 4 and 2.

**Brainy Background:** Your child is developing self-control as he/she copies your patterns. He/She is learning to pay close attention and to draw on his/her memory to follow and repeat your movements. Doing the opposite encourages your child to think on his/her feet and change his/her behavior according to new rules, instead of responding automatically. These skills are important for learning and life.

### Point and Switch

Have your child copy your hand motions, first using a pointed finger, then making a closed fist. After going back and forth a few times, ask your child to do the opposite: when you point a finger, he/she makes a fist and when you make a fist, he/she points. Try this game with other movements too.

**Brainy Background:** Your child is paying close attention and using his/her memory and self-control to move his/her body according to your actions. Asking your child to do the opposite promotes thinking flexibly and not responding automatically—important skills for learning and life.

### Guess My Number

Think of a number between 1 and 5 and see if your child can guess what it is based on your clues. Say something like, “My number is bigger than 3 and smaller than 5. It rhymes with the word “door.” That’s right, it’s 4!” Encourage your child to use his or her fingers for counting. When your child can do this game, make it a little harder by adding or taking away numbers, “My number is 2 more than the number 3.”

**Brainy Background:** Your child must think on his/her feet and use what he/she already knows about numbers to play this game. Guessing games like this one ask your child to use his/her memory and focus to follow the clues like counting on his/her fingers to come up with the answers. If your child doesn’t get the answer, it’s important to encourage him/her to keep trying.

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## Perspective Taking for Pre-K

Perspective Taking goes far beyond empathy. It involves figuring out what others think and feel and forms the basis for children's understanding of the intentions of their parents, teachers and friends. Children who can take the perspectives of others are also much less likely to get involved in conflicts.

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## ▶ Face Off

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Make a face that expresses a feeling and ask your child to make a face that expresses a different feeling. If you make a happy face, he/she could make a sad face. Then your child can take a turn making a face and you should make a different face. Have a back and forth conversation about when your child remembers people making faces like this.

**Brainy Background:** This game draws on your child's ability to think flexibly about a variety of different feelings and his/her working memory to recall experiences when these feelings were expressed. When you have back and forth conversations with your child like this, you are helping him/her recognize and understand the feelings and thoughts of others, which is essential to the skill of Perspective Taking.

## ▶ Today's Happenings

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Encourage your child to talk about his/her day. Ask questions like, "Was there a time when you felt happy today? What happened to make you feel happy? What were you thinking?" Share your day too, talking about your own thoughts and feelings.

**Brainy Background:** Children learn to understand the viewpoints of others when you help them think about their own experiences—what they were thinking, feeling and why. They also learn this when you talk about yourself or others. Understanding their own viewpoints and those of others promotes the skill of Perspective Taking in children.

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## Communicating for Pre-K

Communicating is much more than understanding language, speaking, reading and writing. It is the skill of determining what one wants to communicate and realizing how our communications will be understood by others. It is the skill that teachers and employers feel is most lacking today.

## Stories in Action

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Come up with a short story for your child to act out. Say something like, “There once was a child who loved to jump.” Encourage your child to jump. Add on to the story with more actions. Get creative! Then invite your child to add to your story or tell a new story to you that you act out.

**Brainy Background:** When children pretend, they are listening, remembering what they know about how the world works, controlling their behavior to fit the story, and thinking creatively. Learning that words can “stand for” actions helps your child with the understanding that written words can stand for ideas—a skill in communicating that is important in learning to read.

## Number Story

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Tell a “Number Story” about what you and your child are doing. Say something like, “I just saw 3 red cars drive by. Now I see 2 blue cars go past. How many cars did I see?” You can help him/her figure it out by counting on your fingers. Invite your child to create a Number Story and you count the total numbers on your fingers too!

**Brainy Background:** Telling “Number Stories” helps your child practice early math knowledge and build the skill of communicating at the same time. He/she is also using important skills like focus to listen to your words and memory to keep track of the numbers in the story, as well as thinking creatively to come up with his/her own story.

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## Making Connections for Pre-K

Making connections is at the heart of learning—figuring out what's the same and what's different, and sorting these things into categories. Making unusual connections is at the core of creativity. In a world where people can Google for information, it is the people who can see connections who are able to go beyond knowing information to using this information well.

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## Letter Lookout

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Pick a letter with your child and look for it wherever you go. Take turns calling it out when you see it. If he/she sees an apple for the letter “A,” then it’s your turn to find something that starts with “A.” Keep taking turns. How many “A” things can you find? Move on to a new letter when you’ve both found all you can.

**Brainy Background:** “I Spy” games like this one are great brain builders. They encourage your child to pay attention to details and tune out distractions. Your child is also learning to make connections among letters, sounds and words, important for literacy. Try this game with numbers, colors and shapes too!



## Sense Scavenger Hunt

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Using words or pictures, make a list with your child of things to search for around the house that involve the five senses—things you can see, taste, smell, hear or touch. If he/she needs help with ideas, suggest something that smells sweet, tastes delicious or feels rough. Encourage him/her to use the list as a reminder and check off items as he/she finds them.

**Brainy Background:** Your child is using his/her abilities to make connections and put things in categories as he/she hunts for things that use his/her five senses. When you and your child work together to create and use lists, you are helping him/her see that reading and writing are an important part of his/her daily life.



## Shape Searcher

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Ask your child to be a Shape Searcher! See if he/she can find objects around the house that are shaped like circles, squares, rectangles, or triangles. Have your child think about what he/she notices about the objects that are all circles. How are these circles the same and how are they different? Talk back and forth about items that are other shapes too.

**Brainy Background:** Being able to put things in categories and recognize what is the same and what is different encourages the skill of making connections, fundamental to learning. This game also teaches your child more about shape and size, which are important concepts in math.

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## Critical Thinking for Pre-K-K

Critical Thinking is the ongoing search for valid and reliable knowledge to guide beliefs, decisions and actions.

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## Path Predictor

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You can do this activity outside or inside. Pick a spot in front of you and ask your child to guess how many steps it will take to get there. Then have him/her test out his/her prediction. Encourage your child to change the way he/she moves, like running or jumping to the same spot. How do those changes affect the guesses?

**Brainy Background:** Your child is thinking like a scientist by making predictions and testing them against what actually happens. This game develops his/her skill in critical thinking and helps your child explore math ideas, like distance and counting.



## Everyday Science

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Does your child notice how ice melts when outside of the freezer or how puddles dry up? Help him/her explore these ideas through simple science experiments. Place an ice cube in a bowl and see what happens to it in a warm room, or put a small bowl of water out and see how long it takes to disappear. Talk together about what you both notice.

**Brainy Background:** Children learn like scientists—by paying attention to their experiences, developing ideas about what is going on and then testing them out. By encouraging your child to create experiments, you are promoting curiosity, scientific thinking, and understanding of important concepts about how the world works.



## Measuring Tools

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Encourage your child to “measure” different things using objects around the house. Ask, “How many socks does it take to get from one side of the room to the other side?” Then have him/her measure the same distance using something else you have around, like magazines. Talk together about what changes as he/she uses the different measuring tools.

**Brainy Background:** Your child’s learning deepens when you ask questions and discuss what is the same or different about his/her experiences with measuring. He/She is exploring math ideas like size, shape, and distance using these measuring tools. You’re also encouraging the skills of problem solving and critical thinking!

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## Taking on Challenges for Pre-K

Taking on Challenges: Life is full of stresses and challenges. Children who are willing to Take on Challenges (instead of avoiding them or simply coping with them) do better in school and in life.

### Number Waiting Games

When you and your child are waiting somewhere, invite him/her to play waiting games based on numbers. "How many buttons are on your shirt? How many blue things do you see? How many round things?" Invite your child to think of Number Waiting Games where you take a turn to figure out the answer.

**Brainy Background:** Number Waiting Games not only make waiting time pass more quickly, but they also help your child use numbers in everyday fun ways. Your child is learning strategies to deal with challenges and practicing skills like using self control to pay attention and not become distracted and using his/her working memory to arrive at the answers.

### Calm Down Kit

Using an empty shoebox or other container, invite your child to put special items inside that help him/her calm down, like a favorite toy or a piece of clothing. Have him/her decorate the box and when he/she is feeling upset, remind him/her to use his/her Calm Down Kit.

**Brainy Background:** Tools like the Calm Down Kit help your child learn to deal with stress so he/she can take action in difficult situations. When you help your child come up with tools and strategies to use when he/she is feeling upset, he/she is learning to not only cope with stress, but to draw on his/her skill of self control to take on challenges.

### Sleepy Time Strategies

Before bedtime, ask your child, "What do you do when you have trouble falling asleep?" Share your own Sleepy Time Strategies when relaxing at bedtime, like counting, thinking of a happy memory, taking deep breaths or telling a story to yourself. Remind him/her of his/her ideas the next time he/she can't seem to fall asleep.

**Brainy Background:** Talking with your child before bed is the perfect opportunity to connect with each other. By encouraging your child to take a step back and reflect on his/her experiences, you are helping him/her learn strategies to manage his/her behavior and take on challenges on his/her own.

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## Self-Directed, Engaged Learning for Pre-K

Self-Directed, Engaged Learning: It is through learning that we can realize our potential. As the world changes, so can we, for as long as we live—as long as we learn.

### Silly Stories

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Begin telling a silly story with your child by saying something like, “One day a child decided to wear his shoes on his ears.” Ask your child, “What happened next?” Take turns adding to the story and make it silly! Add surprises like, “The cup ran across the table.” How does your child respond? What surprising ideas can he/she come up with?

**Brainy Background:** By adding surprises to the story, you help your child practice skills like paying attention, thinking flexibly and creatively as well as remembering what’s real and what’s pretend so he/she can make up silly pretend ideas. All of these are important skills he/she will use both now and later in school and in life.

### What’s Your Interest?

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Ask your child what he/she is interested in today? Is your child interested in rockets, cars, or music? Whatever it is, talk about this interest—sharing with your child what you know about it and having your child share his/her ideas with you. If your child wants to know more about his/her interest, how can you help?

**Brainy Background:** By encouraging your child to have interests and to learn more about them, you are promoting self-directed engaged learning, which studies find is very important to joy in learning as well as to life-long learning.

### Play Spaces

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Help your child find different places to play in your home. It can be in a corner or you can create a space together with pillows or a blanket over a chair for a hidden play space. Let your child choose what he/she wants to bring to the new play space and then put it all away for another day.

**Brainy Background:** When your child has the chance to experiment with making choices and moving things around to make play spaces, you are encouraging critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Encouraging your child to take control of things in his/her life promotes independence and confidence.