

Helpful Hints to Jumpstart Your Toddler's Education

By Lori Barrett, Thinkertots Founder

Attention parents of fast-growing and fast-learning toddlers. Implementing a structured home learning environment for children ages one to five can be beneficial in preparing them for the jump to pre-school or kindergarten, and helping you better manage your days together.

As a child development specialist and co-founder of Thinkertots, a Bayside, New York learning center (with a franchise location in New Hyde Park, NY) that provides developmentally enriching programs for children from birth to five years, I recommend ten easy ways to prepare your toddler to be a star student. I believe the saying you are never too old to learn should also say you are never too young. There is a high correlation between an individual's future success and the cognitive stimulation and personality development skills that are formed early in life.

Here are some helpful tips for parents eager to positively influence the educational development of their toddlers:

ROUTINE - Toddlers love to know what to expect. Give them a loosely structured daily routine that includes both free play and learning activities you do together.

READ, READ, READ - Few activities reap the rewards that reading to your child will. Reading helps develop attention span, creative thinking and language while giving you both a close time for bonding. It doesn't matter if she likes to hear the story or if she just wants to actively go back and forth between pages.

MUSIC - Studies show that exposure to different types of music has a positive effect on brain growth and is particularly linked to math ability later on. Play all types of music for her, not just "kids music." This helps make children open to enjoying a variety of musical styles as they grow older.

LIBRARY - Make a visit to the library a part of her weekly routine. You want the library to be a fun part of her world. This will contribute to a love of reading and books.

PARENT-CHILD CLASS - Enroll in an educational parent-child class. As great a parent as you are, you cannot duplicate the learning opportunities children get in a structured group setting with an experienced teacher. You will also enjoy seeing your child blossom socially and learn other ways to continue the learning at home. Remember that 75% of your child's brain develops before age two, so now is a great time to invest in her education.

Thinkertots activities are totally parent-child oriented and focus on social and cognitive development. They range from cognitive games like story time, building and puzzles to ArtSmart activities like mural-making and stencils to physical activities like balance beams, tunnels and parachute games and MusicSmart activities like dancing, musical instrument play and musical story time.

STIMULATING TRIPS - At least once a season, take your child on an interesting, educational trip like the zoo, aquarium, farm or museum. Such visits are mentally invigorating and will reinforce learning in other areas.

COMPUTER PROGRAMS - There are some outstanding educational software programs for toddlers like Reader Rabbit Toddler . These are fun for her and do a great job of teaching basic concepts. The sooner your child is comfortable and adept at using the computer the better.

EDUCATIONAL TV - TV is not all bad! A few carefully selected programs a week which focus on learning like Dora the Explorer or Blue's Clue's can be a great supplement while providing Mom or Dad with a few minutes of down time.

FOREIGN LANGUAGE - If you know another language, now is the time to teach it to your child. Unlike adults, children can easily learn another language without becoming confused. Knowing more than one language is a great asset for a child. Studies also show that learning a second language before age five increases the neural pathways, which benefits all learning.

HELPING - It is important for children to learn about helping others and being a part of a team. Give your toddler a simple job like placing empty cans in the recycle bin. Even though this may seem like more trouble than it is worth, it will go a long way to teaching your child responsibility.

A bit of careful planning can make your toddler's daily life one filled with learning, fun and excitement. Taking an early, active role in your child's educational preparedness and development is an investment in time and love that will pay lifelong benefits.