

You wrestle for ten minutes with your 3-year-old to get his jacket on, yet his preschool [teacher](#) has ten kids (including yours) dressed for the playground in less than three. What's her secret? Partly, of course, the advantage of not being a parent—kids really are more inclined to behave for outsiders.

But it's not only that. Teachers develop all sorts of tricks to help young kids learn, keep the classroom more efficient, and make their job more enjoyable. This is hardly surprising. Preschool teachers have year after year of experience with this challenging age group. Fortunately, they're more than willing to share the keys to their success with eager (and sometimes frustrated) parents:

### ***Secret #1: Preschoolers don't have to dawdle.***

Why does your child seem to thwart your attempts to get you both out the door each morning but promptly turns on her heels when her teacher announces it's time to head back in from the playground? The explanation is simple enough, says Barbara Roth, director and teacher for more than 20 years at the Hanover Nursery School, in New Hampshire: "When we say something, they know we mean it." Roth says she routinely sees parents tell their child it's time to leave the playground but then stop and chat with another parent themselves, or indulge countless delays and requests for "just one more slide." "You've got to follow through," she says. "Otherwise, it becomes clear that your child doesn't really have to do what you say when you say it."

This means giving a few gentle but **firm** warnings starting five minutes before it's time to leave (or come to the table, and so on), then announcing departure time definitively and matter-of-factly. You may have to just go and scoop her up the first few times (which you should do without hesitation) until she knows you're serious.

Kids also respond to cues they can see, hear, or count. If a child has trouble saying goodbye, "decide on a certain number of hugs and kisses," suggests Jenny Raffaelli, lead teacher at the Kinderberry Hill preschool, in Roseville, Minnesota. Soon she'll come to both expect and accept the routine.

Roth plays the same few notes on the piano each day as a signal that free play is over. You might regularly use a bell or an egg timer or blink the lights in the room for the same effect, whether to get everyone to come to the dinner table or to mark that it's time to put away toys. Counting (as in "I'm going to count to thirty, and then I want to see a clean room") also inspires students to finish picking up in a hurry. "I often hear parents promise kids a treat to get them to do something," says Roth. "But that's rarely necessary—praise and accomplishment on their own mean just as much as material incentives."

Letting a child race against herself helps her hurry and also provides a great learning opportunity, says Joyce Drolette, director of the Big Sky Preschool, in Big Sky, Montana. She suggests timing getting ready for bed, school, and so forth with a stopwatch, then graphing or charting the results on the wall each day. In addition to teaching about graphs and charts, this method lets your child compare her speed on different days, says Drolette, and may even push her to beat her best time.

### ***Secret #2: Kids can handle scissors and pens earlier than you think.***

Wanting to help their child develop writing and other fine motor skills, most parents simply hand him a pencil, kid-safe scissors, and paper. But a little practice may forestall frustration later. Raffaelli has her students learn basic skills and movements with such activities as picking up nuts and small blocks with kitchen tongs, stringing beads, rolling out play clay, and even cutting it with scissors. "With clay, it doesn't matter how kids cut," she says. "They can snip any which way and really build the fine muscles in their hands."

Once your child becomes adept, let him cut real paper—but in a way that guarantees his success. "For a preschooler, trying to cut out a picture is often too much—the scissors get caught up in the paper and he can't go anywhere," says Ann Curtis, director of the Infant and Preschool Center at Western Illinois University. "Thin little strips of paper work better: One snip and he feels a great sense of accomplishment." Set him up with a bunch of thin strips of different-colored paper and a container to cut them into, then let him cut strips to glue onto a paper plate for a wall hanging. Yarn also works well for scissor practice.

As for writing, if your child shows an interest in using pencils and wants to move beyond scribbles, loops, and doodles but is frustrated that he can't make letters, he'll probably get a kick out of fooling around with stencils or tracing, says Raffaelli. Both let him practice holding the pencil and using it like a grown-up, and they won't prevent him from writing without them later on.

Also let him copy or trace your grocery or to-do list. "We play restaurant and store all the time, with the kids copying menus and lists right off the blackboard," says Drolette.

### ***Secret #3: Structure and routine are critical for easy naps.***

It may seem amazing that your child manages to nap with a bunch of other kids in the room when you can't get a short snooze out of her in her own comfy bed, but preschools have an advantage over home, explains Raffaelli. "Your child is with a group of other children who are doing the same thing, so it's just easier to go along with the rest." Even if you can't import ten other 3-year-olds every day at naptime, there are some other tricks.

Mary Eltgroth, assistant director of New Horizon Child Care Center, in Savage, Minnesota, recommends that you first give her time to unwind before her nap—a half hour minimum—being careful not to suggest an activity that engrosses her so much that she won't want to interrupt it to sleep. Next, create a routine: the same time, the same music, the same bed, and the same expectation: quiet or sleep.

Cutting down on distractions can also help, says Drolette, who runs a fan (out of reach) to block out background noise and suggests that restless kids cover their eyes with a blanket so they're not tempted to keep looking around.

***Secret #4: How you say things is as important as what you say.***

Having trouble getting your child's attention? Don't raise your voice, unless it's to sing. "Kids don't care how you sound," says Curtis. "If I'm reading and they aren't listening and I start singing the story, they quiet right down."

But you can't rely on song alone. Teachers try to alternate verbal tactics, using whispering or different voices or silently mouthing the words to get children to focus on them. They also employ visual cues, such as putting a hand up in the air or touching their finger to their nose and asking the children to do the same when they're quiet. Amanda Johnson, who used to teach at Radnor Nursery School, in Devon, Pennsylvania, has even been known to lean playfully over her charges and "blow the dust out of their ears."

And once you've got your child's undivided attention, keep your instructions clear, short, and direct, says Barbara Hill, director of administration at the Child and Family Study Center, the Lab School for California State University, Northridge. "Don't start by saying that if they get on the table it might break. Say, 'Get down'"—and explain later.

***Secret #5: Your child wants to get dressed himself.***

Most young kids really want the feelings of independence, self-confidence, and achievement that dressing themselves brings. It's just that their clothes get in the way. To make it easier, "take into account where your child is developmentally when you buy his clothes," says Hill. For instance, a 3-year-old won't do as well in a pair of jeans with a zipper and a button as he will in elastic-waist pants.

Then develop specific ways to help him succeed. This might mean arranging his outfit the night before in the shape of a person on the floor, getting in the habit of putting on dress-ups and costumes when you aren't under time pressure or labeling clothes so that your child is able to distinguish the front from the back.

Raffaelli suggests marking one shoe with a star, dot or little sticker and teaching your child that that shoe always goes on the same foot. Another right/left shoe teaching method, from Curtis: Ask your child whether his shoes are mad at each other. If they're on the correct feet, the toes will be kissing (touching); if they're angry at each other (on the wrong feet), the toes will be turning away.

To help your child learn how to manipulate zippers and buttons, let him practice on someone else so he can see what he's doing. "It's important to do this with real clothes—doll clothes are much more difficult," says Roth. "We let our kids put their snowsuits on large teddy bears." And offering to let your child button or zip your coat after you have buttoned or zipped his gives him a feeling of accomplishment as well.

***Secret #6: Taking turns and sharing don't have to be traumatic.***

As an adult, you know you have to wait in line sometimes, and you're comfortable with it as long as no one cuts in front of you. Kids have the same expectation of fairness, say teachers. Most will share and take turns as long as the system is fair. "When two children are arguing over one object, we talk about how fighting won't fix the problem but will only make them cry and feel angry," says Drolette. "I tell the one who's most upset, 'Let me hear Billy and then I'll hear you.' He'll immediately calm down because he now knows that I'll listen to both sides." Then she gets the children to agree that in the future they'll ask for the toy nicely and relinquish it when they're finished with it. "Seven times out of ten, the child will hand over the toy right then and there."

If this approach doesn't work, you may have to formalize the sharing process. Give the child waiting for a toy (as well as the one already playing with it) an accurate measure of how long until it's her turn, rather than just saying wait until "later" or that she'll get her turn "in a little while," says Johnson. She's had success using egg timers and clocks to schedule use of a popular toy. Curtis has even used a sign-up sheet for some highly desirable items. "Even a three-year-old can understand that it will be her turn when her name comes up. It also serves as a graphic representation of the concept of waiting your turn, and it's good practice for kids to print their name on it," she says.

***Secret #7: Play may be all the education your preschooler needs.***

"I'd like to think kids go home from my class and say, 'I had great fun. I played all day,'" says Johnson, "because that's how children learn."

So even if you decide to push some academics at home, the focus should be on fun rather than rote learning. It's easy to use letters in projects and games, such as Raffaelli's favorite literacy project: personalized math and counting books. "We take photographs or cut out pictures of everything that begins with a certain letter—or look for groups of one, two or three objects and so on—and make them into books."

And remember, one of the reasons your child can let loose and enjoy himself in the first place is that he has his own secret weapon: a foundation of unconditional love waiting for him at home.

*Barbara Rowley's most recent book is [Baby Days](#), an activities guide for young children.*