

Preschoolers Need Structure ... or Don't They?

Parents of young child know to expect the unexpected when it comes to structuring a preschooler's day. But do preschoolers really need all that structure anyway?

Figuring out how much structure is too much and how much unstructured time kids need can be a challenge. Preschoolers need structure to know what's expected of them, to give them a sense of order and security, and to help them learn to follow a routine. Structure can make children's lives feel safer and more dependable. On the other hand, preschoolers also need time that isn't scheduled or highly planned. Unstructured time is developmentally important because it gives children time to be free—to think, dream, or relax. Finding the balance that works for your child is key.

Reasons for Structure

Preschool children like daily routines. Clinical psychologist Dr. Laura Markham explains, "A predictable routine allows children to feel safe and to develop a sense of mastery in handling their lives." When children know things will happen at certain times, it gives them a sense of security and helps them develop self-discipline. Especially for preschoolers in the midst of traumatic life situations, this structure can reduce the chaos in the rest of their lives.



A structured environment is beneficial because it helps preschoolers:

- feel in control of their lives
- learn about order and organization
- feel more secure
- understand boundaries and limits
- know exactly what is expected of them and when
- develop self-discipline

Over-scheduling Children

In an effort to add structure to their preschooler's day, many parents turn to outside activities. One danger of this is over-scheduling, as some parents go to the extreme in planning activities, signing their children up for everything from swimming lessons to music lessons to sports. Language lessons, library storytimes, play dates, religious classes, and family activities can fill the day, as preschoolers go straight from daycare or nursery school to one event after another. But while all children can benefit from extracurricular activities, too much of a good thing can lead to whiny, stressed, overwhelmed preschoolers.

Another danger in over-scheduling is that preschoolers can become overly dependent on outside resources to provide stimulation. "Children whose lives are rigidly scheduled don't learn to amuse themselves or develop the inner resources to cope with boredom," notes Rachel Good, a North Carolina daycare provider. "When they're in unstructured situations, they often become troublemakers, because they haven't learned how to use their time."

Benefits of Unstructured Time

Everyone enjoys time to relax and daydream, and preschoolers are no different. With their active fantasy lives and almost non-stop physical activities, most preschoolers tire quickly and many need naps to recharge their energy. But free time is another vital key to recharging preschooler's batteries. Children need time to explore and investigate, to find out who they are, and to discover their likes and dislikes.

Some benefits of free time include the opportunity for preschoolers to:

- develop their creativity
- experiment with imaginative play
- daydream
- rest and relax
- discover their talents and abilities
- try out activities that interest them

Preschoolers need unstructured time to learn how things work, solve problems, use their imaginations, and practice skills they've recently learned. And most of all, they need time to just be kids!

Choosing a Preschool

Nowhere is the balance between structured and unstructured time as important as when choosing a preschool or daycare program. Some children need more structure than others. This can be personality based, or it may be a result of turmoil and uncertainty at home. Children who are going through a rough situation may crave the comfort of a regular routine to offset the unpredictability of their home lives, and may prefer highly structured programs, with little time to sit and think. Preschoolers who are easily bored or who get into trouble when they have time on their hands may also need a more structured curriculum that keeps them occupied and busy. A dreamer who prefers to do things at her own pace, however, will do better in a school with a more free-flowing, flexible schedule and plenty of unstructured time. Matching the school's style to your child's needs will result in less frustration for everyone involved.

Too much structure can hold preschoolers, or any child, back from discovering their passions, talents, and abilities. It can also prevent them from learning to amuse themselves. On the other hand, no structure at all can lead to chaos. The trick is to balance your preschooler's daily schedule to give him the structure he needs to feel secure, but still allow enough time for him to dawdle, daydream, and discover his inner resources.