7 Qualities You Need to be a GREAT Parent to a Preschooler

What does it take to parent a preschooler? It is pretty simple, once you realize what kids at this age can and can not do, and what sets them off and what keeps them happy! Here are seven qualities that make it much easier to manage all that, and why they are so crucial when you have got an independent-minded, boundary testing picky eater on your hands.

Resolve

We have all hear about the terrible twos. But nobody talks about the tantrum-throwing threes or the ferocious fours. Lots of parents are surprised when their preschooler hurls himself on the floor, screaming, after not getting a coloring book at the store.

Preschoolers, like toddlers, can fall apart when they are tired, hungry or overwhelmed. We assume that because they have stronger language and reasoning skills, they will have better control over themselves. But sometimes, they have a harder time settling down (bedtime, etc) because they think they are missing out on something. Fortunately, kids this age place great importance on figures of authority; teachers, doctors, and you. Use this to your advantage to set clear, firm rules; like no negotiations over bedtime – being steadfast and concise are key so they know what’s expected.

Forethought

When he is 2 or so, your formerly voracious eater may become so picky you will worry he’s malnourished (who can live on PB&J alone?). Experts say you are dealing with a power struggle and a plea for independence, both playing out at the dinner table. Suddenly, kids realize they can exert total and maddening control by refusing to eat what is in front of them. So you need to think ahead in the kitchen, but that doesn’t mean making multiple meals or giving in to their demands. It does mean having a few good choices for everyone, and leaving it at that; children will not willingly starve themselves.

If your child’s not getting the entire nutritional food pyramid every day, don’t worry. She will probably have all her nutritional needs met over the course of the week. So watch what she eats and plan accordingly; if she goes for peas one day, offer her cheese or yogurt the next. Another tactic is to get your preschooler involved before dinnertime. Ask her to help you mix the mac and cheese so she feels like she is in control. Or at the market, let her pick out a fruit that she finds interesting looking.

A Sense of Fantasy

Actors have nothing on preschoolers or their moms. On any given day, your child will be a baby elephant, a monster alien, or a fairy ballerina. And you get to play along. Preschoolers stretch their language skills as they describe complex story plots for you to follow. They hone their logic; “this happened and then this happened”, and develop social skills playing imaginatively with their peers by describing how to build the fort and cooperating making it happen. Your role is to become a facilitator, but be careful not to take over the story. The more they do the better, offer ideas, encourage him to make props out of things around the house. Just remember you are the supporting actor in the play, let her direct for now.

Stoicism

One of the hardest thing to do as a parent is to let your child walk alone into the scary world of jungle gyms and new people. But preschool beckons, even for just a few hours a day. Teachers hug more crying parents then children on the first day of school. To quell your queasiness, make sure you feel good about the person you are leaving your child with, and focus on what your child
will gain from school. It gives her rules for every task, which kids this age thrive on. It makes her feel proud and independent that she can eat her own snack and throw away her own trash.

It enables her to be away from you for a while, trust her own decisions and hey, have some fun. Preschool can also accomplish a lot of the stuff you are still working on, like ridding your child of his pacifier or lovey. If your child has a hard time adjusting to his new routine, comfort him but do not indulge his fears by letting him stay home or lingering at drop-off. Keep a stiff upper lip and remind him that he is a big kid. Remember, you can cry on your spouse’s shoulder when he is not around.

**Nonchalance**

Preschoolers know the power of words. From repeating ‘poop’ in between uncontrollable fits of laughter to uttering the most chilling words in the English language ‘I hate you’, your three year old is beginning to understand that certain language elicits dramatic reactions. That is why it is important not to overreact to potty humor or take hurtful proclamations personally; they are testing to see how far they can go. Now that kids have moved on from diapers and think about potty issues more, they sense that these topics are taboo. And taboo = hysterical. The best way to deal? Act like an English monarch with your ‘I am not amused face’. The more you react – positively or negatively – the more you reinforce the behavior. Explain that while he can engage in a little bit of toilet humor at home, it is not OK at preschool, a friend’s house or anywhere else in public.

When it comes to mean words, use the same approach. It is hard to not feel upset but you need to remain calm and say ‘Oh that is sad because I love you very much.’ Overreacting will only let your child know that this is a good way to get your attention. As with potty humor, nonchalance is key but you do need to make it clear later when she is calmer, that language intended to only hurt people is never OK.

**Dexterity**

During preschool, kid’s motor skills and hand-eye coordination really take off as seen in one-foot hops and buttoning of shirts. Your child learns by trying these things out, repeatedly, and it helps immeasurably to be able to see someone as skilled as yourself doing them, too. So crack your knuckles, stretch your calves and get ready to hop, button and more.

A slightly less tiring way to help your child’s development is with crafts. Playing with clay or stringing beads is a great way to build up the small muscles in her hands and hone her hand-eye coordination. You can also ask her to do housework with you; she can stir cake mix, plant flowers, or sort laundry by color. She will be improving her coordination and having fun.

**Empathy**

It is not all about rules and schedules with preschoolers. As much as your child thrives on knowing what to expect, he is also just a little kid. It is hard growing up; there’s potty training, a big-kid bed, maybe a new sibling, etc. You try three or more major life changes in one year! That is why it is important to show your child you feel his pain too. It could mean a hug and a new do when she flips over her hair being braided all wrong. Or it might mean just understanding that it is tiring to spend a long day at preschool, remembering all the rules, getting along with other kids, and generally keeping yourself together. Help him decompress with a snack and a chat, and don’t rush into chores or errands. Your empathy will not only keep the both of you calmer, it is also a quality well worth modeling. You will be proud to see your child mimic the things you do, then you can definitely call yourself a great parent!