

Pre-Academic Learning

A guide for parents, teachers, and teacher-aides

Pre-academic skills are the early learning abilities that help children explore, understand, and interact with the world around them. They provide a foundation for later learning in areas such as reading, writing, mathematics, and everyday problem-solving.

These skills include recognizing similarities and differences, matching objects and pictures, sorting, identifying shapes and colours, understanding simple concepts, and developing early number awareness.

For autistic children, particularly those with complex communication and learning needs, the pathway towards these skills may look different.

Some children may recognize letters or numbers before they can follow simple spoken instructions. Others may enjoy arranging objects or matching pictures but find it difficult to demonstrate these abilities during a structured learning activity.

A child's ability to participate in a particular task does not necessarily tell us everything about what they understand or how they learn.

Before deciding what to teach, we need to discover how the child learns best and where their individual starting point may be.

Begin with the Child's Strengths and Interests

Children are often more willing to explore activities that involve familiar objects, favourite characters, or subjects that already interest them.

A child who enjoys toy cars may be interested in matching identical cars, arranging them by size, or exploring their colours.

A child who enjoys pictures may prefer matching photographs or identifying familiar characters.

Another child may be drawn to letters, numbers, shapes, or visual patterns.

These interests can provide natural opportunities to introduce early learning concepts.

Begin by observing what the child chooses to explore and how they interact with the materials.

Do they notice differences between objects? Do they place similar items together? Can they recognize a familiar picture or find an object that matches another?

Do they explore independently, or do they enjoy having another person participate?

These observations can help identify activities that are both meaningful and accessible to the child.

Explore Early Learning Skills

Pre-academic learning includes several related areas. They do not need to be introduced in a fixed order, and a child may demonstrate strengths in one area while needing additional support in another.

1. Matching and Recognizing Similarities

Begin with familiar objects or pictures.

A child may match two identical toy cars, pair photographs of familiar objects, or find two blocks of the same shape.

As the child becomes comfortable, introduce matching objects to their photographs or recognizing similar items that are not identical.

2. Sorting and Categorizing

Provide opportunities to group objects according to a shared feature.

For example, a child may place red blocks together, separate large and small objects, or group toy animals and vehicles.

Begin with distinctions the child can readily recognize and gradually introduce new categories when appropriate.

3. Colours, Shapes, and Visual Patterns

Explore colours and shapes through familiar toys, puzzles, picture cards, or everyday objects.

Some children may enjoy arranging coloured blocks, completing simple patterns, or matching shapes in a puzzle.

Naming a colour or shape is not the only way to demonstrate recognition. A child may show understanding by matching, selecting, pointing, or using another accessible response.

4. Early Number and Quantity Awareness

Use familiar objects to explore concepts such as one and many, more and less, or counting small groups of items.

A child who enjoys stacking blocks may be interested in adding another block to a tower or matching a small number of objects to a visual example.

Some children may recognize written numbers before understanding quantity. These abilities can be explored separately and connected gradually.

5. Attention, Participation, and Early Problem-Solving

Provide opportunities to explore simple puzzles, complete familiar sequences, discover how objects fit together, or participate in an activity with another person.

Notice how the child approaches a problem, what captures their attention, and whether they recognize when something changes.

These observations may reveal emerging learning abilities that are not immediately apparent through conventional teaching tasks.

Use Visual and Hands-On Learning Opportunities

For many autistic children, visual information and direct interaction with objects can make learning more accessible.

Instead of relying primarily on spoken instructions, demonstrate what to do using real objects, pictures, or a simple visual example.

For instance, when introducing a matching activity, place two identical objects together while allowing the child to observe.

Then offer another familiar object and see how the child responds.

Some children may understand the activity after watching a demonstration. Others may need additional opportunities to explore the materials before they are ready to participate.

Avoid assuming that a child who does not respond to a spoken instruction has failed to understand the underlying concept.

They may understand the visual relationship between objects but have difficulty processing the instruction, organizing a response, or demonstrating what they know in the way we expect.

The method of teaching should help the child demonstrate their understanding, not become an additional obstacle to learning.

Introduce Learning in Small, Manageable Steps

Begin with an activity the child can approach comfortably.

For some children, a brief, predictable learning opportunity may be helpful. Others may participate for longer when the activity is particularly enjoyable.

There is no need to insist on a fixed session length.

Observe the child's attention, interest, and comfort, and adjust the activity accordingly.

A clear beginning and ending may help some children understand what to expect. This can be shown through a simple visual sequence, a familiar routine, or the natural completion of an activity.

Introduce one new concept or change at a time when possible.

For example, if a child enjoys matching identical objects, you might gradually introduce a new set of objects rather than changing the materials, instructions, and expectations simultaneously.

As the child becomes familiar with an activity, offer opportunities to explore the same concept in different situations.

Matching can happen with toys, clothing, photographs, household objects, or materials encountered during everyday routines.

This helps the child experience learning beyond a single set of teaching materials.

Model, Support, and Allow Time to Respond

Demonstrating an activity can help a child understand what is being offered.

Show how two objects match, how a puzzle piece fits, or how blocks can be arranged to create a pattern.

Then allow the child an opportunity to explore or respond.

Some children may need a visual prompt, a simplified activity, or additional time to process what they have observed.

Support should be offered in ways that respect the child's comfort and independence.

Avoid repeatedly directing the child's hands or requiring them to complete an activity through physical prompting.

A child may demonstrate participation by looking towards an object, selecting a picture, pointing, moving an item, or using a communication device.

Recognize these responses and adapt the activity to the child's abilities.

The aim is to help the child become an increasingly active participant in their own learning.

Consider Sensory and Communication Needs

A child's sensory experiences and communication abilities can significantly influence their participation in learning activities.

A noisy room, uncomfortable seating, bright lighting, or too many materials may make it difficult for a child to focus, even when the activity itself is within their abilities.

Offer a comfortable learning environment and allow movement or sensory breaks when needed.

Use the child's established communication methods to offer choices, acknowledge preferences, and recognize when they want to continue or stop.

A child who cannot verbally name a colour may still be able to match it, select it from a choice of objects, or identify it using pictures or a communication device.

Learning and communication should support one another, rather than requiring the child to master one particular form of communication before exploring new concepts.

Make Learning Part of Everyday Life

Pre-academic learning does not need to happen only at a table or during a formal teaching session.

Everyday activities provide natural opportunities to explore early concepts.

A child may match socks while helping with laundry, sort familiar toys during play, recognize shapes while building with blocks, or explore quantities while preparing a snack.

These experiences allow the child to encounter familiar concepts in different settings and with different people.

Parents, teachers, and teacher-aides can share observations about which activities the child enjoys, what they appear to understand, and what support helps them participate.

Consistency is valuable, but it does not require everyone to use exactly the same materials or teaching routine.

What matters is maintaining a shared understanding of the child's interests, abilities, communication methods, and emerging learning needs.

Final Thoughts

Pre-academic learning is not about introducing formal schoolwork as early as possible.

It is about creating meaningful opportunities for children to explore, recognize patterns, develop early concepts, and discover new ways of understanding the world.

For children with complex learning and communication needs, these opportunities may begin with very small steps.

A child who notices a familiar picture, matches two objects, completes a favourite puzzle, or discovers a new relationship between materials is demonstrating an important part of their learning journey.

Our role is to recognize these abilities, build upon the child's interests, and provide support that allows them to participate with increasing understanding and independence.

We do not choose the starting point from the learning activity alone. The child helps us find it.