

# april-may @ symbio

## upcoming presentations

### Positive Discipline

Tuesday 3 May  
7:30-9:00pm

In order for discipline to be truly effective, it has to help a child learn how to regulate and appropriately express emotions as well as control behavior. Because of the goal of discipline is for a child to internalize a sense of appropriate vs. inappropriate behavior and ultimately moral action, discipline has to be relationally relevant. We will discuss effective ways to set limits, deliver emotionally supportive guidance and foster the development of a healthy sense of self in your child in the toddler and preschool years.

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### Activities for Kids: When, what and how much?

**Q:** *When my wife left for work on a Monday morning a few weeks ago, I officially became a stay-at-home dad. This was part of the plan we had before my wife got pregnant. We were lucky in that she was able to return to work gradually, working from home for the first couple months after a lengthy maternity leave, but now I'm on my own, nine hours a day, with my 10-month-old daughter. Proud to say, I am handling the day-to-day fine (most days). But lately I am kind of freaked out by the fact that all the moms in my "parents" group (which, as you may have guessed, was renamed to on my behalf) are already signing their babies up for activities, teams and classes – some of which won't even start for over year. Our daughter is very active and wants to be on the go all the time. She's nearly walking, and I know that once she masters this skill, keeping her safe and occupied in our apartment is going to be a full-time challenge. So I am all for some classes. But I have also read that kids today are over-scheduled and that this can hamper development. Of course, we don't want that. So what's the deal? How much is not enough and how much is too much? And how do I know when to do what with her? For example, a friend is signing her 18-month-old up for a soccer league. Is that realistic?*

**A:** There's plenty of data to support the fact that kids are more heavily scheduled than they were a generation ago – a fact that has spurred a good deal of controversy. One theory argues that many kids are over-scheduled and therefore deprived of the opportunity to develop as individuals. On the other hand, you'll find plenty of professionals who will tell you that you will give your daughter an advantage in life by providing her with maximum exposure to structured learning and facilitated skills building. As with most debates, you can find research to back up either point of view; and, as with most debates, the wisest position can be found somewhere between the extremes.

Much of the literature cautioning against over-scheduling children focuses on research done on adolescents and older teens which demonstrates a correlation between a history of being highly scheduled throughout childhood and difficulty in self-directed pursuits and situations that require independent initiative. The correlation makes sense, and it's important to keep in mind, but don't let it scare you away from music class or tumbling lessons.

Kids need practice with structured tasks; and exposure to situations that will inspire and require them to develop new skills is advantageous for development. Activities that provided facilitated practice with skills-building are a wonderful resource for children.

One of the great things about life in the Bay Area is the abundance of such resources for families and kid-friendly activities. Parents can find any number of activities that will help children practice fine or gross motor skill development, self-regulation, separation from parents, social skills building, imaginative play and formal learning skills. We are fortunate to have such a plentiful smorgasbord, but it can lead to the temptation to overfill a plate. Children need unstructured time too.

Toddlers and preschoolers should have some time each day when the agenda is basically a blank canvas. This time is important to give children the chance to regroup and reconsolidate after experiencing a high level of stimulation (especially for children who are highly aware of their environments). It's also important that children begin to practice self-directed activity during the toddler years. Figuring out how to entertain and regulate oneself is a developmental task that is as important as impulse control or learning how to separate from parents. As with every developmental task, it's easier for some children than for others; but every child needs to practice the skill in order to become proficient.

As a parent, let your goal be a balance between structured activities and free play time or quiet time. When picking activities for your daughter, play to her strengths and preferences first: she will develop faster and with more glee when she gets to follow her passion.

However, if you notice that she persistently struggles with a particular task, finding opportunities for gentle challenges will help her grow. Examples of this would be finding activities that require waiting and focus for a child that suffers from chronic lack of patience. The key to success with choosing these sorts of activities is to keep the word "gentle" always in your mind when you think of challenging your child. If you overdo the challenge, your daughter will be likely to give up or resist rather than stretching to grow. This can be hard on a child's self-esteem (and lead to acting out). Each child will have her or his own ideal mix of structured activities, free time alone or with siblings and free time with parents. Your daughter's personal cocktail will be dictated by her temperament and you can expect this mix to change repeatedly as she passes through various stages in development.

At each stage she may want, or need, more or less practice with each of the tasks of that stage, and that should be your main guide in determining how many, when and what activities to introduce. With that caveat, here is a rough guide for developmentally appropriate activities:

6 – 15 months: No structured activities are needed outside the home at this age. Things like baby/parent swim or "walk & wheels" groups can be a welcome outing for parents and many infants will enjoy the stimulation. However, your main focus at this age is just keeping a consistent schedule. Because your daughter is so active, as she works on increasing her mobility it will be a good idea to spend some time each day a safe space where she can roam without encountering something you don't want her to touch or climb on. So finding a regular park or an indoor recreation space will be important to help avoid frustration (on both of your parts).

If you would like your daughter to learn a second language, regular exposure to that language can be helpful anytime from infancy on. Children's brains are geared to learn language intensively from 1 – 5 years. Classroom-style instruction will not agree with her developmental learning style during these years, but learning to communicate with a family member or nanny who speaks to her only in another language will. You can also consider foreign language preschools when she gets older.

15 – 18 months: This is a great time to begin exploring

some “daddy & me” classes. Do what you enjoy together: gym classes, music, even art (aka: team paint smearing). The purpose of these classes will have little to do with the intended class activities and, at this age, there will be no point in trying to stretch her envelope.

So, if you want to do music, find a class where she can roam around and don't worry if she's more interested in climbing the piano bench than shaking the tambourine. The main goal will be just to expose her to the subject, to the presence of other children and parents, and to the practice of coming and going from an activity in a predictable, repeating pattern. Group activities that are goal oriented, like team soccer, tend to be a lot like cat-herding with kids this age – which is fine if everyone is having fun.

18 – 30 months: One of the main things you want to think about during this period is how your daughter manages separations. If she hasn't had much experience spending time away from you and her mom by the time she's about 18 months, you'll want her to get some practice. If she struggles with it, start slowly – leaving her for short periods of time with a familiar friend or family member, or participating in classes that allow you to leave the room for short periods of time. Keep in mind that the goal of this sort of practice is not to find a way to separate without her minding, but to give her an opportunity to learn how to manage her distress. Practicing separations will also help her learn to trust that they always end in reunions. It's very helpful for children to have this sort of practice before they head into preschool.

30 – 42 months: By the time your daughter is nearing three years-old she should have the cognitive skills and attention span necessary to benefit from some specific skills training. She will get satisfaction from mastering new skills in her areas of interest, such as learning how to do somersaults in gymnastics class, create a work of art that she can bring home, or identify different birds or butterflies in a nature class.

At the same time, this will be an age when you want to pay special attention to being sure that she has enough unstructured creative time, especially if she is starting preschool.

Her imagination will be exploding at this age and her focus on social learning will intensify. She will need to lean heavily on symbolic expression (such as role-play, telling and listening to stories, and playing with doll or animal figures) to process the expansion of her internal and external worlds; and to do this, she'll need unstructured time.

This is also a good age to begin to introduce some basic academic skills such as letter and number recognition and writing. This is another area in which the exercise is much more important than the outcome. There's no need for her to hit kindergarten with any level of reading skill from a developmental point of view. However, learning academic basics give her a chance to practice structured recall of information from her environment, which builds problem solving and reasoning skills.

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noelle cochran, psyd  
lele diamond, mft license no. 40324