

The Path to Math: Word Problems for Preschoolers



Children as young as 3 may enjoy solving simple word problems (see Illinois Early Learning Benchmarks 6.A.ECb, 6.B.EC, 6.C.ECa). You can give preschoolers opportunities to work with word problems related to their investigations, daily activities, and things they are curious about: money, toys, or objects the class has collected during a project.

What types of word problems can preschoolers solve?

Some preschoolers can try to add two groups of things.

- For example, you might say, “Taylor had 2 keys. He found 2 more. How many keys does Taylor have now?”
- For an added challenge, you could reverse the “known” and “unknown” amounts. “Yesterday, Taylor had 2 keys. He found some more keys and now he has 4. How many keys did he find?”

Some preschoolers can work on simple subtraction or “take-away” problems.

- For example, you might say, “Sascha had 3 pennies. Two of them rolled away. Now how many does he have?”
- Reverse the known and unknown amounts sometimes. “One of Sascha’s pennies rolled away. He has two pennies left. How many did he start with?”

Many preschoolers can work with zero.

- You might say, for example, “Rani had 5 shiny rocks. Five of them got lost. How many shiny rocks does Rani have left?”
- Try reversing “known” and “unknown” amounts. “Rani had 5 shiny rocks. She lost some and now she has zero shiny rocks. How many got lost?”

What are some ways to engage preschoolers in solving word problems?

These strategies can help children get started.

- Speak clearly when you pose a word problem. Give children plenty of time to think, and be willing to repeat the problem.
- Let children use objects to work out the problem and to check their answers.
- When a child answers a word problem, ask her, “How did you get your answer?” The way a child thinks about a problem can be just as important as having a “right” answer.
- Keep in mind that two or three problems at a time will be enough for many preschoolers.

Children can progress from simple to complex problems.

- Start with amounts of 5 or less for beginners. Increase the total amounts when you see that children are catching on.
- When a child can answer simple word problems quickly, try more complex questions. “Winona collected 3 acorns. One got lost. Then she found 2 more acorns. How many does she have now?”

For related Web resources, see “The Path to Math: Word Problems for Preschoolers” at <http://illinoisearlylearning.org/tips.htm>.

Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this tip sheet are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Illinois State Board of Education.



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