

# The Path to Math: Word Problems for Preschoolers



*Children as young as 3 may enjoy solving simple word problems. 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. (See Illinois Early Learning and Development Benchmarks 6.A.ECa, 6.A.ECc, 6.A.ECd, 6.B.ECa, and 6.B.ECd.)*

## 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>.

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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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