

READY for SCHOOL Parent News: Why is Sorting Important?

You have probably visited your child's preschool homebase and observed children engaged in sorting objects into groupings or sorting shapes into piles. What is the big deal about sorting? Why is it such a common preschool activity?

Sorting is a beginning math skill: This skill helps children to organize their world and differentiate properties of objects. It is also a building block to numerical concepts which later require children to group "sets" of objects. The more complicated the sorting is, the higher level understanding is involved. For example, a child who sorts a pile of shapes into red circles, red squares, blue circles and blue squares is sorting by "multiple attributes," in this case, both color and shape.

Sorting at the center: In your child's preschool room, teachers provide opportunities and materials for sorting in a variety of learning centers. Initially, teachers will encourage children to sort by one attribute. For example, in the housekeeping center, plastic fruits can be sorted from the vegetables. Or in the science area, while studying dinosaurs, children can sort plastic dinosaurs into three categories: herbivores, omnivores and carnivores, after these terms have been discussed with the larger group.

Sorting by two or more dimensions: Children gradually build up to sorting by two or more dimensions. When children are working with blocks, they are sorting a variety of shapes and sizes while learning about the building properties of each shape and size of block. As they are cleaning up in the block area, they must use visual discrimination to sort the blocks by size and shape (for example, small rectangles, large rectangles, small triangles and large triangles) to fit them back onto the shelf with the matching label. Many centers have specially-designed small block sets which encourage children to sort by three dimensions such as color, size and shape.

Sorting activities at home: At home, you can provide sorting activities as part of your daily routine. Your child can sort the silverware as it is placed into the drawer. He can put matching socks together while helping with laundry or help with sorting and arranging the canned foods in the pantry. Look for opportunities to make the activity more challenging and to help your child sort by two or more attributes. For example, sorting and folding blue and white bath towels, hand towels and wash cloths (sorting by size and color) is another useful sorting activity at home. Or outside, your child can help pick and sort items from the vegetable garden (big red peppers, small green peppers, big red tomatoes, small yellow tomatoes, etc.) These real life experiences are most memorable to a child as they engage many senses in the learning process.