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Spatial Concepts and Relationships – Early Skills with Preschoolers

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What Are Spatial Concepts and Relationships?

Spatial concepts (a category of basic concepts) define the relationship between us and objects, as well as the relationships of objects to each other. As our language begins to develop, early spatial concepts such as ***in front of, behind, top, bottom, over, under, last, between, farthest, backward, in, on,*** etc., help us understand directions more precisely, ask detailed questions, and express our ideas to others. For preschoolers and young students, an awareness or understanding of spatial concepts and relationships usually predicts later success in math, reading, and following directions.

When Should Parents/Educators Begin Teaching Spatial Concepts?

Parents and preschool educators should begin teaching spatial concepts to children at a very early age. At age two, children are already absorbing, learning, and rapidly developing their vocabularies. They are beginning to understand the concepts of space in their environment; they are moving, touching, talking, and beginning to ask questions. This is the perfect time to *immerse* them in language that fosters their understanding of spatial relationships between their bodies and the objects in their environment.

We ask toddlers, “Where is your nose?” They point to their nose. We follow up with different concept phrases like, “Your nose is ***on*** your face,” “Your nose is ***above*** your lips,”



“Your nose is ***on the front of*** your head.” This type of response embeds concept words—expanding on and making them a regular part of language. Using concepts in “teachable moments” helps children understand, and later generalize, the concepts for further learning.

I Spy and *I See* are examples of games that can use spatial concepts in a fun way. For example, “I see a book. Where is it?” When the child finds or points to it, an adult responds with, “The book is ***on*** the shelf...***in*** the book bag... ***under*** the table... ***by*** the bed... ***above*** the table... ***beside*** the chair.” As children develop spatial concepts, they add other concepts (see [Handy Handout #161](#)) to expand conversation in games like *I Spy*. “I spy a ***big, green*** book! I spy a ***little, square*** pillow. I spy a ***red, round*** ornament with a ***crooked*** hook.”

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It is easy to include concepts while interacting with your child by talking in great detail and description. For example, a mother may tell her kindergarten child, "Take **off** your coat and boots. Hang your **blue** coat **in** the closet **on** the **little** hook **above** the doorknob. Put your **red** boots **on** the rubber mat **by** the door. Now lie **down** and rest **beside** your dad

before we have dinner." In just a few seconds, this child must listen to over ten concepts, make sense of them, and then follow through with the directions. Think of all of the verbal directions a teacher gives each student every day at school. Spatial concepts, along with other basic concepts, are essential for success in school and daily activities at home.



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