

# Practical Strategies for Supporting Preschoolers through Change

**April 14, 2026**

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A DoW & Cooperative Extension partnership supporting professionals who serve military families.

## Our Mission

Strengthening military family service providers through accessible, research-informed learning.

## What We Offer

Free, online professional development through webinars, podcasts, courses, and more.



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## Today's Presenters

# Learning Objectives

## Webinar Overview

This webinar will share ways to prepare young children for changes in caregivers, daily routines, and friends when they move. Learn how to use adaptive tools and keep things consistent so children—including those with disabilities—feel safe and secure.

1

Identify three practical steps to prepare preschoolers for environmental and routine changes.

2

Describe two adaptive tools or routines that support children with disabilities in new settings.

3

Create an action plan to apply content.



# Preparing for Change

# Why Change is a Big Deal

- Brain development and predictability
- Emotional regulation skills are developing
- Change = loss of control

**What changes have your preschoolers struggled with the most?**



- Henry, 4 years old
- In June
  - Dad gets a new job
  - Family sells home and moves in with family members
- In November
  - Family moves into their own home in a new town
- In April
  - Baby brother James is born
- Henry regress in toilet training and started acting out

# Common Changes

- New caregiver(s)
- Classroom transitions
- Moving
- New sibling(s)
- Changes in peers
- Schedule disruptions

# Navigating Change Successfully

- Requires:
  - Flexibility
  - Emotional regulation
  - Supportive caregivers
  - Advance preparation



# Strategy 1: Preparing for the Change

- Visual schedule(s)
- Social stories
- Photo books of new setting/anticipated change
- Countdown activities (calendar cross off, paper chain)



# Let's Chat!

What is one change a preschooler you work with might experience in the next few months? How could you help them prepare?



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# Strategy 2: Maintaining "Anchors"

- What might you keep the same?
  - Familiar routines
  - Rituals
  - Consistent adults
  - Visual supports
  - Transitional 'lovie'

**How might you support these anchors at home and at school?**



# Strategy 3: Teaching Adaptability

- "Sometimes Things Change" scripts
- Modeling/teaching problem-solving
- Practicing through 'low stakes' change(s)



# Teaching Script

1

Name the change. "Sometimes things change."

2

Validate emotions. "That might feel..."

3

Anchor safety/consistency. "Our...is still the same and we are safe."

4

Offer a plan. "Let's think of another idea!"

# Sometimes Things Change Script Examples

“Sometimes things change. When things change, we can feel surprised or upset. That’s ok! We can take a breath, think of a plan, and try something new.”

“Sometimes things change. Today we can’t have outside time because it is raining. That might be disappointing! We can think of another plan. We could have a dance party or play with the parachute- what should we try?”

“Sometimes things change. Today Rory isn’t at school. You might miss playing with Rory. We can still find a friend to play with. Who can we ask to play magna-tiles with us?”

“Sometimes things change. Today Mrs. Foreman is not here, and Mrs. Vassall is helping our class instead. I’m still here and will be here all day.”

# Teaching Flexibility

“In our class we practice being flexible. ‘Flexible’ means we can try something different when something changes. Sometimes things change, and we can handle it together!”



# Considerations for Children with Disabilities

- Avoid being too abstract (“Don’t worry”, “We’ll do something else”)
- Use **clear + concrete** language
- Ground in visual supports (e.g., visual schedule) or first/then
- Pause to allow for processing
- Offer choices
- Support emotional regulation



# Supporting a New Student

- Meet Mateo, age 3
  - New to preschool
  - Recent move to a new state
  - Military parent frequently away
  - Adjusting to many new routines



# Supporting a New Student

- Home Information
  - Clings at drop-off
  - Asks about absent parent
  - Bedtime and routines have been difficult



# Supporting a New Student

- Observed Behaviors
  - Difficulty during transitions (cleanup, toileting, meals)
  - Screaming, throwing materials
  - Running away from adults (elopement)
  - Stays near door or teacher
  - Watches but rarely joins play



# Supporting a New Student

- Strengths to Build On
  - Enjoys building with blocks
  - Responds to one-on-one reassurance
  - Curious about classroom materials
  - Smiles during positive adult interaction



# Let's Chat!

How can an early childhood educator address Mateo's behaviors? How can the adults in his life address them?



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# Preparing for Kindergarten

- Meet Lila, age 5
  - Preparing for kindergarten
  - Will attend a new school
  - Will not attend with familiar preschool peers
  - Family unsure about kindergarten expectations



# Preparing for Kindergarten

- Child Responses
  - Asking many questions about kindergarten
  - Hesitant during conversations about change
  - Needs reassurance from adults
  - Longer bedtime routines with repeated worries



# Preparing for Kindergarten

- Family Concerns
  - Unsure what kindergarten expectations are
  - Wondering what skills are needed
  - Want to help Lila feel confident



# Preparing for Kindergarten

- Strengths to Build On
  - Follows routines well
  - Enjoys helping peers
  - Independent with classroom tasks
  - Strong relationships with teachers



# Let's Chat!

How can families and educators help young children like Lila feel less anxious about change?

What can early childhood programs share with families to help them prepare for kindergarten?



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# A Father's Role in Preparing for Change

## When Home

- Foster social emotional growth through connection and shared time
- Read books, create art, share meals, and play together

## When Away

- Send reminders that you are thinking of your child, supporting them, and proud of them
- Read books via phone or video call
- Remind your child that you are in this together, even when apart

# Ideas for Children with Disabilities

- Create picture schedules to help children anticipate what will happen next
- Introduce "first/then" picture cues to support transitions
- Read stories about the anticipated event
- Provide a tour of the new setting or share photos
- Offer favorite calming or sensory items to ease anxiety
- Display a visual calendar the child can see daily before the change

# Problem-Solving in Preschool



Knowing how to problem-solve helps:



Increase independence



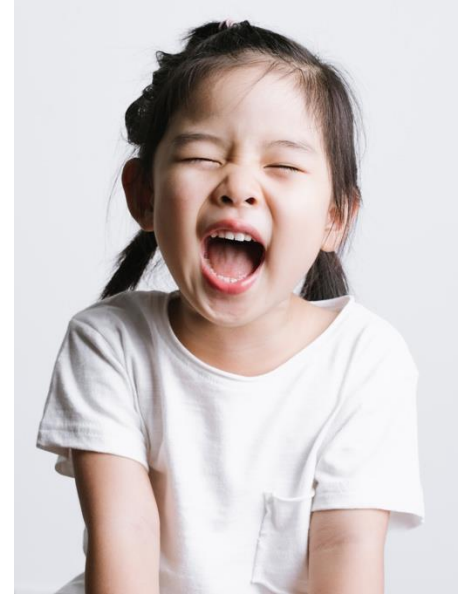
Encourage cooperation



Decrease need for adult intervention



Support social skills development



# Teaching Problem-Solving

- Identify the problem
- Generate multiple solutions
- Understand that solutions have consequences
- If one solution doesn't work, try another



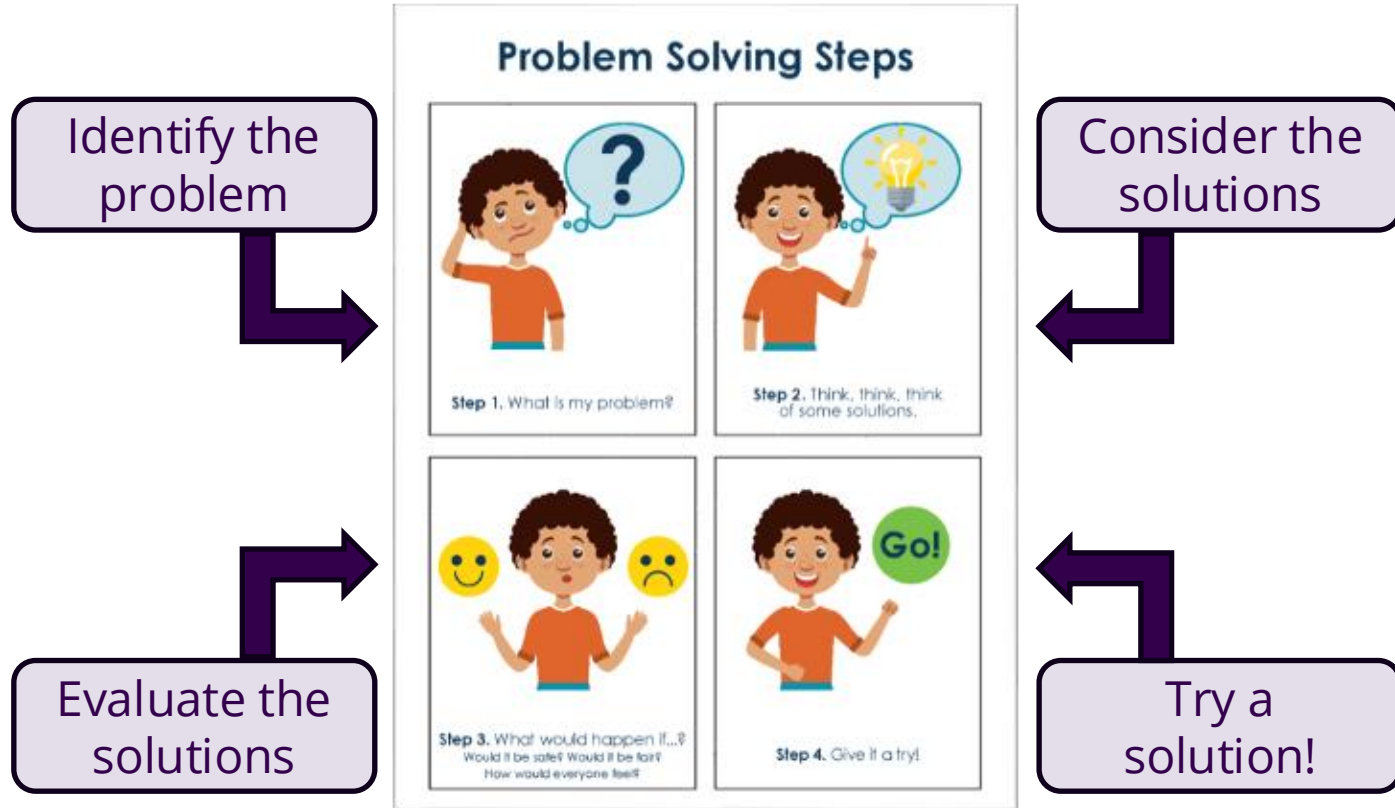
# Let's Chat!

What are common social problems that may occur in a preschool setting?



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# Teaching Problem-Solving Skills



# Possible Solutions

Get a ti

**Wait Patiently for a Turn**

**Eney Meeney Miney Mo**

**Let's Play Together**

are

Say, "Pleas



r help

Use kind

break

Ask nic

**Rock, Paper, Scissors**

**Ask Nicely**

**Make a New Choice**

ore



# Scripted Stories



**We Can Be Problem Solvers!**

By Rochelle Lentini, Rachel Anderson, & Anne Wimmer

**ChallengingBehavior.org**  
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**We Can Be Problem Solvers at Home!**

By Meghan von der Embse, Rochelle Lentini, Rachel Anderson, Anne Wimmer, & Sarah Payton

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# Modeling Problem Solving Skills

- Teach problem-solving skills using visual aids or social stories
- Provide practice opportunities within everyday routines
- Model problem solving using self-talk



# Stability Through Consistency

Predictable Schedule  
and Routines

Visuals

Scripted Stories

Friendship Skills

# Your Action Plan

1

Set one small goal

- What is one action you will try?

2

Identify supports

- What do you already have? What do you still need?

3

Plan for success

- How will you know it worked?

**Any  
Questions?**

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