



**Imagining a calmer classroom:  
Harnessing visualization and future  
thinking skills to help children meet our  
behavior expectations**

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**Children do well  
when they  
can....**

- If they're not doing well, it's our job to figure out what's standing in the way.



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**“How do I get them to want to do it?”**



“It looks like you have everything under control.”

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MARSHALL

## Extrinsic vs intrinsic motivation

- **Intrinsic motivation:** drive to engage in an activity for its own sake. It holds interest, is engaging and challenging, and elicits feelings of pleasure and satisfaction.
- **Extrinsic motivation:** drive to participate in an activity based on meeting an external goal, garnering praise and approval, winning a competition, or receiving an award or payment. Not driven by the desire to engage in an activity for its own sake.



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MARSHALL

### Guiding Principles for the WV Pre-K Standards

Foundations	Description
Representation and symbolic thinking are critical.	Children use representation and symbolic thinking across all domains to develop an understanding of concepts and generalizations from concrete to abstract. The ability to pretend and use symbols are foundations of symbolic and abstract thought, which leads to the development of academic skills such as math, science, and literacy. The experiences that lead to a child's ability to think abstractly must be embedded in the curriculum through opportunities for active exploration, pretend play, and symbolic communication. Children should have the opportunity to invent with materials and words.
Children are active learners.	Children learn through active involvement (exploring, playing, manipulating, and problem solving). They construct their own knowledge by engaging in experiences in the environment with peers and adults. Adults must use experiences with children to scaffold previous knowledge with new concepts. Active learning is a key component of both child-initiated and teacher-facilitated experiences.

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MARSHALL

### Approaches to Learning

Approaches to Learning refers to observable behaviors that indicate ways children become engaged in and respond to social interactions and learning experiences. Children's approaches to learning contribute to their success in school and influence their development and learning in all other domains. Children's ability to stay focused, interested, and engaged in activities supports a range of positive outcomes, including cognitive, language, and social and emotional development. It allows children to acquire new knowledge, learn new skills, and set and achieve goals for themselves. Many early learning experts view approaches to learning as one of the most important domains of early childhood development.

All West Virginia teachers are responsible for classroom instruction that integrates content standards, and learning skills. Students in Pre-K will advance through a developmentally appropriate progression of standards. The following chart represents the components of Approaches to Learning standards in Pre-K:

<b>Executive Functioning and Cognitive Self-Regulation</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Self-regulation</li> <li>Maintain focus</li> <li>Attend to activities</li> <li>Complete challenging task</li> </ul>	<b>Initiative and Curiosity</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Appropriate risk taking</li> <li>Imagination</li> <li>Creativity</li> <li>Build on prior experience</li> <li>Inquire and investigate</li> </ul>
<b>Persistence and Attentiveness</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Implement plans and ideas</li> <li>Engage in a product and activity for an extended period of time</li> <li>Purposeful play</li> <li>Show persistence in actions and behavior</li> </ul>	<b>Cooperation</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Collaborative work and play</li> <li>Play organized by children</li> <li>Share knowledge and ideas with peers</li> <li>Take on roles and responsibilities in the classroom</li> </ul>

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**Following rules requires *upstairs* brain skills**

- Perception and Attention
- Hindsight and foresight
- Emotions and Self-regulation
- Cognitive Flexibility
- Language and communication (including self-talk)
- Social thinking skills/perspective taking



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**Future self continuity hypothesis:**

- Individuals are motivated to consider future outcomes or rewards if they feel a connection between their current and future selves -  
(Ersner-Hersfield et al., 2009)

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**Difficulty with hindsight and foresight**

- Living in the moment
- Impulsivity
- Inconsistent behavior
- Difficulty learning from past experiences and consequences
- Difficulty anticipating a consequence
- Difficulty working for a reinforcer
- Difficulty with delaying gratification



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## Social Thinking *emerges* in Pre K

- Starts to develop at birth
  - Baby develops internal map of the world based on sensory experience
  - Cognitive anchor to attach meaning
- 3-6 months: cause/effect
- 7-8 months: object permanence
- 24-36 months: symbolism/pretend play
- Preschool: Theory of Mind



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To learn implicitly from our environment a child must:

- Perceive their environment
- Focus on a given stimulus
- Interact with the environment
- Sustain attention long enough to process
- Process the feedback from the interaction
- Create a mental image
- Compare the new mental image to prior knowledge
- Attach a phonological sequence (word)
- Practice



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## Marshmallow test and delayed gratification

- Hypothesis 1970s: Kids who can wait to eat the marshmallow have better outcomes in life.
- Update in 2012: Children will wait longer to eat the marshmallow if they trust the adult to give them another one

<https://hiddenbrain.org/podcast/when-to-eat-the-marshmallow/>  
<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/the-marshmallow-test-gets-more-complicated-73835934/>



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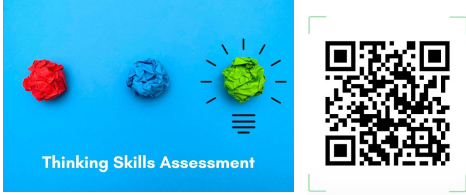
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Thinking Skills Assessment

• <https://thinkkids.org/Thinking-Skills-Assessment/>

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### How is the child's:

- Imaginative/Symbolic Play
- Inhibition and Flexibility
- Language- past and present tense



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### Imaginative Play and symbolism

- Generating past and future events engages the same parts of the brain as imagination and creative thinking (common core network)
- Is the child drawn to cause/effect toys?
- Do they pretend one object is something else?
- Are they dressing up or role playing?





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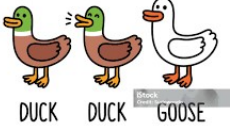
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**Executive function:**

- Inhibition and Cognitive flexibility allow disengagement from the present moment in order to imagine the future



DUCK DUCK GOOSE

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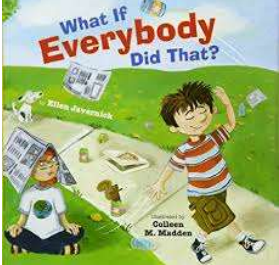
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**Language:**

- 3-year-olds *begin* to use future tense (I'm going to...)
- Receptive vocabulary is correlated with future thinking skills such as: planning, delay of gratification and thinking ahead
- Scripted stories



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**Infants**

**Developing Executive Functions with**

**Nonverbal Working Memory**  
Developing nonverbal working memory is critical to all about helping them attend to objects in their environment and create internal representations and actions of them in their minds.

**Expose them to Lots of Objects and Memory Experiences**  
The more objects and experiences they have, the more they can learn about the world and the more they can remember.

**Hide & Find Objects (0-7 months)**  
Play games like hide-and-seek and peek-a-boo. These games help infants learn about objects and their locations, which is a key part of working memory.

**Play with Puppets**  
Puppets can help infants learn about objects and their locations, which is a key part of working memory.



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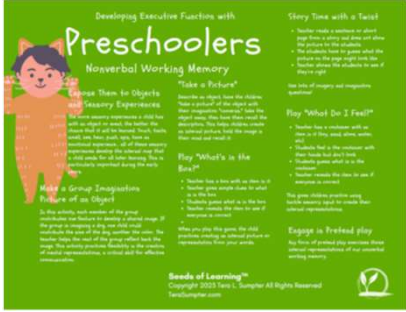
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**Developing Executive Functions with Preschoolers**  
**Nonverbal Working Memory**

**Encourage Them to Observe**  
Nonverbal working memory is the ability to hold information in mind without using words. The poster shows a cat, a dog, and a bird. The cat is orange, the dog is black and white, and the bird is yellow. The poster also includes a list of activities to help develop nonverbal working memory.

**Take a Picture**  
Encourage an object from the poster. Then a picture of the object will appear. Encourage the child to identify the object. This helps children understand the relationship between the object and the picture.

**Play "What's in the Box?"**  
Encourage the child to think of an object. Then a picture of the object will appear. Encourage the child to identify the object. This helps children understand the relationship between the object and the picture.

**Engage in Pretend Play**  
Encourage the child to think of an object. Then a picture of the object will appear. Encourage the child to identify the object. This helps children understand the relationship between the object and the picture.

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**What is a reward?**

**What is a consequence?**

**What skills do kids need to use to get a reward or avoid a consequence?**

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**Self-Regulation and Anger Management are...**

Before children can problem solve, they need be able to:

- recognize anger in oneself and others
- calm down when their emotions become elevated
- use appropriate ways to express anger or other impulses
- recognize that anger can interfere with problem solving

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**"The goal is to *move through* the emotion".**  
 –Tera Sumpter

- **Self-Monitoring**- the ability to take inventory of our sensations, thoughts, actions
- **Self-Modulating**- the ability to adjust or fix the response to those sensations, thoughts, actions
- **Self-Advocacy**- beginning to take ownership of the sensations, thoughts and actions by asking
  - what do I need?: e.g. a break, a deep breath, a hug, etc.
  - How do I get it?: e.g. ask with words, pictures, gestures, etc. (\*this is the "replacement behavior")

<https://terasumpter.com/blog/helping-children-develop-effective-self-monitoring-and-self-regulation>



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**Controlling Impulses Means Building a New Path**

- Automatic vs. Intentional responses to stress
- Plan ahead, set goals, initiate first steps
- Built through practice in situations that matter
- Flexibility
- Resilience



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**Games and Activities for Inhibition**



- Red Light/Green Light
- Freeze Tag
- Duck, Duck, Goose
- Musical chairs
- Simon Says
- Jenga
- Bop-It
- Breathing Techniques
- Mindfulness for Kids/ Yoga

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### Introducing Tucker the Turtle



A scripted story to assist with teaching the "Turtle Technique"

By Rochelle Gentry, Lindsay K. Garcia, and Mary Louise Hemminger

[https://challengingbehavior.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/TuckerTurtle\\_Story.pdf](https://challengingbehavior.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/TuckerTurtle_Story.pdf)

**Step 1:** Tucker now knows a new way to stay calm when he gets mad.

**Step 2:** He can stop yelling and keep his hands and body to himself.

**Step 3:** He can take deep breaths and hold them for 10 seconds.

**Step 4:** Tucker can then think of a solution to solve his problem.

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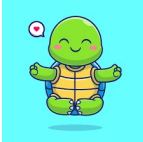
### It's not about the turtle...

**Step 1: Interception:** Can the child feel dysregulation starting?

**Step 2: Inhibition:** Can they take the pause and create space for a new response?

**Step 3: Regulation:** Can they use a core regulatory practice/replacement behavior? (Connector, Activator, Affirmation, Settler)

**Step 4: Interception:** Can they notice the difference between how they felt when they started the technique and how they feel now?

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### Help make Tucker more concrete

**Step 1:** Tucker now knows a new way to stay calm when he gets mad.

**Step 4:** Tucker can then think of a solution to solve his problem.

**Step 1:** Ask the child to put a word or picture on what they feel in their body when they are **mad**. Then use those words or pictures to help them identify when they need to use the procedure. E.g., red, hot, Hulk, lion, volcano, spiky, etc.

**Step 4:** Ask the child to put a word or picture on what they feel in their body when they are **calm**. Use that word or picture to help them identify if the procedure worked. E.g., blue, cool, Captain America, cat, pool, smooth, etc.

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**Children need opportunities to PRACTICE**

"When I feel mad  
I need to (go to the calm down area)."

Take a Deep Breath  
Smell the flower      Blow the pinwheel

Relaxation Thermometer  
Mad  
1 2 3  
Relaxed



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**Plan, Do, Review**

- Practice Pre experiencing and re-experiencing
- At transitions, have children visualize moving through the next activity.
- Social stories build self talk
- Solution kit reduces cognitive load
- Reflexive questioning- How did you do that?



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**Opportunities for Children to Reflect**

Support children to reflect on self-regulation and anger management.

"What did you do today when you were upset that art was full?"

"I saw children using the cozy center today when they were feeling upset!"



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## Thank you!

• Kate Morris, MA, CCC-SLP [morriska@marshall.edu](mailto:morriska@marshall.edu)

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