



Parents' Pages

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Autism Awareness Month

April is Autism Awareness Month and April 2 is recognized as World Autism Day, a time to learn more about autism and emphasize support needed in the autism community.

About 1 in 36 children in the U.S. are diagnosed with autism, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Autism Spectrum Disorder affects how a person communicates, learns and interacts with others. Every person with autism is different and has their own strengths, needs and ways of learning. Identifying autism early and accessing support services can make a meaningful difference in a child's growth and development.

The Division of Early Learning offers helpful information on developmental milestones on its [website](#). Parents can find videos, guides and tools to help track their child's growth from birth to age 5. Each early learning coalition has a specialist who provides support and guidance for families and child care providers who have concerns about autism or other special needs. Families can contact their local [early learning coalition](#) for more information.

The [Bureau of Exceptional Education and Student Services](#) also offers helpful programs for children with autism and their families. The [Florida Diagnostic and Learning Resources System's Child Find program](#) provides free screenings for children ages 3 to 5 who may need extra support. The [Center for Autism and Related Disabilities](#) has seven locations that help individuals with autism and their families by offering free services.

If you have concerns or questions about your child's development, schedule a visit with your pediatrician.

New Worlds Reading Initiative

Reading with your child is one of the most powerful ways to support their growth and learning. Voluntary Prekindergarten (VPK) through grade 5 children scoring below the 40th percentile on the Florida Assessment of Student Thinking (FAST) Star Early Literacy assessment are eligible for free books through the [New Worlds Reading Initiative](#). This initiative was signed into law in June 2021 as a program to help Florida's striving readers strengthen their literacy skills, build reading confidence and foster a lifelong love of reading. Each month during the school year, eligible children receive a free book tailored to their interests with resources and activities for caregivers and children to use together.

[Register your child today!](#)

Celebrating VPK's 20th Birthday!



Matthew Voigt

Matthew started at Orange Park Kindergarten in Orange Park. Since graduating from Florida State, today he is working as a real estate agent.

**Bright
Futures
Happen
Here!**



Antrea Yvette Harris

Antrea started at Every Child Can Learn in Jacksonville. Antrea attended North Carolina A&T and is working toward opening her own business.

The Division of Early Learning is proud of the 20th Birthday of VPK, an important milestone that commemorates the success of a program that continues to make a lasting impact on children, families and communities. To celebrate, the division is sharing a [VPK 20th Birthday Toolkit](#) that includes fun ideas and resources to help schools, early learning programs and families join the celebration.

VPK Registration Do you have a 4-year-old?

Your child may be eligible for Florida's VPK program. To be eligible, children must live in Florida and be 4 years old on or before September 1 of the school year. If a child's birthday is February 2 through September 1, parents can wait and enroll them the next year when they turn 5. Families are encouraged to **register early for VPK**. Registration for the 2026-2027 school year is underway! To apply, visit the [Family Portal](#).

VPK, PM3 and Me!

If your child is in VPK, they will soon take their final progress monitoring check called PM3. This is part of the FAST Star Early Literacy assessment. FAST is given three times during the VPK year. It helps show what emergent literacy and math skills your child has learned, what they are ready to learn next and if they are ready for kindergarten.

In Florida, children who score a unified scale score at 707 or higher on FAST Star Early Literacy at the end of the VPK program are considered ready for kindergarten. If your child is ready, keep encouraging them! Read with your child daily and have fun together to stay on track and prevent the "summer slide." If your child is not yet ready for kindergarten, don't worry. There is still time to learn and many resources can help your child get ready before school starts.

Check out the Division of Early Learning's [online resources](#) and select an age group to see examples of activities you can do with your child to help them develop important skills they need to enter kindergarten ready.

Review the FAST Star Early Literacy Parent Report from your child's VPK teacher for more information. Depending on your child's score on PM3 of the FAST Star Early Literacy assessment, you may register your child for any additional support for which they may be eligible before starting kindergarten.

For example, your child may be eligible for the **Summer Bridge program**. The Summer Bridge program is provided at no cost and provides 100 hours of instruction with an emphasis on emergent literacy instruction. Contact your local school district for registration and additional information.



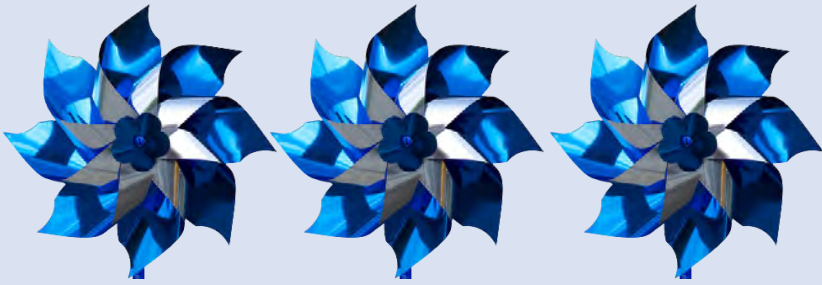
Child Abuse Prevention

In April, you may notice blue and silver pinwheels spinning throughout your neighborhood. These pinwheels are a symbol of hope, strong families and the shared commitment to keeping children safe. They are part of the Pinwheels for Prevention campaign, observed during Child Abuse Prevention Month, which raises awareness about the importance of family well-being and prevention efforts that help children thrive.

In Florida, the campaign is led by Prevent Child Abuse Florida, the Ounce of Prevention Fund of Florida, and the Department of Children and Families. They encourage local businesses and groups to plant pinwheel gardens to help start conversations about child safety.

You can help by planting a pinwheel and supporting positive parenting. Small actions like this help create a safe and happy future for all children.

If you think a child may be abused or neglected, call the Florida Abuse Hotline at 1-800-96-ABUSE (1-800-962-2873).



The Importance of Sensory Play for Young Children

Sensory play is any activity that uses a child's senses. This includes touch, sight, sound, smell, taste, balance and movement. Sensory play may look like messy fun, but it is an important way young children learn and grow.

When children use their senses, they build strong connections in their brains. Activities like scooping rice, buttoning clothes, playing with water or touching different textures help improve fine motor skills and hand-eye coordination. Sensory play also helps children solve problems as they pour, sort and test their ideas.

Sensory play supports language and early writing skills too. When children talk about what they feel and see, they learn new words. Using their fingers and hands during play helps strengthen the muscles they will use later for writing.

Sensory activities can also help children feel calm. They support emotional skills by helping children manage big feelings. Sensory play teaches cause and effect as well. For example, splashing water is fun, but it can make clothes wet. Learning cause and effect helps children understand how actions lead to results.

Parents can support sensory play at home using simple items. Bowls of water, playdough, sand, leaves or kitchen spices are great tools. The goal is not to be perfect, but to explore. When children are free to use their senses, they build curiosity, creativity and confidence.



Florida State Parks - Where Nature Becomes the Classroom!

Florida's state parks are more than just pretty places to visit. They are also outdoor classrooms where families can learn while having fun in nature. From sandy beaches and clear springs to forests and wetlands, these parks help children learn about the world around them through hands-on activities.

Families can join programs like the Florida Junior Ranger, which offers guided nature walks and ranger talks. These activities teach kids about plants, animals and Florida's special environments. Children might see wildlife on a trail or learn how spring water stays clean. Learning outside helps kids ask questions and stay curious.

Many Florida state parks welcome school and community groups. They offer free or low-cost programs, special events and monthly activities for families. These programs make it easy for everyone to learn and explore together. Spending time in nature helps children understand why it is important to protect Florida's natural spaces.

For more information about activities near you, visit the [Florida State Parks Events](#) page.

Family Fun Activities for April

April brings warmer days, gentle rains and lots of chances for families with young children to explore, learn and play together. Here are some hands-on activities that can help your child learn based on the [Florida Early Learning and Developmental Standards](#).

Outdoor Scavenger Hunt

Creative Expression: Make a spring-themed scavenger hunt for your child in the backyard or at a local park. Include things like a smooth rock, yellow flower, feather or something that makes a sound. Children enjoy finding and discovering new treasures.



Butterfly or Insect Observation

Scientific Inquiry: Set up a small "observation station" by looking for butterflies, ladybugs or ants in the yard. Use a child-safe magnifying glass to look closely at the insects. Draw pictures or talk about what the insects might be doing. This activity helps children learn about science and nature.



Spend Family Time Outdoors

Social Studies: Enjoy the warm weather and take some time with the family outdoors. Create a nature-themed sensory bin with leaves, sticks, rocks and toy animals. Let your child sort items, build little habitats or pretend-play.



Sidewalk Chalk Creations

Mathematical Thinking: With warmer weather, grab some chalk and head outside to draw shapes and hopscotch paths, made in squares, on the sidewalk. Counting the number of shapes helps build early math skills in a creative way.



April is a great time for families to enjoy spring and spend quality time together. Each activity helps children build confidence, imagination and a deeper connection to the world around them.

May Upcoming Events

- Provider Appreciation Day is May 9! Celebrate your child's early learning teacher on this special day.
- May 10 is Mother's Day. Moms and mother figures play an important role in a child's growth and development. From tight, warm hugs to lots of tender kisses, a mother and grandmother's love is like no other.
- VPK graduation is almost here! Stay tuned for ways to celebrate your child's accomplishments and transition to kindergarten.



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