

Nurturing Patience in Young Children

Waiting isn't easy, but teachers can help students develop this valuable skill through stories and games.

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In today's world, waiting can feel really hard—especially when so many things happen instantly. Toys light up and move with the press of a button, and favorite shows start the second you tap a screen. Learning to wait is an important skill. Patience helps kids handle big feelings, take turns with friends, and keep trying even when something feels tricky. It's like a superpower that helps them grow stronger, kinder, and more confident.

For educators working with prekindergarten to second-grade students, the challenge is not only to instill patience but also to make the practice of waiting an engaging and rewarding experience. By embedding patience-building strategies into daily classroom routines and social and emotional learning (SEL) activities, teachers can equip young learners with the tools they need to navigate a quick-moving world.

Understanding Patience as a Learned Skill

Patience is more than just an admirable quality—it's a foundational skill that impacts a child's ability to focus, problem-solve, and build strong relationships. Research has shown that children who [develop the ability to delay gratification](#) tend to perform better academically, demonstrate stronger emotional regulation, and exhibit greater perseverance when facing challenges.

In contrast, a lack of patience can lead to frustration, impulsivity, and difficulties in social interactions. Children who struggle with waiting may interrupt conversations, give up easily on tasks, or experience heightened anxiety when faced with delayed rewards.

Fostering patience in the classroom equips students with the resilience to navigate challenges and build meaningful relationships. Although some children may naturally exhibit more patience than others, it is ultimately a skill that can be nurtured through practice. Young learners are still developing the ability to manage their emotions and regulate their impulses. Patience is deeply connected to emotional regulation—the ability to recognize and manage one's feelings. When children learn to pause before reacting, they strengthen their ability to think critically, problem-solve, and persist through challenges.

PRACTICAL STRATEGIES FOR TEACHING PATIENCE IN THE CLASSROOM

Model patience. Children learn by observing the adults around them. Educators can [model patience](#) in simple ways, such as taking a deep breath before responding to a challenging situation or verbalizing their thought process when waiting for something, which supports preschoolers' emotion regulation through co-regulation:

- “I’m so excited to start our activity, but let’s take a deep breath and make sure we have everything ready first.”
- “I know it’s hard to wait, but let’s use our eyes to watch and learn, imagining what we’ll do when it’s time for us to go!”

By demonstrating calm and patient behavior, teachers create an environment where patience is seen as a valued skill rather than an obstacle.

Incorporate wait time. One of the simplest yet most effective ways to build patience is to integrate intentional pauses into instruction. For example, instead of immediately calling on a student who raises their hand, give the entire class a few seconds to think before responding. This practice, known as *wait time*, encourages deeper reflection and reduces impulsive answering. Similarly, using countdowns before transitioning to a new activity reinforces the idea that not everything happens instantly.

Use games and activities. Play-based learning is a powerful tool for teaching patience. Games that require turn-taking, such as board games, puzzles, or storytelling circles, naturally encourage children to practice waiting. Engaging in cooperative activities, where students must wait for their peers to contribute, also helps them understand the value of patience in achieving a shared goal.

To ensure that children truly grasp the lesson of patience, educators can reinforce the experience by acknowledging and praising moments of successful waiting. Simple phrases like “I saw how you waited for your turn so calmly!” help reinforce the behavior. Additionally, asking reflective questions such as “How did it feel to wait?” or “What helped you stay patient?” encourages children to process their experience and internalize the skill for future situations.

Assign projects that require waiting. Teachers can also engage students in collaborative projects where students work over time to achieve a shared goal. One example is activities that require delayed gratification, such as watching a caterpillar transform into a butterfly or planting seeds and observing their growth over time. These experiences offer concrete, real-world examples of the rewards that come with patience.

teaching patience through SEL

SEL provides a framework for explicitly teaching patience through self-awareness and self-regulation. Incorporating mindfulness exercises, such as deep breathing or guided relaxation, can help children develop the ability to pause before reacting.

Storytelling is another valuable tool; books that highlight characters practicing patience can help children see its importance in action. For example, [*Waiting*](#), by Kevin Henkes, is a gentle story about five toys sitting on a windowsill, waiting for different things. It teaches children the beauty of patience and anticipation. Educators can facilitate discussions around stories like this one, asking questions like the following:

- “How do you think the character felt when they had to wait?”
- “What helped them stay patient?”
- “Have you ever had to wait for something? How did it feel?”

Role-playing activities, where children act out scenarios that require waiting (e.g., standing in line, taking turns on the playground), provide additional practice in a safe and supportive environment. You can also read stories that provide real-life examples of patience leading to success, such as artists completing paintings over weeks or athletes training for years to achieve their goals

HELPING FAMILIES NURTURE PATIENCE

Parents can extend lessons on patience by weaving the concept into everyday experiences. Simple moments, like waiting in line at the grocery store, taking turns during conversations, or anticipating a special event, offer opportunities to talk about patience in a relatable way. Parents can model calm waiting by verbalizing their thought process: “I really want to check out quickly, but I see there are people ahead of us, so I’ll take a deep breath and wait my turn.”

Reading books together, such as [*Waiting Is Not Easy!*](#), by Mo Willems, or [*The Very Impatient Caterpillar*](#), by Ross Burach, can spark conversations about how waiting feels and strategies to make it easier. Parents can also turn waiting into a game by asking, “What’s something fun we can do while we wait?” or “Can you think of a time when waiting made something even more special?” When patience is consistently reinforced in a positive way, children begin to see it not as a frustration but as a skill that helps them navigate the world with confidence.

Building patience in young learners is not about eliminating frustration altogether but rather about helping children understand that waiting can be rewarding. Acknowledging small moments of patience, whether it’s a student waiting their turn without prompting or showing persistence in a difficult task, reinforces the importance of this skill. By creating a classroom culture that values patience, educators empower children with a mindset that will serve them well beyond their early years.