

Ensuring a healthy start. Promoting a bright future.

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Is your child ready to begin school? Most adults remember kindergarten as a relaxed opportunity to learn the formal reading and math skills needed for first grade through guided play activities. However, because current public policy demands that schools meet higher standards, young children today often find themselves in increasingly rigorous academic programs beginning as early as kindergarten.

Beginning kindergarten students are now often expected to be ready to learn what was previously taught in first grade. Given these expectations, parents worry that their preschoolers may not have the preparation or maturity needed to succeed in today's kindergarten programs. Parents' worries regarding their child's school readiness have occasionally resulted in the delaying of kindergarten entry for their child in order to assure a higher level of readiness.

School Readiness

The concept of school readiness typically refers to the child's attainment of a certain set of emotional, behavioral, and cognitive skills needed to learn, work, and function successfully in school. Unfortunately, this common philosophy of "ready for school" places an undue burden on children by expecting them to meet the expectations of school.

A more constructive way to consider school readiness is to remove the expectations from the child and place those expectations onto the schools and the families. Young children have wide ranging needs and require support in preparing them for the high standards of learning they will face in elementary school.

Who Is Ready for Whom and When

States designate a specific, arbitrary cut-off date to create consistency in school entry practices. If a child reaches a certain age by the cut-off date (usually 5 for kindergarten and 6 for first grade), a child may begin school. However, cut-off dates vary considerably across states. In addition, age is not the best determinate or most accurate measure of how well a child will adjust to school. However, these policies are relatively fair because all students are treated equally.

Research about the relationship of school entry age to later school success suggests that children who do not meet the cut-off date and begin kindergarten do not suffer any harm in the long run.

It is difficult, though, to imagine that all entering kindergarten students will have similar skills and needs. Often school districts and communities hold kindergarten screening programs designed to help parents determine if their child is ready for school and to identify problems in development that might warrant attention or extra services. In spite of the kindergarten screening programs, young children are very difficult to evaluate accurately owing to their rapid development, short attention spans, and often inconsistent performance on demand. Children also may be entering the school system with, for instance, varying linguistic abilities, varying cultural heritages, and varying levels of both personal experience and cultural exposure.

In addition, because it is normal for children to learn different skills at different rates, it is inappropriate to judge school readiness based on a prescribed set of skills and abilities. While schools may reasonably expect that children enter kindergarten as active, curious, and eager learners, it is not reasonable to expect that all 5-year-olds have the same level of preparation needed to acquire early reading, math, and social skills, or have the same attention spans or motor dexterity. It is the school's job to teach children at their own level and to meet each child's needs, not the child's job to meet the school's expectations upon entry. School readiness should signify the need for educators to be ready for the child as much as it has come to signify the child's need to be ready for the school.

Characteristics of School Readiness

Stated in simple terms, school readiness means that a child is ready to enter a social environment that is primarily focused on education. Research has suggested that many aspects of children's lives influence their preparation for formal school learning, including cognitive, social, emotional, and motor development, and, most importantly, early home, parental, and preschool experiences. Consideration of school readiness must take into account the range and quality of children's early life experiences,

the normal wide variation in young children’s development and learning, and the extent to which the school’s expectations of beginning kindergarten children are appropriate and respect individual differences.

The following list of behaviors and/or characteristics are often associated with early school success:

- Ability to follow structured daily routines.
- Ability to dress independently.
- Ability to work independently with supervision.
- Ability to listen and pay attention to what someone else is saying.
- Ability to get along with and cooperate with other children.
- Ability to play with other children.
- Ability to follow simple rules.
- Ability to work with puzzles, scissors, coloring, paints, etc.
- Ability to write their own name or to acquire the skill with instruction.
- Ability to count or acquire the skill with instruction.
- Ability to recite the alphabet (or quickly learn with instruction).
- Ability to identify both shapes and colors.
- Ability to identify sound units in words and to recognize rhyme.

Parent and Family Influences on School Readiness

Family environment is very important in shaping children’s early development. Some family factors that can influence school readiness include:

- *Low family economic risk:* Poor readiness for school is often associated with poverty.
- *Stable family structure:* Children from stable two-parent homes tend to have stronger school readiness than children from one-parent homes and from homes where caregivers change frequently.
- *Enriched home environment:* Children from homes where parents talk with their children, engage them in conversation, read to them, and engage in forms of discipline such as time-out that encourage self-discipline have stronger readiness skills.

What Parents Can Do to Help Prepare Children for School

A great deal of variability exists in developmental and skill levels within young children. This is normal, and many children will not have developed to the level of others at the same age. Nevertheless, parents can help their children develop the skills they will need to be ready for school. The following list is a collection of activities that parents can do with their children to increase their child’s general readiness for school:

- Read books to and with your child.

- Spend time with your child, including playing, cuddling, and hugging.
- Create and enforce a routine within your home that your child needs to follow (i.e., times of meals, naptimes, and bedtimes).
- Take time to talk to your child.
- Encourage and answer questions from your child.
- Engage in informal reading and counting activities at home.
- Promote your child’s cognitive development by showing and encouraging your child to think about the world around them.
- Promote play that helps develop literacy skills, problem-solving skills, creativity, and imagination.
- Familiarize children with the alphabet and with numbers.
- Ensure opportunity to develop social skills through playgroups or more formal preschool activities.
- Encourage behaviors that demonstrate respect and courtesy.
- Encourage children to accept responsibility and build competence through simple chores such as putting toys away and picking up clothes.

Promoting Readiness to Read

Children’s readiness to read, in particular, has gained greater attention recently from educators as the developmental precursors to reading have become more evident.

Children are ready to read when they have developed an ear for the way words sound, can identify rhyme and alliteration, can blend sounds, recognize onset rhyme (initial sounds), and can identify sound units in words. Together these skills are called *phonological awareness* and usually emerge in children between ages two and six. Children with good phonological awareness skills usually learn to read quickly. Children who are poor readers often have weak phonological skills.

Phonological awareness. There are many things that parents can do to facilitate phonological awareness and improve their child’s readiness to read:

- Read nursery rhymes, sing songs, and clap along with the rhythm.
- Play games with words that sound alike as you experience them in everyday life. (“We’re passing ‘Mike’s Bikes,’ that’s a funny name because they sound alike!”)
- Demonstrate how sounds blend together in familiar words. (“Let’s sign your name on Grandma’s card, T-o-m --- Tom.”)
- Play a game where the goal is to find objects with names that begin with a certain initial sound; this is a great game for walks or car rides.
- Play clapping games and clap with each distinct sound. (“‘C-a-t’ is a three clap word; so is ‘fam-i-ly.’”)

Comprehension. Parents can build the following comprehension skills: attending to short stories by reading

short high interest books and reading the same favorites over and over; connecting story and titles by predicting the story from the title; making predictions about stories and following simple plots by asking questions while reading (“What’s going to happen now?”) and allowing children to retell stories; and communicating feelings and ideas by allowing children to talk and tell stories even when they do not appear to make much sense.

Print awareness. Another important readiness skill that helps children learn to read is called print awareness. *Print awareness* means that the child:

- Knows the difference between pictures and print.
- Recognizes environmental print (stop signs, McDonald’s, Wal-Mart).
- Understands that print can appear alone or with pictures.
- Recognizes that print occurs in different mediums (pencil, crayon, ink).
- Recognizes that print occurs on different surfaces (paper, computer screen, billboard).
- Understands that words are read left to right.
- Understands the lines of text are read top to bottom.
- Understands the function of white space between words.
- Understands that print corresponds to speech word-for-word.
- Knows the difference between letters and words.

Parents can build print awareness by pointing out print as distinct from pictures in everyday life (e.g., “That’s a sign for ‘women.’ That says ‘women.’”); pointing out store and restaurant marquees; pointing out print with and without pictures (e.g., “Here’s a page with just words!”); pointing out words written in different media and on different surfaces (e.g., “Look, someone wrote on that wall with spray paint!”); occasionally tracing words with your finger as you read; note that we begin reading at the top (point to the top and say, “Here’s where we start!”); playing find the word games with your child; and teaching the alphabet via songs and rhymes and talking about which letters make up familiar words.

Book handling. Children also need to learn book handling skills such as orienting a book correctly and recognizing the beginning and the end. Giving children their own books or letting them take books from the local library helps. Allowing children to hold books while being read to and asking them to open the book at the beginning and close the book at the end of the story facilitate book handling skills.

Ten Signs of a Great Preschool

Placing your child into a preschool program will supply further reinforcement of your child’s general school readiness skills. However, as with anything else in life, some preschool programs are better than others. What follows is adapted from a list of 10 indicators of quality preschools prepared by the National Association for the Education of Young Children:

1. Children are mainly active in the classroom; that is, playing and/or working with other children or materials.

2. Children have access to various hands-on materials and activities.
3. Children receive individual and small-group time with the teachers, and not solely large-group time.
4. Children’s work is displayed in the classroom.
5. Children learn numbers and the alphabet throughout the entire day; that is, their learning of these constructs is embedded into everyday activities.
6. Children are given at least an hour to play and explore with little worksheet use.
7. Children are provided a daily opportunity to play outside.
8. Children are read to by teachers, individually, and in small-groups.
9. Children receive adapted curriculum dependent upon their own individual needs.
10. Children and parents are excited about the preschool; that is, children are happy and do not regularly cry or complain.

Resources

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Websites

- National Association for the Education of Young Children—
www.naeyc.org
See Position Statement on School Readiness and Signs of Quality Programs.

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