

School Readiness

A Guide for Parents

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SCHOOL READINESS

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This guide was written to provide information about how the concept of school readiness is changing, and to help answer questions you may have as you talk with teachers and school staff. In addition, activities that will help develop your child's readiness for learning are suggested.

Changing attitudes towards readiness

In the past, readiness has been defined as a level of development a child is expected to have to be successful in a typical kindergarten classroom. This idea focused mainly on the child being ready with the result that some programs excluded children. Interest in early education has increased with the recent No Child Left Behind legislation. Current research shows that readiness should focus on several factors, not just the child. This is creating a new spotlight on child-school partnerships and kindergarten programs that meet all children's needs.

Readiness re-defined

States and school districts do not have a definition of school readiness that is the same everywhere. A child with the same skills and experiences may be considered ready in one school, but not ready at another school. The National Education Goals Panel definition of readiness has been widely accepted and covers five areas:

- physical well-being and motor development
- social and emotional development
- approaches toward learning
- language development
- cognition and general knowledge





READINESS IN CHILDREN

Beginning kindergarten is an exciting experience for a child. However, some parents struggle with whether their child is ready for school. To help make a decision, questions about testing or assessment might arise.

Will assessment determine readiness?

Assessment is a method of evaluating the amount of skills a child has. Standardized tests are one form of measurement that might be used. It is important for parents and educators to understand that a score on a test is just a snapshot of where the child's skills are when he took the test. At this young age, results do not predict how well a child will do in his later school years (Carlton & Winsler, 1999). Assessment information can be gained in other ways such as teacher observations, checklists, child work samples, and parent/caregiver interviews. The use of many assessment tools gives a more complete understanding of the child than a single test score.

What if my child performs poorly on an assessment?

If an assessment indicates a child doesn't have some important skills, it is not necessarily a sign that the child shouldn't start school or that special services are necessary. School readiness is *on-going* and most children respond well to support from a capable teacher and a quality curriculum. This is a time in a young child's life of very rapid growth and learning. In the school setting, every child is involved in learning activities and helped to gain skills. Carefully watching the child's progress in the kindergarten program will help decide if any additional teaching support is needed.

What do we know about *not* starting children when they are five?

On the average, waiting a year to start kindergarten has no long-term effect on increasing success in school. Any advantage of waiting a year to send a child to school has disappeared by second grade (Carlton & Winsler). However, waiting to begin kindergarten can keep some children from receiving instruction that would encourage learning new skills. There is no social advantage in holding children out. Research shows that acceptance by classmates and the way children feel about themselves is not affected. In fact, children might worry that they have failed if they are held out. Children who have been held back are more likely to receive special education services later. If they had been enrolled when eligible, they may have received help earlier. In kindergartens that are developmentally appropriate, it should not





make a difference if the child is younger or less mature. If the kindergarten is over-academically oriented, there may be more reason for concern (*Young Children*, September 2003).

Why would we want children to go to kindergarten if they are “not quite ready”?

Although it might seem logical to give a child one more year to develop, perhaps it is better to give the child new experiences that provide instruction in the important skills that are expected in kindergarten. In other words, will delaying kindergarten a year help a child to improve his or her language, phonemic awareness or social skills? Rather, by attending kindergarten, teachers can help the child with his or her needs.

As stated earlier, schools must be “ready” to receive children who are of age for kindergarten. Part of what it means for schools to be ready is that teachers can meet the needs of children at a variety of developmental levels. The school setting has the resources such as school support staff and AEA professionals if a child should need extra help. These resources might not be available if a child is “held back” from kindergarten.

Children are not naturally *ready* or *not ready* for school. Readiness involves all the experiences a child has had since birth leading up to his fifth birthday.

Young Children on the Web,
January 2004

What about a Pre-K program for five year olds?

Some schools decide to offer separate pre-kindergarten programs for children that are five years old and eligible for kindergarten, but who are younger or less mature. If you are considering pre-kindergarten for your five year old, think about why and how that program might benefit your child. Is it because you have heard that it's a good idea for boys with summer birthdays to wait a year? Is it because you want your child to do well in athletics later on and being a little older may help? Is it because your child is lacking readiness skills and you want to give him more opportunities to learn? It is important to consider your child and what his needs are when making this decision.

If your primary concern is that your child hasn't learned essential early literacy, math, or behavior skills, you will need to decide if the pre-





kindergarten program could provide more focus and individualization in those areas than kindergarten. Set a time to talk with the principal or teachers about the pre-kindergarten and kindergarten curriculums and how each meets individual learning needs. Visit the classrooms. What are the expectations for learning? How is progress monitored and how frequently? What material is covered? What would happen if your child had difficulty in the pre-kindergarten or kindergarten program?

There are considerable variations in the focus of pre-kindergarten programs from school district to school district. Some focus more on teaching students “learning to learn” skills rather than subject area skills. Some have a social skills emphasis. Take the time to find out how the one you are considering is structured and if it would benefit your child. While attending a pre-kindergarten program is generally preferable to no program, research suggests that the effect is often the same as delaying kindergarten entry a year. Keep in mind that if your child is a year older when he begins kindergarten, he will also be a year older when he graduates. Looking at the long-range effect of delaying entry is another issue that should be considered.

The decision about when to start a child in kindergarten is ultimately the parents’. This document is intended to help parents consider different issues and different ways of making the decision.

READINESS IN SCHOOLS

Children’s needs and backgrounds as they arrive at school are more varied than ever. At the same time, schools are being held more accountable and have increased pressures to improve achievement scores due to No Child Left Behind legislation. However, every school has the responsibility to educate all students legally eligible for kindergarten. In Iowa, a child is eligible for kindergarten if they are five years old by September 15. Ready schools are willing to receive all children of age.

Ready schools pay attention to student progress

Ready schools follow a child’s growth regularly and often by gathering samples of their work and checking to see how well they are learning. If a child’s rate of growth slows down or is not showing improvement, the teacher can plan specific tasks to provide help. If a child continues to have difficulty, the teacher will talk with parents and additional school staff to plan specific activities to increase the child’s learning. If you develop concerns about your child’s progress, talk to his teacher. Find out how you can work together to help your child be successful.





For a successful start in school

Starting kindergarten creates both challenges and chances for new growth. Too much change without support can lead to stress or anxiety for a child and make it more difficult for a child to learn. Planning ahead can help avoid this. Registration for kindergarten may be held in the spring to discuss the kindergarten program. Kindergarten teachers may arrange a time for preschoolers to visit their classroom or go to preschool settings to talk with them about kindergarten. Families may be given summer activity booklets describing typical preschool and beginning kindergarten activities. The school may have a parent committee to plan get-acquainted events at the beginning of the school year.

Transition and children with disabilities

If you have a child with a disability, the transition to kindergarten may cause anxiety and raise new concerns. You may have worries about how your child will get services for his needs or if others will accept him. Transition meetings with school age and early childhood staff can help to lessen worries and help in a successful start in kindergarten. Sharing information such as your child's likes/dislikes, strengths/needs, and what works will assist the school staff in getting to know your child and planning his program. Keep in mind that your child's program can be always adjusted after school starts.

Heartland AEA supports all learners

Heartland AEA's mission is to improve education by supporting all learner's through client-focused services, partnerships, and leadership. Heartland staff can help school districts by providing resources on developmentally appropriate practices in preschool and kindergarten programs, information about model programs for transition to kindergarten, and in-service training on early literacy and other topics.

If you have a concern that your child has a disability, AEA teams are available to help you and the school staff in a problem solving approach to discover the reasons your child might be having difficulty. The focus of intervention and assessment activities is on how to effectively support your child's future learning. Special education services are provided to children with disabilities who have a need for specialized instructional services.





Every day of a child's life is an opportunity to expand his horizons, brighten his future.

—June Streckfus, Executive Director Maryland Business Roundtable for Education

FAMILY AND COMMUNITY SUPPORTS

As a parent, you know your child better than anyone else. Here are some tips that will help your child have a good transition to kindergarten and have him excited to learn.

Use your community to expand your child's knowledge.

Your family can visit parks, museums, the zoo and other places of interest. Check out the community pages in your phone book for schedules of annual events. Taking advantage of activities sponsored by the community will give you a chance to see how your child listens during a library story hour, how he responds to other adults, and plays with children at the park. Help your child get a library card and use it. Ask the librarian for suggestions of children's books about kindergarten.

Read several stories every day to your child.

Children will learn important concepts from reading frequently – that books are read from front to back and from top to bottom. They also learn the story they hear is represented by written letters and words. Storybook reading will help a child learn new vocabulary and concepts. It is one of the best things you can do to help your child learn to read.

Re-read the same stories.

Repetition helps children understand the sequence of the story and that it has a beginning, middle, and end. As they become familiar with the story, they can predict what will happen, improve their ability to answer questions, and re-tell it in their own words.

Choose stories that use repeated phrases.

By hearing the same phrases over and over, your child will have the chance to be more actively involved and begin to think of himself as a "reader". Stories with repeated lines are: Brown Bear, Brown Bear, Three Little Pigs, The Gingerbread Man, I Went Walking.





Point at the words as you read them.

This will help your child learn the concept of “word”. It helps him understand that when letters are grouped together it makes a word and that words make up the story.

Choose books that rhyme.

Rhyming books help children become aware of the sequences of sounds in words. Research has shown that for young children to learn to read, they must have learned this important concept (called phonemic awareness).

Dr. Seuss books and nursery rhymes are familiar books that can help teach this concept and are fun at the same time.

Encourage lots of talk during story reading.

When you are reading to your child, it is important to stop occasionally and ask questions about the pictures, the story, or even the print. Children who are encouraged to talk during storybook reading learn more about print (i.e. recognizing letters, their names, etc.) than those who just sit and listen. You can also see how well your child understands the story or if he is learning new vocabulary words. If you choose alphabet books, it is a perfect time to stop and point to some of the letters.

Before school starts:

- Determine the school children in your neighborhood attend and visit the school.
- Find out any choices you may have for where your child attends school (half day, full day, magnet schools).
- Find out when registration will be and what records you may need to bring such as immunizations and birth certificate.
- Go to visit the school with your child.
- Attend any orientation meetings the school may have for parents or children.
- Find out if there is any available transportation. Make sure your child knows how he will get to and from school.
- Check into after school child care programs if you will need a place for your child to go.





When school starts:

- If your child has had preschool or Head Start experience, see if your child's teacher could talk with the kindergarten teacher to share what your child likes and what she has been learning.
- Talk with your child's teacher about what he will be doing in school. Establish some form of on-going communication whether through notes, phone calls, e-mails, or visits.
- Read notes your child brings home. Follow suggestions to practice or extend experiences at home.
- Talk with your child about school and what he liked best that day or what things were hard.
- Volunteer to help in the classroom, through projects at home, or at school events.
- Have lunch at school with your child when you have a chance.
- Keep a folder of your child's work.

The more you stay informed, the more it shows your child that learning and education is valued. It can help you stay connected with your child and his school. Research shows that children who are successful in school go on to do well in life.

KEY CONCEPTS IN SCHOOL READINESS

- School readiness should be approached as a process to make a decision.
- There is no single right answer for everyone.
- A decision about kindergarten enrollment should be made by considering issues specific to each child's needs.
- Research suggests that delaying kindergarten entry does not generally benefit children.
- Young children make rapid growth and progress at this age.
- Progress in the kindergarten curriculum should be carefully monitored through data to insure every child's learning is on track.
- Planning activities that focus on skills beneficial for kindergarten can make a significant difference for a child in terms of readiness.
- Working together, schools, families, and early education programs can make the transition to kindergarten comfortable and successful.





Resources and References

Helping Your Preschool Child, U.S. Department of Education, Office of Intergovernmental and Interagency Affairs, Rev. 2002. Available online: www.ed.gov/parents/academic/help/hyc.html

Iowa Early Childhood Network Fact Sheet on School Readiness, May 1998. <http://www.state.ia.us/educate/ecese/is/ecn/factsht.html>

Making Time for Parent Involvement: Tips for Busy Parents, National Parent Teacher Association. <http://www.pta.org/index.asp>
National PTA is the largest volunteer child advocacy organization in the United States. A not-for-profit association of parents, educators, students, and other citizens active in their schools and communities, PTA is a leader in reminding our nation of its obligations to children.

National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) articles related to school readiness.

- *Research in Review. Opportunity Deferred or Opportunity Taken: An Updated Look at Delaying Kindergarten Entry*, Marshall, Hermine, *Young Children*, September 2003. <http://www.naeyc.org/resources/journal/item-detail.asp?page=1&docID=2862&sesID=1091464949965>
- *School Readiness Assessment*, Maxwell, Kelly L.; Clifford, Richard M., *Beyond the Journal*, *Young Children on the Web*, January 2004. <http://www.naeyc.org/resources/journal/default.asp>
- *Still Unacceptable Trends in Kindergarten Entry and Placement*, A position statement developed by the National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education, 2000 Revision and Update. http://www.naeyc.org/childrens_champions/psunacc.asp
- Brief, single-subject articles are located on NAEYC's website at *Early Years are Learning Years*. <http://www.naeyc.org/resources/eyly/default.asp>

School Readiness: Helping Communities Get Children Ready for School and Schools Ready for Children, *Child Trends Research Brief*, October 2001. http://www.childtrends.org/_catdisp_page.cfm?LID=141

School Readiness in Your Community: A Guide for Local School Communities, ready at five partnership, Maryland, 2003. <http://www.readyatfive.org/resources/early.html>





School Readiness: The Need for a Paradigm Shift, Carlton, Martha P.; Winsler, Adam, School Psychology Review, Vol. 28, No. 3, 1999.

School Readiness: Starting Your Child Off Right, Wynn, L., Raleigh, North Carolina Partnership for Children, 2002, printed in Iowa Community Empowerment Newsletter, Vol. 4, No. 3, July 2003.

<http://www.smartstart-nc.org/parents/school.htm>

Additional websites that offer information about readiness and early childhood issues

Iowa Association for the Education of Young Children (IAEYC)

<http://www.iowaaeYC.org>

The Iowa AEYC mission is to serve and act on behalf of the needs, rights, and well-being of all young children with primary focus on the promotion of educational and developmental services and resources for children families, and communities. This site provides links to local resources and to additional Iowa agencies whose focus is early education and care.

Iowa Department of Education, Early Childhood Network

The Mission of the Iowa Early Childhood Network is to promote the optimal development and education of all young children by providing leadership and support to the collaborative efforts of families, schools, and communities.

Site index <http://www.state.ia.us/educate/ecese/is/ecn/index>

ReadyWeb is an electronic collection of resources on school readiness divided into two sections: getting children ready for schools and getting schools ready for children. <http://readyweb.crc.uiuc.edu/>

Association for Childhood Education International (ACEI)

The Mission of the Association for Childhood Education International (ACEI) is to promote and support in the global community the optimal education and development of children, from birth through early adolescence, and to influence the professional growth of educators and the efforts of others who are committed to the needs of children in a changing society.

<http://www.udel.edu/bateman/acei/kindergarten.htm>



