

Getting Your Child Ready for Kindergarten (and the World)

Volume 28

"School readiness", "ready to learn", "ready for school", or "readiness skills" are all expressions that you will hear as your child gets closer to starting kindergarten. But what does it mean to be "ready"?

It is important to remember that ALL children are always "ready to learn." From birth, children learn things every day through their experiences and interactions with adults, other children and things in their environment.

When schools talk about children being *ready* they're talking about whether children have specific skills and information that will help them succeed in school, such as counting, knowing letters and the sounds they make, and being able to work in small groups.

FUN THINGS TO DO WITH YOUR PRE-K CHILD:

To help your child with important skills for kindergarten, try these activities:

- **Read, Read, and Read Some More!** You know your child likes to hear the same story again and again - so have fun picking out a new picture or letter to talk about each time, or ask your child to "read" a favorite story to you - even if he doesn't really know how to read words yet.
- **Practice the Alphabet: Sing the ABC song**, sometimes skipping letters to see if your child knows the right order; or say the ABCs and stop and see if your child can continue. Sound out letters, and talk about words that begin with a letter. When you are running errands with your child, play games in the car, having your child pick out letters on signs and items in the grocery store.
- **Name That Thing:** Help your child learn how to describe how things look and what they do by playing the "Name That Thing" Game. Example: Ask your child, "What's round and you bounce it?" (Answer is, of course, ball), or "What has four legs, a long nose, and floppy ears?" (Answer - yes, an elephant).
- **Counting in Every Day Activities:** At the grocery store, have your child count how many items you put in the cart, and ask how many there would be if you add one or take two away. Count the number of red cars you see on a short trip to visit a friend. Read books about numbers and counting.

When Is a Child Ready for Kindergarten?

Each state has its own requirements for when children are "ready" and **can** *normust* start kindergarten. The minimum age in almost all states to start kindergarten is five years old. However, most states have strict and specific age requirements. Some children will not be able to start kindergarten until they are six because their birthday falls past the state law's date for eligibility.

AS YOUR CHILD GETS CLOSER TO KINDERGARTEN AGE, AROUND FOUR YEARS OLD:

Contact your local elementary school or school district and request information on kindergarten enrollment. They will have information on what is needed to enroll your child in the local school system, as well as information on the kinds of skills and abilities they would like for all children coming into kindergarten.

Skills That Will Prepare Your Child

Many skills make up a child's readiness level. Most of these skills develop naturally over time. However, some may not. If you are aware of the types of things your child should know and be able to do, you will be better able to help your child. This can be especially important if your child does not attend a formal child care or preschool arrangement.

Schools want all of their students to learn and succeed. Ask yourself these questions when preparing your child for kindergarten. Is my child:

- **Familiar with and knows** items in the environment?
- **Able to understand** what others say?
- **Able to be understood** by others?
- **Able to do basic self-care activities** such as feeding and dressing himself?
- **Sociable and likes to be around others?**
- **Able to stay with an activity** for 15 minutes or more?
- **Able to follow simple directions?**
- **Able to do large and small muscle activities**, such as cut with scissors or ride a tricycle?

SKILLS NEEDED

Knowing what things are, what they are used for, and why

Understanding language and being understood

WHAT YOU CAN DO

- Talk about what the things are, how they look, feel, taste, sound and smell ("That is a big, round, orange!")
- Point out familiar things in your everyday environment. ("We always stop at a red light.")
- Ask your child to tell a story or repeat what happened in a story you read. ("What happened to Ella in the story?")
- Let your child practice talking to people on the phone. ("Tell

Aunt Jo what you did at the park today?")

- Able to do independent activities
 - Let your child dress, feed, and toilet himself as much as possible and help only when needed.
 - Give choices to help increase his independence skills.
 - Give your child one or two "chores" that he can do everyday, such as help you set the table or tidy up.

- Able to follow directions and get along with others
 - Provide opportunities for your child to play with other children in small groups and one on one

- Good control of large movement and small movement skills
 - Give your child lots of practice with carrying things, holding utensils, using crayons, turning the faucet, opening the door, and cutting with scissors (with appropriate scissors and supervision).
 - Allow your child to use large muscles when running, jumping, and climbing stairs.

Parents and Caregivers Working Together Ahead of Time

If your child is in a regular child care arrangement, such as a center-based setting, a family child care home, a family member, or some other child care arrangement, it is important to talk regularly to your child's provider.

Parents and caregivers can work together on readiness skills by:

- Regularly discussing your child's daily activities, making sure a variety of activities that include reading, writing, building, and creative play, are being offered;
- Making a plan for transitioning into preschool or kindergarten as time approaches that includes -
 - talking with your child about the new school,
 - saying goodbye to old friends,
 - visiting the new school, and
 - meeting with your child's new teacher.
- Including routines that may be part of the kindergarten routine, such as circle time.
- Gradually transitioning your child from two naps to one or working to match your child's naptime to that of the local kindergarten schedule.

WHAT ABOUT PRE-KINDERGARTEN AND UNIVERSAL PRE-K PROGRAMS?

Most states (40 states and Washington, D.C.) either provide funding or have their own programs within the existing school systems for pre-kindergarten programs for all or for certain groups of

three and four year olds. These programs are usually half-day programs. To find out more contact your local school board or state department of education.

What If... My Child Isn't Ready?

Children grow and develop at different speeds. Just because your child may not be able to do something today, doesn't mean that he will not be able to do it next month. Kindergarten "ready" skills are guides for parents. They are not meant to be used as "must have" skills before going to kindergarten. If your child does not yet have a skill, or is behind in any one certain area, it doesn't mean that he is not ready to go to kindergarten.

Just like adults, children have different skill levels and strengths. If at age five, for example, a child does not know the alphabet or has trouble with holding a pencil correctly, it may mean that the child just needs extra support to improve on those skills.

The point is to work with your child on a variety of skills and activities. If your child seems particularly behind on tasks that most children at that age are able to do, talk to your pediatrician and caregiver. Discuss your child's development and progress with those who work with her on a regular basis to get a complete assessment of your child's abilities.

If your child has a lot of delays in readiness skills, and you feel that your child may not be ready for kindergarten, work with your local school system. They will help to determine if your child should or should not go on to kindergarten just yet.