

# School Readiness and School Entry: Helping Handout for Home

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## INTRODUCTION

Formal school entry begins for most children at kindergarten. This is an exciting time for children to explore new ideas and materials, create new friendships, and build independence and self-confidence. Parents, however, often worry about a child's readiness and ability to thrive as a happy and engaged member of this new learning environment. Many parents wonder what it means for a child to be "ready for school" and if there are things that can be done to prepare a child for this important transition. Successful entry into kindergarten is the result of a combination of a child's unique strengths and needs as well as the settings in which a child resides, including the home, the school, and the community. Indeed, children's adaptation to a new school experience is strongly influenced by interactions within and across these settings (Pretti-Frontczak et al., 2016). Important considerations to support your child's transition into school are presented below, followed by specific recommendations to increase your child's successful school entry.

### Considerations for School Entry

As you are preparing your child to enter kindergarten, you will need to consider the kindergarten options available within your school district. Some states and districts offer only half-day tuition-free kindergarten and charge an additional fee if a child remains the whole day. Hours for full-day kindergarten also vary considerably. Research indicates the academic and social advantages of full-day kindergarten (Cooper, Allen, Patall, & Dent, 2010). Parents often have to make a difficult placement decision based on economic considerations.

A second consideration involves understanding what will be expected of your child. A child's former preschool experiences may differ substantially from those he or she encountered in kindergarten, which can result in unexpected stress. Many schools have shifted from play-based learning to more academic learning. Although many kindergarten classrooms have designated time for free play, that time is limited and is often separated from other academic activities. That change is being made despite research emphasizing the importance of play in kindergarten and evidence that play is integral to learning (Miller & Almon, 2009). Thus, children entering school may experience fewer opportunities to play, explore, and interact with peers during less-structured time.

A third consideration concerns the specific developmental behaviors and skills that your child will be expected to master by the end of the year and beyond. Most kindergarten curricula provide learning opportunities to improve skills in language and communication and to develop cognitive, social, emotional, and physical competence. However, the emphasis placed on each of these domains may vary by classroom. Most teachers will expect a child to be developing the ability to (a) understand and follow directions, new rules, and routines; (b) verbally communicate needs and feelings; (c) relate interpersonally and cooperate with others; (d) take care of personal needs; and (e) develop foundational early literacy and math skills.

Finally, additional issues must be considered if your child has a specific developmental delay or disability, or is transitioning from early intervention to school-age special education services. Those issues include the need to develop an Individualized Education Program (IEP) that focuses primarily on your

child's academic, social, and emotional needs and less on family needs and services.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations will help prepare your child for a successful transition into kindergarten. They are organized into three general domains: language and cognition, social–emotional learning, and personal self-help skills. As a parent or caregiver, you should recognize that (a) skills within each of these domains require guidance and practice, (b) individual children develop such skills over different time frames, and (c) the best way to develop and reinforce such skills is during typical daily routines (Pretti-Frontczak et al., 2016). The final section presents ideas to further prepare your child for this important transition and to foster strong connections between your home and your child's school. More information about these and other effective school entry ideas can be found in the recommended resources at the end of this handout.

### Language and Cognition

To increase your child's language and cognitive abilities, it is important to focus on activities that improve listening, speaking, attention, vocabulary, memory (recall of information), and comprehension. Such skills have been directly linked to early success in reading and math and to higher rates of academic success and school completion (Duncan et al., 2007).

1. ***Build your child's oral language by repeating and expanding upon her comments and by using more complete sentences with added descriptive vocabulary.*** For example, when taking a walk you might say "See the tall trees rocking back and forth in the wind." Likewise, when your child is playing, it helps to use a "Follow the CAR" strategy to foster language development (Rosenkoetter & Knapp-Philo, 2006). "Follow" refers to showing interest in what your child is playing. "C" requires making a simple comment about what your child is doing and then waiting for a response. "A" refers to asking your child a question about her comment or about what is happening (but be careful not to overwhelm your child by asking too many or too complex questions). Finally, "R" is a reminder to add a little more to a prior comment and then to wait quietly for 5 seconds or longer to give your child a chance to process her response more carefully.

2. ***Share books with your child to build vocabulary and foster an interest in reading.*** Find books with many pictures and engage your child in a discussion about the book, the title, and the author. Ask for a prediction of what the story might be about. Preview the book by slowly scanning the pages and discussing what your child sees and what might be happening. Follow up and expand on your child's comments and interest in the pictures and story. During these discussions point out differences between single letters, whole words, and sentences. Finally, provide models of fluent, expressive reading by either reading with or letting your child listen to a recording of the storybook.
3. ***Increase your communication and interactions with your child during everyday family routines.*** This might include quick encouragement and check-ins on your child's progress and needs (e.g., "I appreciate how you are putting away your toys now so we can get ready to leave. I wonder what we can do to look for your coat.") as well as simple comments to show you are actively listening and valuing your child's growing independence and initiative (e.g., "It seems like this idea is very important to you right now. Tell me more about that.>").
4. ***Play games during daily activities to develop your child's preacademic skills.*** Help your child to recognize, spell, and write his or her name and to find objects that begin with similar sounds and letters. Games such as I Spy also can encourage vocabulary development and early literacy skills (e.g., "I spy something that starts with the sound /a/ or starts with the letter 't'"). Other games can teach early math skills, such as games that require matching similar and different colors or items, arranging items in a sequence (i.e., smallest to largest, first to last), or counting groups of items.

### Social–Emotional Learning

To increase your child's social–emotional learning, you can teach her to express and control her emotions and to recognize that her emotions can differ from others'. Such understanding is the basis of many important social relationship and interpersonal skills, such as the ability to take turns, share materials, and resolve conflicts with others (Tominey, O'Bryon, Rivers, & Shapses, 2017).

5. ***Expand your child's emotional vocabulary by associating words with feelings you and your***

**child share.** Read books together that discuss and label emotions and talk about pictures of people expressing different emotions. Also model and label your own emotions as you encounter different situations (e.g., “I am frustrated [mad, sad, scared] right now because ...”).

6. **Support your child’s ability to control and regulate behavior.** One way to do this is to model effective coping strategies, such as deep breathing (i.e., “I am going to take a deep breath and count to 10”) and positive self-talk (e.g., “I will find something else to do until I can play with the toy I want.”). Self-regulation also can be fostered through the use of social stories, in which the characters use important skills to face problems or situations. One well-known author of such stories is Julia Cook, who wrote the children’s book, *I Just Don’t Like the Sound of No*. The Head Start Center for Inclusion (n.d.) also has free social stories available and links to additional resources. One such social story, *Dragon Brain*, is often used to teach preschool children a deep breathing strategy that can help them deal with anger.
7. **Help your child learn to accept transitions.** Children are sometimes unwilling to stop an ongoing activity and move onto another. You can prepare him by giving him a clear warning that a change is going to happen. For example, you might say “We have 5 more minutes left to play. Then we have to clean up so we can go visit Grandma.” Another way to help your child understand upcoming transitions is to develop a visual schedule of expected activities that occur regularly during your child’s day. A visual schedule breaks the day into a sequence of time periods and includes pictures of the activities that occur during each period. The schedule should be placed in a prominent spot and used as a reminder of what is coming next. Teachers often use similar practices in classrooms to prepare students for upcoming transitions.
8. **Engage in games or activities that require cooperation and turn taking.** Games such as Chutes and Ladders, Go Fish, or Musical Chairs use these skills. Teach your child to follow directions and rules by playing games such as Simon Says, Mother May I, Follow the Leader, or Red Light/Green Light. When your child wins at a game, model language and coping strategies for when things don’t turn out as he or she hopes they will (e.g., “That was a fun game even though I didn’t win.”).

## Personal Self-Help Skills

To promote a child’s self-help skills, it is important to ensure that the child develops personal competencies for eating, toileting, dressing, putting items away, and sharing important information in an emergency, such as his or her own and family members’ names, address, and phone numbers (Rosenkoetter & Knapp-Philo, 2006).

9. **Practice zipping, tying, and buttoning with your child to increase his independence.** Besides preparing your child to put on and take off outdoor gear, shoes, and so on by himself, you will be giving him greater confidence and making classroom transitions easier. You also can play games or sing songs that require starting and stopping specific movements such as balancing, hopping, jumping, running, or skipping. These types of activities also help to strengthen small and large muscles.
10. **Encourage personal responsibility and give your child opportunities to practice.** Your child will be better prepared for the classroom if you have her help clean up after herself at meals, pack up her own school materials in the morning, and unpack them in the afternoons. You can make a game out of putting clothes away and cleaning up toys after play. These responsibilities also will help your child follow simple directions and practice tasks often required in classrooms.
11. **Have conversations with your child weeks in advance about what to expect on the first day of school.** Include expected steps of the day, which may include taking a bus, getting dropped off or picked up by another parent, and attending a before- or after-school program. To further prepare your child, you can act out the steps leading up to this event together. If you drew up a visual schedule earlier, you can review it and refer to it often before the big day.
12. **Once your child begins school, try to keep home routines consistent and provide extra rest time.** Your child will need plenty of rest and consistency to adjust to the new demands and expectations of school. Set up a consistent bedtime and after-school routine to help ensure your child has the necessary sleep to function at his optimal capacity. Children ages 3 to 5 years require 11–13 hours of sleep, and school-age children require 10–11 hours of sleep.

## Ideas to Further Enhance Adjustment to School

To further prepare for and enhance your child’s entry into school, it is important to build a relationship with

your child's teacher; understand important school policies, rules, and expectations; and identify differences and continuities between home and school values, expectations, and routines (Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 2003).

13. **Find ways to communicate effectively with your child's new school and teachers.** If you set up a regular two-way flow of information with the school, you will be more confident when communicating about your child's adjustment and well-being. For example, if the teacher asks you if your child regularly looks forward to school, you will be able to quickly alert the teacher to any concerns. Bring concrete examples of any concerns about your child's progress to all meetings to aid the dialogue.
14. **Discuss household rules or practices that may differ from school practices.** For example, ask about any practices that may seem to be affecting your child's adjustment (e.g., taking off shoes or sharing personal items or food). You may also want to ask about academic and social-emotional concepts and terminology used in the classroom to reinforce ideas being learned at school and further your child's learning.
15. **Share positive impressions of the classroom and mention your child's progress.** Be willing to collaborate on what can be done both at home and at school to coordinate common routines and practices and help your child adapt to this new experience.
16. **Contact other families who have already experienced this transition.** Other families are a good source to ask about school or community resources that might be available to support your child's, and your own, transition.

## RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

### Websites

<http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/>

The website for the Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning provides resources to support social-emotional learning for young children, including social stories, book lists, and practical strategies.

<https://developingchild.harvard.edu/>

The website for the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University provides research on child development and presents the information through videos and briefings.

### Books for Parents

Elovson, A. (1993). *The kindergarten survival handbook: The before school checklist and guide for parents*. Santa Monica, CA: Parent Education Resources.

This book provides parent-friendly information about ways in which parents can use everyday experiences to help their child be ready to learn and enjoy school. Specific strategies and simple suggestions for use in the home are provided.

Siegel, D. J., & Payne, T. (2011). *The whole-brain child: 12 revolutionary strategies to nurture your child's developing mind*. New York, NY: Bantam Books.

This book provides parents with practical information about their child's developing brain, with specific ideas and language to foster healthy problem solving with toddlers through teenagers.

### Books for Children

Danneberg, J. (2000). *First day jitters*. Watertown, MA: Charlesbridge.

Harris, R. H. (2003). *I am not going to school today*. New York, NY: Margaret K. McElderry Books.

Henkes, K. (2010). *Wemberly worried*. New York, NY: Greenwillow Books.

Millis, D., & Finlay, L. (2001). *Sam's first day*. Aurora, IL: Mantra Lingua.

Penn, A. (2009). *The kissing hand*. Indianapolis, IN: Tanglewood.

### Related Helping Handouts for Home

Reading Skills: Helping Handout for Home

Social and Emotional Learning: Helping Handout for Home

Using Praise and Rewards Wisely: Helping Handout for School and Home

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