

# Preparing young children for school success

## *It's easier than you might think*

For most parents, the first year or two of their children's lives are typically punctuated by specific, concrete milestones, from first steps and first words, to first tastes of real food. You probably knew what to expect and when — but as your youngster gets closer to school age, your questions may get far more complicated, and harder to answer:

Does my child play well with others? How many numbers and letters should my child know? How independent should my child be?

These common, but important, questions leave many parents pouring over books and magazines, talking with fellow moms and dads, and polling extended family in search of guidance. And usually, the answers aren't as concrete as one might have hoped.

Here's why: The skills that truly help children do well in school are not measurable on a growth chart or correlated to age, say pre-school and kindergarten teachers. Instead, the most important skills for school success are developed naturally, during common daily activities, such as throwing a ball back and forth, asking your child to name items in the grocery store, or helping your child make a drawing.

In fact, it's easier than you might think to work a little preparation for school success into every aspect of your child's day. Here are some tips:

**Ask questions.** Building your child's knowledge of the world can occur anywhere, whether it's running an errand at the local bank or a trip across the country. Expanding children's knowledge of the world beyond their homes will help them get into the habit of sharing their opinions and ideas. As you travel around with your children, talk informally about your interests and ask them to do the same. Encourage creative answers from your child by asking open-ended questions, such as "Why do you think the sun shines?" or "How do you think birds stay up in the air when they fly?" Let your child's natural curiosity create the answers, no matter how offbeat or unrealistic. Aside from helping you form a close relationship with your children, this type of ongoing dialogue pays off once they enter school: Children who are accustomed to speaking up and who have had a chance to develop their vocabulary are often capable of handling more information than those with limited language skills — and they will be more likely to participate in classroom activities.

**Give plenty of encouragement.** Strong emotional development comes primarily from the positive encouragement children receive from parents and other important adults in their lives. Openly praising your children's good habits — such as following our directions when helping with chores or asking politely to have a snack — will help encourage them to follow the same patterns in school. Further, firmly encourage them to keep trying if they don't quite master a task at first, and help them work to solve the problem. This will build your children's level of persistence and instill in them the confidence they will need to resist the urge to throw in the towel at the first sign of failure.

**Help your children learn independence.** It's a given that children must learn to follow directions to be successful in school. At the same time, children must also demonstrate independence, primarily by learning to make their own choices and be self-sufficient. Pay attention to what you routinely do for your children, as well as the types of tasks your children consistently ask for help with (picking up toys, dressing, etc.), and work on teaching them to do those things independently. This will help your child learn to accomplish basic tasks without you, which will help ease the transition into the school environment where your children must learn to get along without you.

**Set healthy limits.** At the same time, children should not equate "independence" with refusing to follow directions. "Some children think that following an adult request or direction is optional," says one kindergarten teacher. "A child may say, 'I don't want to do that,' to which I find myself replying, 'I'm sorry, but it's not a choice!'" To help your children understand the difference, try giving your child choices within your directions. For example, if you want your child to make his bed as well as pick up his toys, let him choose which one he

wants to do first. This gives your child some control, but also ensures both tasks are completed. You can also try giving your children choices (no more than two or three so they don't get overwhelmed) for how to spend their free time: "Do you want to play with Playdoh or color a picture?" At the same time, help your children understand that some directions are non-negotiable: If a grown-up (parent, babysitter, teacher) gives them a direction, they are expected to follow it.

**Get social.** Introduce your children to experiences where they can interact with other children their age and learn to accept care from adults other than their parents. Preschool, daycare, or play groups are perfect starting grounds. Through these experiences, your children will begin learning to play, cooperate and problem-solve with their peers, building the social skills that will translate to proper behavior in the school environment. Be sure to walk the walk at home as well: When limiting the amount of time your children spend on generally solitary activities, such as watching television or playing video games, do not engage in the activities yourself. Suggest activities you can all do as a family instead of plopping in front of the tube, such as taking a walk after dinner.

**Read, read, read.** Even if your child is only interested in books as a way to delay bedtime, indulging that request for "one more story" every now and then can pay off. Early childhood educators say that reading with your children, as well as letting them see you read, sends your children the message that reading is important and fun. Further, reading develops children's language skills, helping them to communicate more effectively with you and others — which can lead to less frustration and fewer meltdowns. The same rules apply to very young children: Babies learn about language from hearing your voice, even if they do not understand the story you are reading.

**Provide plenty of opportunities for physical activity.** Playing a game of catch, running and jumping, climbing on a jungle gym or dancing to music are fun and easy ways children can learn muscle coordination and control. Ironically, activities like these actually develop the strength they need for quieter skills they will need to master for school, such as holding their arms steady for writing, or sitting for extended lengths of time. Coloring, putting together puzzles, zipping their jackets and even enjoying a bite-sized cereal snack will help children learn to control and coordinate hand and finger muscles.

**Bring out your child's artistic side.** Here's all you need to foster the natural evolution of your child's drawing and writing skills: A comfortable space, pencils and markers big enough for little fingers to grasp, and a blank sheet of paper. Watch as those first few scribbles evolve from squiggles and loops to actual letter shapes. Be sure to provide plenty of encouragement and do not worry if your child still isn't writing letters by the first day of school — every child's writing evolves at a unique pace.

**Be your child's "counting coach."** Sesame Street's Count von Count has it right: The opportunities to count are endless if you know where to look. Your child will learn to recognize numbers and understand fundamental math concepts from such basic household items as clocks, telephones and TV remote controls. Just about any household task can be turned into a counting game. Try counting out the forks, spoons and napkins as you set the table for dinner, or count as your child puts toys away. Throw in a quick lesson on fractions by asking your children if they want their sandwich halved or quartered, then let your child watch as you cut the sandwich. Even counting as you stack blocks one by one in front of your baby will help the numbers begin to sink in.

**Know, and accept, what your child is capable of.** Young children often learn at dramatically different rates from the preschool years through age eight. While most children can learn to sound out letters at age six, it is also normal for children to learn to do this as early as age four or as old as seven. This is also true of drawing, writing letters and numbers, counting, speaking articulately and following multiple directions. So if your children are still working to build the skills needed for school success when that first day of kindergarten rolls around, relax — they should master those skills with time and support.

## As That First Day Approaches...

Beyond the everyday activities that help prepare our children for school, more detailed questions may arise regarding the actual enrollment process. For example: Will your child be tested before entering school? Does the school offer an orientation for parents? Will your child need to bring anything to class on the first day of school?

### To find the answers:

- Call the school where you plan to enroll your child. It is never too early to get information on Pre-K and kindergarten registration and enrollment, mark your calendar with important dates, and gather the necessary supplies for the first day of class.
- Go right to the source: Talk with a Pre-K or kindergarten teacher at the school. Teachers can offer valuable insights on what they expect from their students, as well as how you can help to reinforce the lessons from the classroom at home.
- Check the school's website for additional information and resources, including upcoming registration dates and the phone number for the main office of your child's school.
- Request a tour of the school for both you and your child if the school does not already offer an orientation program. Familiarizing your child with the surroundings will help to ease tension on the first day of school — for the both of you.

## Additional information

Even if the first day of school is still a long way off, it's never too early to gather additional perspectives on preparing your children for school success. Here are some resources to reference:

### Books

- *Megaskills: Building Our Children's Character and Achievement for School and Life*, by Dorothy Rich, Ed.D.
- *Mommy, Teach Me: Preparing Your Preschool Child for a Lifetime of Learning*, by Barbara Curtis
- *I Am Too Absolutely Small For School*, by Lauren Child. (If your child is apprehensive about going to school, this story, about a little girl who thinks she's "too small to go to school" and the older brother who convinces her otherwise, may help to ease the nervousness.)

### Online Resources

- *Helping Your Preschool Child* <http://www2.ed.gov/parents/earlychild/ready/preschool/index.html> — Download a free booklet from the U.S. Department of Education that lists school-prep activities for children from infants to age 5. Available in English and Spanish.
- *Grow & Play* [http://www2.scholastic.com/content/collateral\\_resources/pdf/g/gerber\\_smp\\_growplay.pdf](http://www2.scholastic.com/content/collateral_resources/pdf/g/gerber_smp_growplay.pdf) — A free PDF guide from Scholastic that features activities and tips for preparing preschoolers for school.
- *Gayle's Preschool Rainbow* <http://www.preschoolrainbow.org/preschoolers.htm> — A website that includes activities for preschool children.

## ***Local Resources***

- Schenectady County Public Library <http://www.scpl.org/youth/read.html> — Check out the events list on the library website for activities geared toward preschoolers at various library branches, such as Toddler Time, Preschool Story Hour, and Baby Lap Time. Be sure to check if registration is required.
- Albany County Public Library <http://www.albanypubliclibrary.org/> — Look for online resources, a calendar of events for kids and more.
- “Family Fun Day” at the New York State Museum <http://www.nysm.nysed.gov/programs/familyfun/> — Every third Saturday of the month, the museum holds this event, which includes activities geared toward the whole family, no matter the age.