



ready, set, school!

how to prepare your child for kindergarten

by Heidi Smith Luedtke, PhD

When my son boarded the bus for pre-kindergarten last fall, I waved good-bye with excitement—and more than a little anxiety. I hoped he would be able to sit still, and I feared that he'd clam up when the teacher asked a question. Despite a nightly story time and shelves full of preschool prep workbooks, I wasn't sure his skills would meet the teacher's expectations. I hoped other kids made their letters backwards and upside down sometimes, too. I didn't want my son to be left out socially if he couldn't keep up academically.

A recent online survey of 518 kindergarten teachers conducted by the Glendale, California-based company Age of Learning, Inc. suggests parents have plenty of reasons to worry about pre-kindergarten preparation. Sixty-six percent of the teachers who responded believe kids are underprepared for school. The national sample included new and experienced instructors from both public and private programs.

Readiness from A to Z

Survey results show some kids cannot recite the whole alphabet—the simplest early literacy task. Only 28 percent of teachers said most children know the names of the letters, and even fewer (15 percent) said students know what sounds letters represent. Teachers' ratings of number skills were more favorable. More than half of the teachers (57 percent) reported most kids can recite the numbers from one to ten, and 49 percent indicated most kids can count a collection of fewer than 10 objects.

Although 95 percent of kindergarten teachers agreed preschool is beneficial, Dave Hendry, coordinator for Age of Learning's comprehensive online curriculum (ABCmouse.com Early Learning Academy) says parents play a vital role in kindergarten readiness. "Parents can create learning opportunities at the grocery store and in the car," says Hendry, to demonstrate learning is a natural part of everyday life. Read on for some of the specific—and enjoyable—ways to get your child ready for school.

Reading

Experts say the best way to support early literacy is to read with your child. Use books as the basis for a conversation about letters, words, and stories, says Hendry. Look at the pictures and ask questions about what your child sees. Note the names of the author and illustrator, point out specific letters, and run your finger beneath the words periodically to demonstrate we read from left to right and top to bottom. These are key reading concepts.

Writing

Offer a variety of crayons and markers, and big, blank sheets of paper for your child to explore. Scribbling strengthens hand muscles and hones hand-eye coordination. "Chalkboards are great surfaces for little kids," says pediatric occupational therapist Anne Zachary, PhD, who works for Shelby County Schools in Memphis, TN. Small pieces of chalk encourage kids to grip with their fingers instead of their fists, and—because your child can erase—you won't go through reams of paper. Prompt your child to make lines, curves, crosses, and circles. Shapes are letter-writing prerequisites.

Speaking

Children should be able to speak clearly and express their ideas with words. "Encourage independence by having your child place her own order at a restaurant," suggests educational psychologist Kim Har, PhD, early education director at the school admissions consultancy Aristotle Circle. "Speaking directly to the server and paying for purchases in a store are opportunities to interact with adults who are not parents." When you speak with your child, be a good role model. Make eye contact, listen, and take turns.

66%

of the teachers who responded believe kids are underprepared for school.

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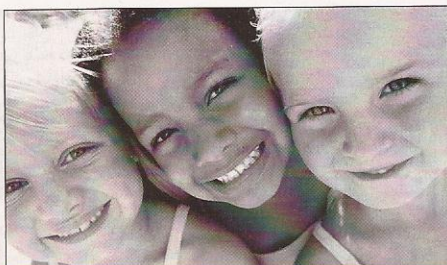
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Math & science

Reciting numbers from one to ten is only the beginning of pre-kindergarten prep. "Ask your child to count out five bananas or to get six cans of soup at the store," says Hendry. Count the number of people in line ahead of you. Point out price stickers and ask, "Do you see a number that starts with 5?" to help your child learn to identify written numerals. At home, let your child sort items (such as clean laundry or silverware) by color, shape, or size. Use words like more/less, bigger/smaller, and light/heavy to describe objects. Science is based on measurement and comparisons.

Small-motor skills

"There's a big wave of children who can't manipulate a pencil or cut with scissors entering kindergarten these days," says Zachary. Playing with small toys, such as Legos and beads and clay improves strength and coordination. Give your child a small pair of tongs to pick up pom poms or pasta, says Zachary. Tongs require the same pinching maneuver kids must make when manipulating a pencil or cutting with scissors.

Self-care

Your child should be able to button, snap, and zip his pants and coat without assistance, says Zachary. He should also be able to recognize when he needs to use the bathroom and get the job done independently. If you've been helping because it's quicker and cleaner, scale back your assistance.

Social skills

"In kindergarten, academics have a lot more to do with social skills than with anything else," says Rusty May, a school counselor in San Francisco and co-author of *Time In: Teaching Social Skills and Connecting with Students*. Kids learn from whole-class conversations led by the teacher, and smaller peer-group projects or play. "Kids who can't wait their turn or control their response to frustration can ruin a classroom environ-

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ment," says May. Go to the park or attend library story time regularly to expose your child to large groups of peers. Praise her for kind, composed behavior. Social and emotional skills don't develop automatically.

With one semester completed, I'm pleased to say my son is succeeding at school. He speaks up during circle time after raising his hand. He writes his name more fluidly and with fewer backward letters. And he puts his whole heart into every art project. With guidance from his teacher, he's learning all the things a 4-year-old should know so next fall, when he's 5, he'll be ready for kindergarten. **f**

Preschool tech specs

Technology can aid preschool preparation if it uses age-appropriate content and instruments.

Tools that are too difficult may result in frustration. Those that are too easy will be boring. "You want software that has a developmental progression, so it's focused on what your child needs to learn next," says Dave Hendry, curriculum coordinator for ABCmouse.com, an online curriculum company for preschoolers. New knowledge makes the most sense when it's built on a foundation of previous learning.

When you're shopping for educational technology, "Look for tools that allow your children to interactively control learning at their own pace," says Hendry.

Of course, even the best educational technology shouldn't take the place of reading books, playing with peers, and making mud pies. Early childhood experts recommend tech sessions of only 30-60 minutes for preschoolers.

Heidi Smith Luedtke, PhD, is a personality psychologist in NJ and mom of two. She offers psychology lessons for life at heidiluedtke.com/blog.

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