

Helping Your Child Succeed In School

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Part 1 - Preparing Your Child For School

Learning Begins Early

The road to success in school begins early. Good health, loving relationships, and opportunities to learn all help preschool children do well later in life. But many parents wonder, "How can I give these things to my child?"

This section is for all of you who have asked this question. It's for parents, grandparents, and others who want to know what to do to help young children get ready for school.

Throughout the preschool years, you can do many simple things to help your child grow, develop, and have fun learning. This book:

- * Describes the qualities and skills that youngsters need to get a good start in kindergarten;
- * Tells what to expect from preschoolers each year from birth to age 5;
- * Suggests easy activities that help children grow and develop; and
- * Explains how to encourage enthusiasm toward school and teachers and make it easier for children to adjust to kindergarten.

Special sections in the back of the book tell how to monitor television viewing and find good programs; and explain how to find suitable child care.

Parents and caregivers are busy people. Most of us have many responsibilities: jobs outside the home, laundry to wash, and groceries to buy. When we are tired and under stress, it's often hard to feel we are being the best parents.

But however busy we may be, there are lots of things we

can do to help our children get ready for school--little things that make a big difference. Many of them cost little or nothing and can be done as you go about your daily routines.

Mothers and fathers aren't the only people who help children get ready for school. Entire communities share this job. Businesses, schools, government agencies, and religious and civic organizations help out. So do day care providers, doctors and other health professionals, elected officials, relatives, and neighbors. But no one is more important than parents, because life's most basic lessons are learned early and at home. The first 5 years are when the groundwork for future development is laid.

What Does It Mean To Be Ready for School?

There is no one quality or skill that children need to do well in school, but a combination of things contributes to success. These include good health and physical wellbeing, social and emotional maturity, language skills, an ability to solve problems and think creatively, and general knowledge about the world.

As you go about helping your child develop in each of these areas, remember

- * Children develop at different rates, and
- * Most children are stronger in some areas than in others.

Remember, too, that being ready for school depends partly on what the school expects. One school may think it's very important for children to sit quietly and know the alphabet. Another may believe it's more important for children to get along well with others.

Children who match the school's expectations may be considered better prepared. You may want to visit your child's school to learn what the principal and teachers expect and discuss any areas of disagreement.

While schools may have different priorities, most educators agree that the following areas are important for success.

Good Health and Physical Well-Being

Young children need nutritious food, enough sleep, safe places to play, and regular medical care. These things help children get a good start in life and lessen the chances that they will later have serious health problems or trouble learning.

Good health for children begins before birth with good prenatal care. Visit a doctor or medical clinic throughout your pregnancy. In addition, eat nourishing foods, avoid alcohol, tobacco, and other harmful drugs, and get plenty of rest.

Pregnant women who don't take good care of themselves increase their chances of giving birth to children who

- * Are low in birth weight, making them more likely to have lifelong health and learning problems;
- * Develop asthma;
- * Are mentally retarded;
- * Develop speech and language problems;
- * Have short attention spans; or
- * Become hyperactive.

If your child already has some of these problems, it is a good idea to consult your doctor, your school district, or community agencies as soon as possible. Many communities have free or inexpensive services to help you and your child.

Good health for children continues after birth with a balanced diet. School-aged children can concentrate better in class if they eat nutritionally balanced meals. These should include breads, cereals, and other grain products; fruits; vegetables; meat, poultry, fish and alternatives (such as eggs and dried beans and peas); and milk, cheese, and yogurt. Avoid too many fats and sweets.

Children aged 2-5 generally can eat the same foods as adults but in smaller portions. Your child's doctor or clinic can provide advice on feeding babies and toddlers under the age of 2.

Federal, state, and local aid is available for parents who need food in order to make sure their children get a balanced diet. The federal nutrition program, called the Special Supplemental Food Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), distributes food to more than 5.4 million low-income women and their children through about 8,200 service centers across the country. Food stamps also are available for many families with children. For information and to find out if you are eligible, contact your local or state health department. Preschoolers require regular medical and dental checkups and immunizations. It's important to find a doctor or a clinic where children can receive routine health care as well as special treatment if they are sick or injured.

Children need immunizations beginning around the age of 2 months to prevent nine diseases: measles, mumps, German measles (rubella), diphtheria, tetanus, whooping cough, Hib (Haemophilus influenzae type b), polio, and tuberculosis. These diseases can have serious effects on physical and mental development. Regular dental checkups should begin at the latest by the age of 3.

Preschoolers need opportunities to exercise and develop physical coordination. To learn to control large muscles, children need to throw balls, run, jump, climb, and dance to music. To learn to control small muscles, particularly in the hands and fingers, they need to color with crayons, put together puzzles, use blunt-tipped scissors, and zip jackets. In kindergarten, they will build upon these skills.

Parents of youngsters with disabilities should see a doctor as soon as a problem is suspected. Early intervention can help these children develop to their full potential.

Social and Emotional Preparation

Young children are often very excited about entering school. But when they do, they can face an environment that's different from what they are used to at home or even in preschool. In kindergarten, they will need to work well in large groups and get along with new adults and other children. They will have to share the teacher's attention with other youngsters. The classroom routines may also be different. Most 5-year-olds do not start school with good social skills or much emotional maturity. These take time and practice to learn. However, children improve their chances for success in kindergarten if they have had opportunities to begin developing these qualities:

Confidence. Children must learn to feel good about themselves and believe they can succeed. Confident children are more willing to attempt new tasks--and try again if they don't succeed the first time.

Independence. Children need to learn to do things for themselves.

Motivation. Children must want to learn.

Curiosity. Children are naturally curious and must remain so in order to get the most out of learning opportunities.

Persistence. Children must learn to finish what they start.

Cooperation. Children must be able to get along with others and learn to share and take turns.

Self-control. Preschoolers must understand that some behaviors, such as hitting and biting, are inappropriate. They need to learn that there are good and bad ways to express anger.

Empathy. Children must learn to have an interest in others and understand how others feel.

Parents, even more than child care centers and good schools, help children develop these skills. Here are some ways you can help your child acquire these positive qualities: Youngsters must believe that, no matter what, someone will look out for them. Show that you care about your children. They thrive when they have parents or other caregivers who are loving and dependable. Small children need attention, encouragement, hugs, and plenty of lap time. Children who feel loved are more likely to be confident.

Set a good example. Children imitate what they see others do and what they hear others say. When parents exercise and eat nourishing food, children are more likely to do so. When parents treat others with respect, their children probably will, too. If parents share things, their children will learn to be thoughtful of others' feelings.

Have a positive attitude toward learning and toward school. Children come into this world with a powerful need to discover and to explore. Parents need to encourage this curiosity if children are to keep it. Enthusiasm for what children do ("You've drawn a great picture!") helps to make them proud of their achievements.

Children also become excited about school when their parents show excitement. As your child approaches kindergarten, talk to him about school. Talk about the exciting activities in kindergarten, such as going on field trips and making fun art projects. Be enthusiastic as you describe what he will learn in school--how to read and measure and weigh things, for example. Provide opportunities for repetition. It takes practice to crawl, pronounce new words, or drink from a cup. Children don't get bored when they repeat things. Instead, repeating things until they are learned helps youngsters build the confidence needed to try something new.

Use appropriate discipline. All children need to have limits set for them. Children whose parents give firm but loving discipline are generally more skilled socially and do better in school than children whose parents set too few or too many limits. Here are some tips.

- * Direct children's activities, but don't make unnecessary restrictions or try to dominate.
- * Offer reasons when asking your child to do something (For example, say, "Please move the toy truck off the stairs so no one falls over it"--not, "Do it because I said so.").
- * Listen to your children to find out how they feel and whether they need any special support.
- * Show love and respect when you are angry. Criticize a child's behavior but not the child (For example, say, "I love you, but it is not okay for you to draw pictures on the walls. I get angry when you do that.").

* Help your children make choices and work out problems (You might ask your 4-year-old, "What can we do to keep Kevin from knocking over your blocks?").

* Be positive and encouraging. Praise your child for a job well done. Smiles and encouragement go much further to shape good behavior than harsh punishment.

Let children do many things by themselves. Young children need to be closely watched. But they learn to be independent and to develop confidence by doing tasks such as dressing themselves and putting their toys away. It's also important to let them make choices, rather than deciding everything for them. Remember to give them a choice only when there really is one.

Encourage your children to play with other children and be with adults who are not family members. Preschoolers need these social opportunities to learn to see the point of view of others. Young children are more likely to get along with teachers and classmates if they already have had experiences with different adults and children.

Language and General Knowledge

Kindergärtners participate in many activities that require them to use language and to solve problems. Children who can't or don't communicate easily may have problems in school. There are many things you can do to help children learn to communicate, solve problems, and develop an understanding of the world. You can

Give your child opportunities to play. Play is how children learn. It is the natural way for them to explore, to become creative, and to develop academic and social skills. Play helps them learn to solve problems--for example, a wagon

tips over, and children must figure out how to get it upright again. Children learn about geometry, shapes, and balance when they stack up blocks. Playing with others helps children learn how to negotiate.

Talk to your children, beginning at birth. Babies need to hear your voice. A television or the radio can't take the place of your voice because it doesn't respond to coos and babbles. The more you talk to your baby, the more he will have to talk about as he gets older. Talking with children broadens their understanding of language and of the world.

Everyday activities, such as eating dinner or taking a bath, provide opportunities to talk, sometimes in detail, about what's happening and respond to your child. "First let's stick the plug in the drain. Now we'll turn on the water. I see you want to put your rubber duck in the bathtub. That's a good idea. Look, it's yellow, just like the rubber duck on 'Sesame Street.'"

Listen to your children. Children have their own special thoughts and feelings, joys and sorrows, hopes and fears. As their language skills develop, encourage them to talk. Listening is the best way to learn what's on their minds and to discover what they know and don't know, and how they think and learn. It also shows children that their feelings and ideas are valuable.

Answer questions and ask questions, particularly ones that require more than a "yes" or "no" response. While walking in a park, for example, most 2- and 3-year-olds will stop to pick up leaves. You might point out how the leaves are the same, and how they are different. With older children you might ask, "What else grows on trees?"

Questions can help children learn to compare and classify things. Answer your children's questions thoughtfully and, whenever possible, encourage them to answer their own questions. If you don't know the answer to a question, say so. Then together with your child try to find the answer.

Read aloud to your children every day. Reading can begin with babies and continue throughout the preschool years. Even though they don't understand the story or the poem, reading together gives children a chance to learn about language, enjoy the sound of your voice, and be close to you. You don't have to be an excellent reader for your child to enjoy this time together. You may also want to take your child to a local library that offers special story hours.

Make reading materials available. Children develop an interest in language and in reading much sooner if they have books and other reading materials around their homes. Monitor television viewing. Next to parents, television may be our children's most influential teacher. Good television can introduce children to new worlds and promote learning, but poor or too much TV can be harmful.

Be realistic about your children's abilities and interests. Children usually do best in school when parents estimate their abilities correctly. Parents must set high standards and encourage their preschoolers to try new things. Children who aren't challenged become bored. But ones who are pushed along too quickly, or are asked to do things that don't interest them, can become frustrated and unhappy.

Try to keep your children from being labeled. Labels such as "dumb" or "stupid" have a powerful effect on a child's confidence and school performance. Remember to praise your child for a job well done.

Provide opportunities to do and see things. The more varied the experiences that children have, the more they learn about the world. No matter where you live, your community can provide new experiences. Go for walks in your neighborhood, or go places on the bus. Visit museums, libraries, zoos, and other community resources.

If you live in the city, spend a day in the country (or if you live in the country, spend a day in the city). Let your children hear and make music, dance, and paint. Let them participate in activities that help to develop their imaginations and let them express their ideas and feelings. The following activities can provide your children with these opportunities.

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