

## **What Can Parents Do To Support Kindergarten Readiness?**

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The first day of kindergarten is a big day for students and their parents. This is the beginning of the thirteen years of schooling that hopefully all students will complete. For many students, problems develop in kindergarten and the ramifications of these problems go on for years making it difficult for students to become grade level proficient. Problems relating to social, emotional, and cognitive development hinder the growth in kindergarten. Students reach a level of frustration that is insurmountable. In some cases, this results in failure to graduate from high school. For other students, they may remain in school but it is such a struggle that the love for learning is diminished. As a result, students tend to shy away from academic challenges in an effort to “play it safe” due to the fear of failure. This can have a lasting impact on their choices about college as well as career choices. More and more attention is being placed on increasing drop out rates. This concern is encouraging parents, district leaders, administrators, and teachers to examine factors that may prevent students from completing high school. The quest to raise graduation rates motivates educators to investigate where problems for students may first arise.

Students enter kindergarten classes each fall who are already one year behind when initially assessed by the school. Kindergarten teachers and students must work extremely hard to address the existing gaps before moving forward with the kindergarten curriculum. This becomes an “uphill struggle” from the very beginning for students. This is largely due to the changes that have taken place in the kindergarten curriculum over the years. Kindergarten classes at this time do not resemble kindergarten classes ten years ago. Parents are continually shocked at the level of rigor associated with the work children are expected to do during their first year of school. With the arrival of Common Core Standards in the 2012-2013 school year, the kindergarten curriculum will only become more rigorous; therefore, making it even more important for students to be prepared for kindergarten. This places tremendous stress on both students and teachers because of the severe gaps that are already present in accordance with the existing curriculum. Typically, these gaps are seen in math reasoning, math computation, letter-sound recognition, vocabulary, and fine motor skills. The rigor of the new Common Core Standards will only increase the frustration of young students who are not prepared for kindergarten. The new Common Core Standards in kindergarten will resemble the objectives present in the existing second grade curriculum.

Preparation for kindergarten begins very early in the lives of young children. Vocabulary and language development have a profound impact on students' academic growth. Parents engaging in conversations with their children are powerful tools in relation to the language development of small children. New vocabulary words are taught to children when their parents talk with them. The exchange that takes place during conversations builds background knowledge which supports learning experiences in school. This is especially true when children are learning to read.

Another way to boost language development and to help students increase vocabulary is for parents to read to their children. This is a great way for parents and children to spend quality time together while also introducing children to new vocabulary. The background knowledge of young children is also increased when their parents read to them. Time spent reading to children sends the message that reading is a worthwhile activity; therefore, children are more apt to read during their leisure time. Children who have been exposed to books develop knowledge about the parts of a book such as the front, back, title page, and the movement of pages from left to right when reading. It is beneficial to young children entering kindergarten to already have an understanding about the parts of a book and the movement of the pages from left to right. This exposure will have a positive influence on young children when they enter kindergarten.

There are many experiences that can add to background knowledge other than reading. A stimulating environment provides opportunities to explore and learn. Family trips are a great way to expose children to many wonderful aspects of nature. However, the economic level of many parents can prevent family trips from being a possibility. Therefore, time spent playing outside in the back yard or visiting the neighborhood park can be wonderful ways to explore while also getting exercise and enjoying the elements of nature during all four seasons. Exploring outside in a sandbox or a neighborhood nature trail promotes healthy growth. These experiential learning activities are invaluable to the cognitive growth of children.

Preschool age children need routines and schedules in their daily lives. Schedules or daily routines offer structure to young children while creating an environment that feels safe and secure. Meal times, snack times, nap times, and bed times need to be scheduled and the times should be adhered to as much as possible. Healthy foods and plenty of rest will help students feel better physically and have a favorable influence on their disposition. Schedules for bedtime most definitely need to be in place before children begin kindergarten. Many students without schedules have a very difficult time when beginning kindergarten. It is difficult for students to suddenly adjust to being on a schedule. Failure to implement an appropriate bedtime can result in students being tired in the morning and unable to get to school on time. This results in students arriving to school late and missing out on important instructional time. Others are exhausted before the school day is over due to the lack of sleep. Bedtime schedules should be in place before beginning kindergarten in order to bypass these problems.

One of the most beneficial things that can be done to support kindergarten readiness is participation in a preschool program. The preschool experience offers structure and routines for young children making it easier for these students to transition into kindergarten. These programs are available both in the private and public sector. Private and public day cares or preschools are considered to be beneficial and there are advantages to both. Many local churches sponsor private preschools in their buildings. Programs such as More at Four, Head Start, and pre-kindergarten programs are housed at public schools. This variety offers programs for all socio-economic levels. The length of the day varies based on whether or not the program is a private program or public program. The structure and routines create boundaries and limitations for students making it easier for students to conform to the expectations of the typical kindergarten classroom.

The social interaction associated with preschool experiences is advantageous for all young children. This interaction helps young children to grow socially and emotionally. Being able to share with others and interact appropriately with their peers throughout the day is very important for kindergarten students. In the case of single child families, this exposure can be the only opportunity for children to interact with other young children. Failure to act appropriately takes away from the time "on task" and also important instructional time for the student and his/her kindergarten classmates. Preschool experiences give young children the chances to share and interact with others. These experiences help children work through the egocentric stage associated with their early years of life.

In the last fifteen years, there has been a growing preoccupation with the benefits received from cooperative learning experiences. Opportunities to work with others and treat others with respect are concepts that are crucial to cooperative learning. Preschool experiences will give young children the chances to work cooperatively with others at an early age which will only make this an easier goal to obtain when students enter kindergarten. Many parts of the preschool day are composed of activities requiring children to work together at work stations or centers. Transitioning from center to center is also part of the preschool learning experiences. These activities create the foundation for cooperative learning activities that will be a part of the kindergarten instructional format.

Most preschool programs have time in the day for children to explore the use of art materials by creating products. The activities are usually tied to a curriculum that is age appropriate for preschool students. The use of glue, scissors, age appropriate pencils, paint, and other art supplies open up huge opportunities for discovery and creation for young children. They create products while also being exposed to themes that are age appropriate. The use of these materials also helps students to develop motor skills. These experiences will make it easier for kindergarten teachers to move forward with more content driven activities that integrate these age appropriate tools.

Preschool programs introduce young learners to basic information that will strengthen their learning in kindergarten. The content is presented to children in an age appropriate manner. Unless parents have knowledge of early childhood education, they most likely are not knowledgeable about information that is age appropriate or about the manner in which the information should be presented to young learners. For example, it would be inappropriate to expect preschoolers to write complete sentences with the proper punctuation and capitalization. The daily activities in most preschools are student centered activities focusing on letters and sounds. Young children begin to work on writing their first name. Age appropriate lessons about colors and the first ten numbers in the number system seem very insignificant; however, prior exposure to these concepts can help children experience success in kindergarten.

Preschool experiences are not the only options for providing access to resources. There are many resources available in our communities that offer wonderful enriching activities for small children and their families. Story telling time at local book stores, trips to the public library, visits to local children's museums and to local parks are great ways to expose children to wonderful activities that will help them grow while also spending quality time with their parents.

Exposure to resources while spending quality time with parents is crucial to the healthy growth of children. Time spent with parents creates the feelings of comfort and security necessary for children to enter kindergarten feeling safe and self-assured. These feelings will reduce the possibility of separation anxiety when children begin kindergarten.

It is highly recommended that parents of young children contact agencies in their area that can provide an overview of the preschools or day care centers that are available. These agencies can inform parents about resources ranging from support for concerns about the physical growth as well as the social, emotional, and cognitive growth of young children. Information about enrichment activities can be obtained from these organizations as well. It is important to remember that the transition into kindergarten can have a tremendous impact on the years to come for our young students; however, the work to make this a positive transition needs to begin prior to kindergarten.