

Ready for Kindergarten?

Five teachers tell you what preschoolers really need for next year
by Ellen H. Parlapiano

If your child's preschool years are coming to an end, your thoughts are probably turning toward kindergarten. But is your child ready to move on to the "big" school? What skills do kindergarten teachers expect their new students to have? To help answer those questions (and ease your mind), we've asked highly regarded kindergarten teachers from around the country to share their insights on helping your child gain the right mix of kindergarten-readiness skills.

What follows are the top readiness skills that kindergarten teachers look for.

Enthusiasm Toward Learning

"I look for those qualities that prime children to be successful in school," says Kim Hughes. Does the child approach learning enthusiastically? Is she eager to explore and discover? Does she ask questions, take initiative, and persist when tasks are difficult?

"Parents can set aside a little time each day to investigate the world with their preschooler and answer those endless questions," says Sandra Waite-Stupiansky. As you drive or walk along in the park, point out your child's surroundings — the different trees or the various birds at the feeder. Demonstrate how things work. "You'll help your child develop beginning science skills — the ability to form a hypothesis, test it out, and come up with new questions and theories," Waite-Stupiansky explains. "The more kids notice, the more curious they'll become. And we'll be building on that curiosity in kindergarten."

Solid Oral-Language Skills

"Children need wide background knowledge about their world and the words to go with it," says Lisa Mosier. "I want to know where they've been and what they can talk about." You can help build language skills and vocabulary by taking your child to many new places and giving him words and descriptions for what he is seeing. At the zoo, explain, "There's a tiger. See how he has stripes and looks different from the lion?" Mosier says these experiences have a huge impact on literacy. "If you're reading a book about zoo animals and it says 'Look at the tiger,' and you can't tell the difference between a lion and a tiger, then you won't have the background knowledge to help you tackle the word. When children come to words that they don't know, they won't be able to make a good guess because it isn't in their vocabulary."

Research shows that one of the best predictors of later reading success is a well-developed oral vocabulary in kindergarten. "PreK kids are learning vocabulary at the rate of five to six words a day, and come to school understanding and speaking about 24,000 words" says Waite-Stupiansky. "A child needs to hear a word at least 12 times before they will retain words in context and conversation."

The Ability to Listen

Children's literature is a rich resource for expanding language. "We expect parents to be reading to kids every day," says Jayne C. Isaacs. "I can tell which children have been

glued to the TV or computer for hours at a time. When we read them a story and ask them to tell us in their own words what they liked or remembered, they're unable to do so." Besides fostering vocabulary and comprehension, reading develops the attention skills necessary in a kindergarten classroom. "Listening is a key part of school behavior," Isaacs notes. Students must be able to concentrate on what the teacher is saying, listen carefully and follow directions, and tune in to the sounds in letters and words.

"The more animated you are as you read, the better you'll focus your child's attention on what she's hearing," says Armando Argandona. Use different voices for the characters. Promote critical thinking by asking questions like, "Why do you think that happened?" and "How would you feel if that happened to you?" and "What do you think will happen next?" Engage children by inviting them to clap or stomp when they hear a rhyming word, and letting them finish sentences in familiar stories. Books with rhyme and repetitive refrains (like those by Mother Goose and Dr. Seuss) help them predict what's coming and detect consonant sounds at the beginning and end of words, which fosters phonemic awareness—the ability to hear and break down the pure sounds in words. Singing fosters pre-reading skills too.

The Desire to Be Independent

Encouraging self-help skills is an important step to preparing your child for kindergarten. "It's amazing how many children come to kindergarten not knowing how to hang up a jacket," says Argandona. It might be quicker for you to do it, but "independence is critical for helping your child adjust to school," he emphasizes. Teachers expect children to:

- Get coats on and off and hang them up
- Follow simple two-step instructions such as "take off your boots and put on your sneakers"
- Go to the bathroom and wash their hands thoroughly
- Blow their nose and cover their mouth with their arm when they cough
- Fasten and unfasten simple buttons and snaps
- Eat neatly and pour into a cup
- Open up a juice box and get the straw in.

"Some children are so dependent on their parents that they expect the teacher to do these things for them," says Hughes. "But when you have several children in the room, it's difficult to attend to all those little needs!" However, she notes that tying shoes is a developmental skill that often doesn't come until the first grade.

The Ability to Play Well with Others

Your child will need your assistance refining essential social skills such as sharing, compromising, turn-taking, and problem-solving. "Children are naturally egocentric at this age, and we don't expect them to be able to share everything," says Waite-Stupiansky. "But by the time they reach kindergarten, they should be able to express their feelings in words and begin to understand that two people can use the same thing at the same time."

If you and your child are building with blocks and he reaches for one you're using, Hughes suggests you first encourage your child to ask, "May I have the block?" Then model sharing by saying something like, "I'm glad to share my block with you." When you notice your child sharing with others, celebrate it by saying, "I'm so proud of you. It's really hard to share your favorite doll, but you were able to do it. Good for you!"

On play dates and park outings, stay within earshot so you can help kids problem-solve when conflict occurs, Hughes recommends. If your son gets in a power struggle over a toy and can't seem to work it out, step in and say, "It looks like we're having a problem here. What can we do about it?" Encourage him to come up with possible solutions, offering your own suggestions, if necessary. "Help them understand the feelings of others," says Hughes. "I want them to know when a friend is sad by looking at her face and seeing that her mouth is frowning or her eyes are crying." This nurtures compassion and empathy, values that are prized by kindergarten teachers.

Strong Fine-Motor Skills

Your child's hands must be strong enough to master coloring, cutting, pasting, and holding a pencil — fine-motor tasks that they will use every day in kindergarten. "By week one, we're already writing letters of the alphabet," says Argandona.

To hold the pencil properly children need to develop the small muscles in their palms and fingers. Hughes suggests giving your child a pipe cleaner and some Cheerios (or similar, colorful cereal) to make bracelets. "It requires you to pinch with your fingers, but have them pinch with their thumb and second finger instead of the index finger to prepare them to hold a pencil" she explains. Eating with chopsticks or playing darts can also model the same pencil position for them. Or ask your preschooler to mist your houseplants with a spray bottle, an activity that boosts both writing and scissor skills. Scribbling in clay with fingers is a fun alternative to doing it on paper and especially helpful for kids who are resistant to writing and drawing. (A child can practice cutting the clay into small strips too.)

Basic Letter and Number Recognition

It is not necessary that the children come to school with any letter or number recognition. What would be helpful is if they knew how to recognize the numbers on a clock in this order; 2, 10, 8, and 4 and be able to trace the clock with their fingers touching the points. This skill will allow them to learn what we call "clock letters" or those that begin with some form of circle, "a", "c", "d", "f", "g", "o", "qu" and "s".

The lessons unfold naturally as you and your child sort Legos by color or shape. Your daughter practices counting as she serves up pretend cookies for the dolls in her tea party.

"Every outing is a spontaneous opportunity to learn," Isaacs adds. Play guessing games like, "I spy with my little eye something with the number 3."

Most important, always keep the focus on fun. "Relax, and enjoy your children," Mosier says. "Read, play, and go places. And talk the whole time you're doing it!"