

The Real Kindergarten Readiness

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I am a former kindergarten teacher with a Bachelor's degree in Elementary Education and a Master's in Early Childhood Education. There is nothing like the magical time in kindergarten and I want nothing more than to help your child have a smooth transition into it.

I know what you're hoping for.

You're hoping for a magical, unicorn-type answer to today's hottest question: "How do I make my child ready for kindergarten?"

I get it.

It's a big deal sending kids off into the world. We're left wondering if we've set them up for a good time or if this is going to be a total bust. We want our kids to be successful. We want our kids to be confident. We want our kids to *thrive* in kindergarten.

What is kindergarten readiness?

Kindergarten readiness is a hot buzzword right now in the United States. It's a product of the overwhelming urge to help kids be academically advanced in school under the misguided notion that "earlier is better."

The logic being imposed on parents is inherently flawed. The earlier a child learns a skill, the better the child will be at that skill does not, unfortunately, hold true (Carlsson-Paige et al., 2015).

But that's the bill of goods that parents are sold.

As kindergarten standards became increasingly more academic in the United States over the past decade, the push to have children learning more and learning faster was shoved into preschools. Despite how developmentally inappropriate these standards are, parents (and educators

without choice) have bought into the idea that the goal of preschool should be to prepare a child academically for kindergarten.

This is a really sad way to look at early childhood education.

A shift happened when the standards in kindergarten changed pulling focus away from early childhood being a time to develop thinking skills, life skills, and social-emotional skills to a time when children should be focused on memorizing academics (Akaba et al., 2020). Again, all in reaction to a flawed belief that we can make children smarter by starting them memorizing facts earlier (Carlsson-Paige et al., 2015).

While kids are entering kindergarten knowing much more "academic skills" than they did 30 years ago, they lack in so many other areas (areas that will have a major impact on their life in and out of school).

The truth is: kindergarten readiness isn't as academic as you might think....

Basic academics are not kindergarten readiness

The current fixation with kindergarten readiness positions one set of skills over all other skills (Brown & Lan, 2015). Academic skills.

We want to make sure our children are set up for success but we often OVER-value skills we can quantify and measure (like counting and knowing letter names) and UNDER-value the truly important skills which are much more abstract (like executive function skills, self-regulation, reasoning skills and social skills).

When we talk about a child heading into kindergarten, the first questions we often hear are:

- How high can they count?
- Do they know their letters?

This immediately makes kindergarten readiness solely focused on one type of skill: memorized academics.

The problem with this is that the academic skills that are often revered in early childhood (knowing letters, counting, shapes, colors, etc) are very basic memorization skills.

Parents have been fed a lie that how quickly a child memorizes a set of symbols (like letters) or can regurgitate a pattern of words (that's all counting is), the better prepared they'll be for kindergarten.

This isn't true.

In the grand scheme of life and learning, memorizing is the lowest form of education (Armstrong, 2020). We have literally hung our education hats on valuing the *lowest type of learning* in childhood.

Let's change that.

Let's go back to remembering that "kindergarten readiness" is about school and life readiness. This is about the *whole child* and their *whole self* being ready to take on a life outside their parent(s) and to become great learners, thinkers, and doers.

This needs to be about life readiness, not kindergarten academic readiness.

A new look at the kindergarten readiness checklist

Remember, there's more to early childhood than the ABCs and 123s – no matter how much social media disagrees.

Let's shift the focus back to the most important part of early childhood: growing cognitive thinking skills, learning life skills, and developing social skills.

Without these skills, school academics will be a mountain to climb, being away from home will be a struggle, and learning to live an independent life can be so complicated.

Their development as a person before kindergarten is much more important than their development as a rigorous student who has some facts memorized.

We must stop thinking 2-dimensionally about kids and how they learn. We must see them for the 3-dimensional, vibrant, and complex being they are.

How can we help kids be ready for kindergarten?

As your child grows in early childhood and gets ready for kindergarten, there are some skills that can really help them navigate kindergarten. These are *real* skills for them to begin developing – not necessarily master, but develop.

Remember, kindergarten and school beyond are not just about academics (and definitely not just about memorized academics).

The goal is for kids to learn actual skills that will make life in kindergarten *away from home* so much easier and more successful. As fun as academics are in these early years, they don't do much for helping a child successfully navigate life independently.

The academic learning that happens in kindergarten and beyond needs a foundation to be built on. *That is what we should be building in early childhood.*

Shift your focus from kindergarten readiness being a set of low-level memorized academics to

high-level skills that will help our kids be successful in life.

We must look beyond just kindergarten: *let's help our kids be life-ready.*

The Busy Toddler Kindergarten Readiness "Checklist"

FOLLOW A MULTI-STEP DIRECTION

“Take off your coat, put it in the cubby, pick out a book and join me on the rug.”

School is full of multi-step tasks and so is life. Being able to remember a set of instructions – and finish a task fully – is huge. So is being able to take direction from another person. We need to make sure our kids have follow-through, have the ability to listen to a set of directions, and to complete a job.

This is part of your child’s working memory and growing their ability to remember.

What you can do at home:

Help them grow their ability to complete multi-step tasks by introducing and practicing these daily. Rather than doing steps for our kids or overly simplifying tasks, start to give them multi-step directions and help exercise that working memory.

Introduce methods you use to follow or remember direction sets. Don't assume they'll just magically know how to do this from age or maturity. It may need some work.

SPEAK TO ADULTS (IDEALLY THAT AREN'T RELATIVES)

There are lots of adults in school and being able to ask for help, talk to, and listen to them is a big deal.

Problems arise at school and often times *outside of the classroom*. Your child being comfortable with going up to a volunteer or recess teacher

(whom they might only vaguely know) is going to be critical.

Some kids are more reluctant than others to speak with adults. These kids especially need guidance and help learning what this can look like. Consider emphasizing why this is important to be able to do in the school/life setting.

What you can do at home:

Encourage your child to talk to adults.

Give them chances to order at restaurants, talk to the cashier at Target, or ask a question to the doctor/dentist/pastor/neighbor. Let them learn to use their voice and find confidence in speaking to others.

This may mean practicing scripts for how to ask questions or making a game plan for how the interaction will look. However you go about this, give your child lots of safe chances to talk to adults so this important skill of advocating without the help of a parent can form.

KNOW 2-3 STRATEGIES TO SOLVE PEER PROBLEMS

It’s easy when a parent is around to walk right up to them whenever there’s an issue, have them swoop in with solution ideas, and magically fix it.

But that’s not how school or the real-world works.

Our kids need to have a tool box of ideas for how to solve a problem with a peer before going to get adult intervention. At school, it's common for adults to *require* children have tried two strategies for solving a problem before the teacher will intervene (unless in situations of safety concerns).

Teachers are actively trying to help kids learn to solve problems with peers, but this has to start at home.

Reflect for a moment on your child: Have you taught them to do this? Have you let them solve peer arguments or do you mediate immediately? How do they handle disagreements with friends?

What you can do at home:

This starts with you, the caregiver. There are two ways you can support learning this skill.

1. Teach conflict resolution strategies. Talk in the car or at dinner (times when kids are not currently fighting) and walk through social situations together. "Let's pretend a friend took your toy. What do you do?" Then work together on a game plan. Review this game plan often.
2. Pause before you get involved when you hear kids start arguing. Give a second to let kids try strategies before swooping in - and when you do need to assist, act as a coach to their conflict resolution (not just a referee).

This is another part of kindergarten readiness (and life readiness) that kids will not just develop with time and maturity. They need your guidance and expertise. They need you to talk to them, model conflict resolution skills, and coach them as they develop these strategies.

ASK QUESTIONS TO GAIN MORE INFORMATION

I always tell my kids (and I used to tell my students) that smart people are smart because they **ask questions**.

They don't sit there. They don't hang their head when they don't get it. They aren't silent, sitting in their unknowing.

Instead, smart people ask. They seek information.

What you can do at home:

Teach your kids this phrase: "I'm smart enough to say 'I don't know.'" This is a great way to normalize and promote question asking as a sign

of strength not weakness (yup, some people see asking for help as being "weak").

In addition to this, the question-asking skill starts with you.

Help model the idea that people don't always know what to do or how to do something. This isn't something "just kids do" or "only kids don't know," which is how it can feel. Instead of thinking questions in your head, say them out loud and let your child watch you go through the learning process.

There is so much power when we take the problem-solving techniques that happen internally and verbalize them for kids so they can see the process rather than thinking we always know what to do and everything somehow works for parents.

It doesn't. You know that. I know that. Let's make sure the kids know it too.

SHARE AND TAKE TURNS (ON COMMUNAL ITEMS)

There's a lot of talk in the parenting world about not forcing kids to share, and I get that. You won't see me sharing my iPhone or car with someone else. Some items are just *yours*.

Plus, forced sharing doesn't actually promote understanding how to share.

But (and this is a big one) at school, most toys and equipment are communal. It doesn't belong to any one child. It's different than it is at home where toys may have a clear "owner."

For the school setting, ponder this:

Does your child know how to share? Do they know how to take turns? Do they know how to ask for a turn and not grab or steal a toy? Do they recognize when someone is waiting for a turn?

What you can do at home:

Teach your child this magical script that classroom teachers have used for decades:

“When you’re done, can I have a turn?”

“Yes, when I’m done you can have a turn.”

It’s important kids learn *both* sides of this script. Help scaffold and model this exchange. Memorize this script and help them do the same by explicitly teaching it. This script works.

Kids actually use it once they’ve learned the magic of it and it curbs so many potential arguments.

WIN AND LOSE GRACIOUSLY

This is a big one.

Kids have to learn how to both win and lose graciously and with respect.

Please let your child lose. Don’t let them win at Go Fish every. single. time. They will not win at everything in school and that is a hard lesson to learn with 20 other kids staring back at you.

In life, we don’t always win.

This is a lesson we learn in childhood, but what happens to the kids who don’t learn this lesson? How is their self-esteem later in life? Have they accidentally made a connection to self-worth and winning?

Conversely, we need to teach children to win without hurting others. They need to understand that winning is part of the game, but the fun was in the playing.

What you can do at home:

Play board games, nightly if possible. *The double bonus is a massive amount of math skills are learned in board games but that’s not what we are focusing on here.* We are learning to win and lose.

Show them what losing graciously looks like. Talk about your feelings. Let them know they aren’t the only person upset over losing and show how you process this disappointment.

We want kids to know that they are not bad for losing and that failing has no bearing on their worth as a person. That’s a big lesson to learn and it’s somewhat easier right now with board games (this gets more important in the middle and high school years).

When you win, win graciously too. Show them how to be a good sport and that you can be excited you won without hurting the person who lost.

LISTEN TO A STORY WITHOUT INTERRUPTING

This is a tough one. But it's one that is asked of kindergarteners all day long, especially in today’s world of direct instruction (something I vehemently oppose and wish to everything I could change).

Five- and six-year-olds are asked to sit and listen a lot (Miller & Almon, 2009).

In many cases in school, this ability to *sit and listen* becomes critical to understanding an assignment or achieving a learning target.

What you can do at home:

The ability to *sit and listen* starts with books. Read picture books at home and ask them to wait until the end for questions or comments. Go to the library for story time. Try reading simple chapter books with limited pictures.

Another way to help at home: Make screen time routine (rather than excessive) to help children grow a longer attention span.

It’s a hard skill to learn at this age (and hard for me to advocate for when children should be running, playing, and active in education, but thus is sadly the reality of American kindergarten).

BE ABLE TO SELF-ENTERTAIN

School isn't the most exciting place all the time.

The playground is awesome. Playing with toys is super fun. Sitting at a desk learning to write letters? Not so fun sometimes.

Kids need to have an ability to self-entertain and to be able to keep themselves occupied when the going gets slow.

Remember, a child who is bored at school is not necessarily an unchallenged child or a gifted child. All children get bored at school regardless of their academic skill level. Even gifted children get bored in school while learning academically rigorous and challenging material (think Advanced Trig... no matter who you are, that gets boring).

Life is inherently boring at times, but we can mitigate this boredom by helping children develop self-entertaining skills.

What you can do at home:

There are two parts of time at home that can impact a child's ability to self-entertain: Screen time and independent play.

Let's start with screen time. Does this mean no screen time, ever?! No. Goodness, no.

But it means finding a routine in your family's day for screen time and making sure screen time isn't being used "just because." Screens are a great tool and often help parents fill in systemic gaps (like child care), but screens can also become a crutch to help kids get through boring times.

This means *when possible* limiting screens (tablets, iPads) as an entertainment tool during situations like sitting at restaurants, church, or car rides. These are inherently boring times, but they are also times where kids develop the self-entertainment skills that will serve them throughout life.

Again, it doesn't mean you can never use a screen for boring times, but be thoughtful about it.

Second part of self-entertaining: Kids develop much of their self-entertaining skills when they are playing without adults. Cultivate your child's independent play skills, provide time at home for them to play, and honor that play.

Check out my full post of growing independent play skills if this is an area your child is working on.

KNOW HOW TO FAIL AND TRY AGAIN

This has far reaching implications into adulthood and it is so important: let's have resilient kids.

Let's raise kids who know that failing happens, that failing isn't the end of the world, and that failing means you get to try again. **It's okay to fail.**

Help your child learn strategies to handle the disappointment.

Help your child understand that failure isn't a reflection of who they are as a person.

Help your child see the chance and beauty in hard work and trying. Learning happens while we are trying to find the right answer.

What you can do at home:

Normalize failure. Normalize mistakes.

We make mistakes often as adults, but we also resolve those mistakes and come up with a new plan *internally*. Kids never get to see the process we went through.

Talk about it. Show that you fail. Show that you try again. Show that you feel disappointed, but that it doesn't impact your worth as a person.

The more we can make failure and mistakes normal, the more they become okay and far less scary for kids to face.

BE ABLE TO MAKE A DECISION

Our kindergarteners need to be independent. They need to have skills to navigate life without parents hovering over them. Help your child develop their *own life skills*.

They're about to take a giant step into independence and you won't be standing next to them to remind them what to do or give suggestions.

That's hard.

Kids need to know that they have valid ideas, how to think through a problem, and what it feels like to make a choice. They're about to do this a lot at school without you.

What you can do at home:

Let them make their own decisions – even if this means they fail. They'll learn from that.

If they respond well to choices, give them a few (2-3) options to choose from – let them decide simple parts of their day (like which shoes to wear or what sandwich to make).

If they have an idea for how to do something, let them lead. Show them that you value their thoughts and their ideas.

Stand back a little and let them navigate a new area – you're still watching and supervising, but maybe doing it from the park bench instead of standing right beside them (aka sittersitting).

Kindergarteners have a lot of independence. Help your child learn to feel comfortable in the role of *leading their own life*.

LEARNING TO SELF-REGULATE

Did you know that self-control skills in a kindergarten is a big indicator of future success in academics and in life (Robson, Allen, & Howard, 2020)?

Children need to learn how to navigate big feelings, big emotions, impulses, and their own desires. This is a big part of life, not just kindergarten.

Is your child in control (most of the time) of their emotions? Do they have some skills for calming their body? Do they understand and (often) exhibit self-control?

What you can do at home:

Learning self-regulation skills is a big deal in the early years. Being a model of these skills and coaching our children through them is huge part of our parenting job.

Form a game plan with your child if big emotions/feelings is a big part of who they are. Come up with strategies together for what to do if they feel dysregulated at school, like hugging their body and taking 3 big breathes or taking 5 sips from their water bottle.

This is *not* about learning to hide your emotions. It is about learning how to convey your feelings in a safe way and keeping others safe from your impulses.

Remember that your child is one of 20+ in a classroom. That's a lot of little bodies to keep regulated and safe.

BONUS - A FEW MORE KINDERGARTEN READINESS SKILLS

As a former Kindergarten teacher, here are a few other simple and more basic skills that would be awesome for a child to know before starting school. Some of these are requirements (like toileting) and some are just helpful in the name of having independent kids.

- Put on a coat. Bonus: zip it up without adult help.

- Be able to put on shoes correctly (tying shoes is tough, no worries there).
- Be fully toileted which means knowing how to wipe...
- Know their first and last name. Bonus: know their parent's first and last name.
- Be able to recognize their name in print.
- Be able to write their first name (all capitals and backwards letters is fine).
- Know how to use scissors.
- Know how to use a glue stick.

Tip - the best way to promote kindergarten readiness skills

Spoiler: it's not a computer program, subscription box, or an app.

It's play.

You can't drill and kill a child to learn to handle losses.

There's no worksheet that explains sharing.

YouTube videos are not going to empower your kids to be resilient.

Focusing solely on academics robs our kids of the real learning that needs to take place in early childhood. They desperately need those play-based skills and values to carrying them throughout their life.

Play builds their social-emotional skills. Play builds their self-regulation. Play builds their executive function.

It is through play that children (largely) become kindergarten ready. They need this foundation for the independent learning in kindergarten and beyond to take hold.

As you get your child ready for kindergarten, focus on the person they are rather than the academics they know (or don't know).

There are lots of things kids will learn in kindergarten and so many skills to master.

Kindergarten will be a year of great growth in your child.

Remember: this isn't just about today, tomorrow, or the year they'll have in kindergarten. There is so much life in front of our kids. Let's help them be ready for all of it.

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