

early years are learning years

Ready or not...Preparing young children for the classroom

Just when you've settled into the routine of the school year, it's time to think ahead to next year. With many preschools and kindergartens now taking applications for next fall, parents may find themselves asking: Will my child be ready? Will he measure up?

There is no one quality or skill that children need to do well in school—a combination of factors contribute to school success. These include physical well-being, social and emotional maturity, language skills, an ability to solve problems and think creatively, and general knowledge about the world. School success also depends upon the “match” between children’s skills and knowledge and the school’s expectations. More children succeed when these expectations reflect knowledge of child development and early learning.

Here are some suggestions of how parents and schools can promote a good match for every child.

Parents can:

Take advantage of learning opportunities in every day activities. These will make a big difference in preparing young children for the classroom.

1. Promote good health and physical well-being. Children obviously need nutritious food, enough sleep, safe places to play, and regular medical care. In addition to medical and dental checkups and immunizations, preschoolers need opportunities to exercise and develop physical coordination. Throwing balls, running, jumping, climbing, dancing to music—all of these activities will enhance coordination and help children learn important concepts such as up, down, inside, outside, over, and under.

2. Support your child’s social and emotional development. Children who are kind, helpful, patient, and loving generally do better in school, and feeling good about oneself is an

important aspect of developing desirable social skills. Tell your child how glad you are to be his parent. Set a good example for your preschooler by showing what it means to get along with others and to be respectful. Give children chances to learn about sharing and caring, for example letting them feed hungry birds, or helping them make cookies to welcome a new neighbor.

3. Build your child’s language and general knowledge. There are many things you can do to help your child learn to communicate, and develop an understanding of the world. Don’t underestimate the value of play! Play allows children to explore, be creative, and develop social skills. It also paves the way for academic learning. For example, children learn key concepts important in geometry while stacking blocks, and playing with others helps with negotiation skills.

Talk to your children. Everyday activities, such as eating lunch, cleaning up toys, or taking a bath, provide opportunities to talk. Listening and responding to a child is the best way to learn what’s on her mind, to discover what she knows and doesn’t know, and how she thinks and learns. Listening also shows children that their feelings and ideas are valuable. Finally, read together frequently. Fostering your child’s love of books is a gift that will last a lifetime!

4. Not assume a child with a late birth date should be held out of school. Research shows that children receive little, if any, advantage when held out of school because of late birth dates. And, the practice may have a negative impact on other children by encouraging school expectations better suited to older children.

Schools can: 1. Be prepared to respond to a diverse range of abilities within any group of young children. Small group sizes with enough teachers who are skilled in early childhood education make it easier to pro-

vide the individualized attention every child deserves.

2. Offer a curriculum and teaching practices that reflect principles of child development and learning and provide many active, meaningful learning opportunities that build upon children’s existing knowledge and abilities.

3. Make sure expectations of children are reasonable and age-appropriate. Even children who have received every advantage prior to school struggle when demands are too great, experiencing stress and having their confidence as learners undermined.

4. Not use tests as the primary measure for entry decisions. Developmental screening to detect a health problem or developmental disability is important to ensure early diagnosis and treatment, but tests should not be used to determine school entry for at least three reasons: (1) Children are not good test takers, especially with strangers in unfamiliar settings. (2) Young children are growing and learning rapidly; test results may change greatly in six months. (3) Tests too often ignore language and culture variations and may not give a true picture of a child’s skills and knowledge.

Additional Resources

Washington, V., Johnson, V. and McCracken, J.B. 1995. *Grassroots Success! Preparing Schools and Families for Each Other*. Washington, DC: NAEYC. Order #722/\$8

NAEYC. 1995. *Ready or Not: What Parents Should Know about School Readiness*. Washington, DC: NAEYC. #554/50¢ each or 100 for \$10