

Getting Ready for Kindergarten

The skill sets we are looking for in kindergarten readiness might surprise you. Because of the national focus on improving education and meeting standards, you might think that it's most important for children to enter kindergarten having academic knowledge. While teachers would love children to come in with some letter and number recognition, they don't want you to drill your kids on academic skills. There are equally—if not more—important readiness skills that set the stage for your child's learning. Raising an eager learner is the goal, and it can be achieved easily through play and day-to-day activities.

Top Readiness Skills for Kindergarten

- Enthusiasm Toward Learning
- Solid Oral-Language Skills
- The Ability to Listen
- The Desire to be Independent
- The Ability to Play Well with Others
- Strong Fine-Motor Skills
- Basic Letter and Number Recognition



How you can help!

Enthusiasm Toward Learning: We love to see when children approach learning enthusiastically, eager to explore and discover, ask questions, take initiative, and persist when tasks are difficult. Parents can set aside time each day to investigate the world with their preschooler and answer those endless questions. As you drive or walk, point out your child's surroundings—the different trees or the various birds you see. 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. The more kids notice, the more curious they'll become. 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. You can build language skills by taking your child places, reading books together, and giving him words and descriptions for what he is seeing. Research shows that one of the best predictors of later reading success is a well-developed oral vocabulary in kindergarten. Preschool kids are learning vocabulary at the rate of five to six words a day. It's just amazing how they will retain words if you use them several times in context and conversation.

The Ability to Listen: Children's literature is a rich resource for expanding language. Besides fostering vocabulary and comprehension, reading develops the attention skills necessary in a kindergarten classroom. Listening is a key part of school behavior. Students must be able to concentrate on what the teacher is saying, listen carefully for 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. 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 kids 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 kids 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 subtle sounds in words. Your child won't be able to read the word "cat" until she understands that it actually has three sounds: "cuh", "ah", and "tuh". Singing fosters pre-reading skills too. Enjoy!

The Desire to be Independent: Encouraging self-help skills is an important step to preparing your child for kindergarten. It's amazing how many kids come to kindergarten not knowing how to hang up a jacket. It might be quicker for you to do it, but independence is critical for helping your child adjust to school. 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 shoes"
- Go to the bathroom and wash their hands
- Blow their nose and cover their mouth 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

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. 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. On play dates and outings, stay within earshot so you can help kids problem-solve when conflict occurs. 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 your child understand the feelings of others, nurturing compassion and empathy.

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 kids use every day in kindergarten. To hold the pencil the correct way, kids need to develop the small muscles in their palms and fingers. Give your child something like a pipe cleaner and some Cheerios to make bracelets. This requires him to pinch with his fingers, the same motion needed for grasping a pencil. 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. Your child can practice cutting the clay into small strips too. Offer writing utensils in a variety of sizes and shapes. Fat pencils are not always easier to hold. For a child with weak hands, a smaller, shorter pencil might be easier to manage.

Basic Letter and Number Recognition: Our expectations are that students recognize most letters (particularly those in their name), can count past 10, identify numbers 1-5, and know shapes and colors. But we don't want you to quiz your child or use workbooks, flashcards, or phonics kits. So much learning can happen without quizzing or sitting down with a pencil. The lessons unfold naturally as you and your child sort Legos by color or shape. Your child practices counting as she gives out pretend cookies or builds letter recognition while scrambling alphabet magnets on the fridge. Every outing is a spontaneous opportunity to learn. Play guessing games like, "I spy with my little eye something with the number 3." Show your child how letters are all around us. Say, "That spells 'Durango'! Let's spell it together, D-u-r-a-n-g-o." Point out objects that contain the letters in your child's name.

Most importantly, always keep the focus on fun.

Relax and enjoy your child. Read, play, and go places. And talk the whole time you're doing it!



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