

FACT SHEET



Beginnings and Beyond: The Caregiver and Kindergarten Readiness

by Wayne Eastman

To teach is to allow children to think for themselves, to discover and to create. To teach is to lead children to respect their thoughts, discoveries, relations and the thoughts of others.

(Newfoundland Teachers Association, 1994).

Most early childhood educators believe that it is through play and social interactions that young children begin to develop their self-concept. Play also provides an opportunity for children to learn new skills and add to their knowledge. The ultimate goal of most day care centres is to ensure that children grow and learn at their own level of development.

The early years are essential in a young child's development. By the time a child enters kindergarten, five years of education have transpired. The importance of the preschool years in the learning continuum is accentuated by the fact that «some experts believe a child's intellectual development is as great from birth to age four as it is from four to 18. This means that by age four, half of a child's intelligence has already been formed» (World Books, 1987).



The kindergarten readiness skills described in this article are best taught in an early childhood setting where children do not have to adhere to a rigid schedule and where they can learn through play. It must be remembered that every child has his/her own learning clock. Hence, how do young children learn?

Young children don't learn like older children and adults. Their intellectual growth is connected to and dependent on their social, physical and emotional development. In fact, they can't help learning. Much of what they learn about the world comes from the hands-on experience they get while playing (Eberts, 1991).

The role of early childhood educators in promoting kindergarten readiness skills is synthesized in Joanne Frantz's (1993) article *How Preschool Really Prepares Your Child for Kindergarten*. She writes:

The subject of school readiness concerns parents today long before their child is old enough for kindergarten. Parents want to know whether their

child's preschool or child care centre provides the curriculum necessary to promote success in kindergarten, and what they can do at home to ensure that their child will be prepared to start school.

Although young children love to learn and kindergarten teachers want eager learners, Eberts (1991) cautions caregivers and parents not to destroy this eagerness by forcing academics on children before they are ready. Furthermore, Eberts (1991) states, «There is absolutely no evidence that formal instruction at an early age has any lasting academic advantage.» Thus, to avoid kindergarten burnout, the preschool centre should focus on a rich variety of activities and materials that encourage young children to explore and discover rather than force feeding academics.

The caregiver plays an important role in a child's «learning ladder.» Through play and a child-centred curriculum, early childhood educators can stimulate a preschooler's natural instinct to learn and, consequently, enhance kindergarten readiness skills in a low-pressure environment. As Eberts (1991) states, «Each bit of learning is a building block for future learning.»

Kindergarten Readiness

Caregivers and parents can develop kindergarten readiness skills without turning their centres or homes into formal classrooms and without turning themselves into academic teachers. This article will focus on examples of activities that help ensure children are ready to learn when they begin school.

Size

Skills in this category include the basic differentiation of big and small, related size concepts, and matching predicated on size. Examples of activities to enhance readiness in this area include: **neighbourhood or centre walks** -- have the children walk around the neighbourhood or child care centre looking for objects they can compare in size (e.g. trees); **size boxes** -- provide a large and small empty box with two of several objects, one big and one small, then have the children sort the objects into the appropriate box; and **block building** -- ask children to construct a house using various sizes of blocks (World Books, 1987).

Colour and Shapes

Activities to develop colour and shape awareness include: **colour walks** --

walk around the centre or neighbourhood and find as many things of a certain colour as possible; **colour touch** -- ask the child to find and touch certain objects (e.g. the red bean bag chair); **clothespin sticker match** -- stick dots of various colours around the outside of a plastic cup, colour the clothespins to match the dots and have the children clip the clothespins to the appropriate dots; **shape recognition** -- have the children locate variously shaped objects (e.g. a rectangular table); and **felt shapes** -- cut out pieces of felt in different forms, such as triangles, circles and squares, and have the children name the shapes as they place them on a flannel board (World Book, 1987; Charmer, 1993; Wilmes, 1984).

Numbers and Math Readiness

The groups of skills included in these two categories are counting, matching objects one-to-one and quantity. Examples of activities to promote math readiness include: **counting from one to 10** -- in the bottom of each pocket of an empty egg carton, place different quantities of items such as buttons or beans and ask the child to count how

many are in each pocket; «**What Time Is It Mr./Mrs. Lion**» -- have the children ask Mr./Mrs. Lion what time it is. If the lion says it's three o'clock, the children take three steps forward, but if the lion says it's dinner time then he/she chases the children back to a predetermined line; **one-to-one matching** -- have the children set the lunch table by placing a fork, cup, plate and napkin at each seat; **math cooking** -- activities such as making popsicles (using fruit drinks and popsicle sticks), help children develop skills in number awareness, counting and measuring; «**Five Little Ducks**» **song** -- use colourful pieces of felt to make five little ducks, including a mother and father, and act out the song on a flannel board; and **matched cards** -- make a set of numbered cards and a set of object cards and then match each numbered card with an object card (World Books, 1987; Stravos, 1987; Inderbaum, 1985).

Reading Readiness

Reading readiness or emergent literacy describes the early stages in a child's development toward literacy, that is, it precedes the conventional reading of print (Spodek, 1991). The group of skills contributing to a successful start in reading awareness include: basic vocabulary, verbal expression, awareness of letters, sentence sense, story comprehension and storytelling (World Book, 1987). Activities that contribute to emergent literacy skills include: «**Simon Says**» and the «**Hokey Pokey**» **game**; **storytelling** -- find magazine pictures that show children engaged in interesting activities and encourage the children to discuss what is happening; **writing centres** -- give children daily opportunities to write by making pencils, pens, markers, paper and other writing materials readily available; the **foot path** - - to emphasize the reading readiness foundation skill of directions, such as left and right, draw child-sized footprints from bristol board, colour code the prints (e.g. yellow for left

and blue for right) and place the prints in a pattern the children can follow; **greeting cards** -- help the children make greeting cards for special occasions; **magnetic or wooden alphabet letters** -- have children use magnetic or wooden letters to spell words; **regular visits to the library**; **junk mail sorting** -- collect junk mail and have the children sort through it; **reading games** -- make a game of finding letters hidden in the kitchen on soup cans, cereal boxes, etc.; and **making up riddles** -- for example, «I rhyme with cool. You can swim in me. What am I?» (World Book, 1987; NTA, 1994).

Position and Direction

The group of skills needing consideration in this category include word meanings, relative positions, left-to-right and top-middle-bottom progression, and descriptive language, including opposites (World Book, 1987). Examples of activities that contribute to the enhancement of these skills include: «**Simon Says**» -- use this game to have children follow simple directions, such as front/back, under/over; **understanding descriptive words** -- for (e.g. hot/cold, fast/slow) -- have the children cut out and sort magazine pictures of animals according to fast and slow; **marking time** -- provide each child with a ruled construction paper attendance chart and have them mark the squares in a left-to-right order for each day of attendance (this process helps children internalize left-to-right progressions); «**Worm Through the Apple**» **game** -- have the children stand close together in a line with feet apart and let one child be the worm who wiggles through the spaces between the legs (World Book, 1987; Schiller, 1990; Inderbaum, 1985).

Time

Caregivers and parents can help young children understand the concept of time by teaching them the time of day, time

of year and birthdays. Activities that contribute to time awareness include: **illustrating the concept of day and night** -- have the children browse through magazines with pictures of both daytime and nighttime activities and help them find clues that indicate the time of day (e.g. people eating breakfast); **matching seasonal items** - - cut out various patterns for each season (e.g. mittens for winter, flowers for spring, trees for summer and leaves for fall) and have the children match the patterns with the season of the year; **creating a birthday calendar** -- the children's birthdays can be indicated on a large calendar and celebrated when they occur (World Book, 1987; Charmer, 1993).

Listening and Sequencing

Eberts (1991) states that, «Teachers rank understanding of the spoken word as the number one skill area in which parents should help their children prepare for kindergarten.» Furthermore, she says that listening is more than hearing, «...it involves learning basic sounds, words, phrases, sentences and the relationship between objects and their use.» In the context of the preceding remarks, skills in this category should include sound recognition, story recall and paying attention. Examples of activities that enhance listening and sequencing skills include: **listening walks** -- have the children listen to both quiet and loud sounds, help them identify the different sounds, and see if they can remember any of the sounds when they return from their walk; **retelling simple stories in sequence** -- read a familiar story to the children and ask them: what happened first? what happened next? and what happened last?; **following directions** -- play the game «**Simon Says**»; and **recognizing rhyming sounds** -- introduce rhyming sounds through rhymes and stories, for example *The Cat in the Hat* by Dr. Seuss (World Book, 1987; Eberts, 1991).

Motor Skills

Motor skills can be classified under large-muscle or gross motor activities that include skills such as jumping, hopping and throwing a ball, and small-muscle or fine motor activities skills such as colouring, cutting, drawing, buttoning and zipping. Activities to enhance a child's motor skill development could include the following: **animal imitation** -- have the children imitate various animals by jumping like a frog or hopping like a rabbit; **kicking and running** -- turn the children loose in an open area to play; **follow the leader** -- have the children dance like a ballerina, waddle like a duck, or walk a straight line like a tightrope walker; **riding a broomstick horse** -- a broom with a bag over the top can be the transportation for a cowboy or cowgirl; **shadow tag** -- on a sunny day in the playground have the children try to step on the shadows of other children; **buttoning and zipping** -- attach the following items to a sturdy board: a sneaker with laces, a zipper from a pair of pants, a belt with a buckle, and a row of buttons and buttonholes from a shirt; **dress up** -- in the dramatic play centre, or at home, provide the children with plenty of adult wardrobe clothing so they can practice learning how to dress; and **cutting** -- with safety scissors, allow a child ample opportunities for cutting (World Book, 1987; Ebert, 1991; Hammett, 1992).

Socio-Emotional Development

Skills to be developed in this category are: self-help, knowing one's full name and address, the ability to work independently and cooperation. Activities that contribute to social-emotional development include: **helping with centre or family chores** -- give children special jobs, for example setting the table or putting away the toys, and praise them afterwards; **cooperative games** -- such as parachute play; «**Sharing my Sandwich**» -- ask children and guide

them on how they would solve the problem of dividing a sandwich amongst three people; and **leader and follower games** -- encourage children to play games such as «Farmer in the Dell» and «Mother, May I» (World Book, 1987; Schiller, 1990; Eberts, 1991).

Speaking Skills

By the time a child enters a kindergarten classroom, he/she should be able to take an active part in conversations with the teacher and classmates. Activities to help young children develop speaking skills include: **answering questions** -- parents and caregivers can stimulate a child's conversational skills by asking open-ended questions; **direction games** -- have children run an obstacle course; **sequencing events** -- following a visit to an interesting place, such as the fire station, have the child create a story by describing the experience; and

starting a scrapbook -- have children make a scrapbook of recent events (Eberts, 1991).

Summary

Caregivers and parents play an important role in preparing children for kindergarten success. Formal teaching is not the way to develop kindergarten readiness skills. Centres that promote a variety of interesting hands-on activities that help a child develop socially, emotionally, physically and intellectually through a child-centred curriculum, do much to prepare preschoolers for a kindergarten classroom. Remember, «Whether at a preschool or at home, the best education for young children occurs in a warm and caring environment that provides them with a variety of new experiences» (Eberts, 1991).

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