

A Parent's Guide to School Readiness

Tips on how to ensure your child makes a successful start to school

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A Parent's Guide to Starting School

Tips on how to ensure your child makes a successful start to school

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Why is early learning important? How do young children learn?



Ensuring your child makes a successful start to school is an investment that all parents want to make, but many parents are unsure as to how they can do this. This practical guide provides parents with an overview of the prerequisite skills and competencies that children need to thrive at school. This guide does NOT advocate 'hot-housing' children nor does it endorse the rote learning or memorisation of facts. Instead this guide provides practical examples of incidental activities and games that parents can utilise with their children at home to maximise their learning potential.

There is an abundance of academic research which shows that children who enter school ready to learn, make more academic gains than their under-prepared peers. Similarly, there is a significant corpus of research that confirms that parental involvement in learning is a key indicator in determining a child's subsequent academic success.

Neuroscientific research has confirmed that the architecture of the human brain is constructed via an ongoing process that is most rapid during the early years. Early experiences affect the quality of this architecture by establishing a foundation

for learning. Rapid brain development occurs between the ages of three and six, as neural connections are formed every second. It is during this period that the brain is considered to be 'plastic' or flexible meaning that it is easier and more effective to influence a young child's developing brain architecture. Therefore, children's early learning experiences play a significant role in their brain development.

It is often a misnomer that children learn when engaged in 'traditional' school-like activities such as writing, counting or reading. This explains the popularity of pre-reading and pre-writing courses for preschoolers and why many preschools advertise 'early learning programs' and 'school readiness' programs which involve young children completing worksheets. However, young children learn best through play. During play children acquire and use language, form and test hypotheses, negotiate, problem-solve and develop key mathematical ideas. These are essential skills for learning. When engaged in play activities it is important for parents to look for opportunities to extrapolate rich learning experiences. In doing so, learning is meaningful and relevant to the child.

Children learn best through play.

What does my child need to **know** and **do** to make a successful start to school?

School Readiness Components

The human brain is a highly interrelated organ and its many functions operate in a coordinated fashion. Cognitive, emotional, physical and social capacities are inextricably linked. For example, emotional and social competencies are an essential foundation for developing cognitive capacities. Children cannot learn if they have immature social skills or are still developing basic emotional skills. Therefore, children need to know more than their ABCs and 123s (cognitive skills) when they start school. In fact, despite popular practice, rote learning these skills may not be advantageous for children. There are many other activities and skills that children can acquire and develop, that would ensure they make a successful start to school.

School Readiness Equation

Starting school involves a complex interplay between a range of developmental domains. A child must have developed cognitive (academic) competencies in addition to social, emotional and physical skills. Too often we focus on children's cognitive development when considering if a child is ready for school. However, it is more important to consider the child's overall development before determining if they are ready to start school.

School readiness =
**cognitive development +
 social skills +
 emotional skills +
 physical skills**



How to develop your child's **social** and **emotional skills**

Social Skills

Social skills are crucial if a child is to make a successful start to school. Academic learning cannot take place if a child cannot socialise with their peers or participate in collaborative activities in a classroom. Many parents assume that children develop social skills naturally, almost like the process of osmosis. However, research has shown this is not the case. Social skills need to be explicitly taught to children.

What parents can do:

- *Provide opportunities for your child to share their toys with peers. Model how to share.
- *Allow your child to role play social situations such as making new friends, resolving conflict.
- *Use puppets to rehearse adverse social situations such as resolving conflict.
- *Provide opportunities to play games where there is a winner and a loser.
- *Discuss how characters deal with various social situations when reading books.



Emotional Skills

Children need to develop confidence and resilience to be successful learners. What parents can do to develop emotional skills:

- *Model and praise confidence
- *Discuss how you can 'bounce back' from adversities
- *Support your child when they experience disappointment or set backs (avoid the temptation to shield them from these experiences)
- *Encourage children's efforts- focus on the process and not the final result
- *Use praise sparingly for maximum effect
- *Encourage your child to take calculated risks (e.g on playground equipment)
- *Develop your child's emotional vocabulary
- *Model how to put things on a 'catastrophe scale'

Social and emotional skills need to be explicitly taught- they are NOT learnt through osmosis!

How to develop your child's numeracy?

Being able to rote count is not an predictor of early mathematics success. Too often parents believe that their child's ability to count is an indicator of their mathematical ability, when in fact, current research does not support this assertion. The ability to rote count requires the same cognitive skills involved in reciting a nursery rhyme: it is more of an indication of a child's working memory as opposed to their mathematical ability.

Instead, current educational research suggests that a child's ability to **recognise pattern and structure** is predictive of their subsequent mathematical development in the early years of primary school. Therefore, preschool children need experiences in patterning to build robust mathematical concepts.



Look for the **'teachable moment'** in everyday experiences like cooking, tidying up, setting the table and driving in the car.

Mathematics must be seen as part of a child's everyday life. It is important that parents capture the 'teachable moment' and look for meaningful opportunities to introduce and consolidate mathematical ideas. Not only is this important when preparing children to start school, it also continues well into primary school. Incidental learning, just like play, is a powerful means to introduce mathematical skills and ideas. This can be accomplished when undertaking many everyday tasks such as cooking, tidying up, setting the table, driving in the car, playing board games, and role playing. Your job, as a parent is to elicit the learning experiences from these everyday experiences. The opposite page provides more details of how to do this.

The most important thing that parents can do to support their child's mathematics learning is to display a positive attitude towards mathematics, themselves (even if it is feigned). When mathematics is seen as part of everyday life and enjoyable, children are more likely to develop positive attitudes towards this subject at school and succeed. Always praise your child's efforts, even if they are wrong.

Patterning Activities

Preschool children need experiences with patterns in order to develop key mathematical ideas and concepts essential for primary school. This can easily be accomplished at home using a range of activities:

- *Children need to be able to copy, continue and create simple patterns with concrete materials such as blocks, handprints, shapes, leaves, coloured lids and coloured paper clips before introducing counting patterns (this is typically introduced in the early years of primary school).
- *Children should create, copy and continue simple ABABAB patterns such as red car, blue car, red car, blue car and can then progress to more advanced repeating patterns such as ABCABCABC or ABCDABCDABCD.
- *Create tower patterns with blocks where the number of block increases incrementally.
- *Create repeating border patterns to frame children's artworks.



At Home

Incidental, everyday learning experiences can help young children build fundamental understandings of mathematical ideas that will enable them to acquire important mathematical skills upon school entry. Simple tasks that will build prerequisite ideas include:

- *Cook- measure quantities required and discuss how long it takes to cook different items. This will develop important measurement skills.
- *Set the table and discuss the number of plates, knives and forks required. This promotes one-to-one correspondence which is required for counting.
- *Sort the laundry according to different colours or sizes or match socks- this also promotes one-to-one correspondence.
- *Unpack the groceries and identify the names of 3D shapes and discuss their attributes. Eg. 'This box is a rectangular prism and it has four corners and flat faces.'
- *Plant seeds and count the number of seeds. Measure the height of plants using string.
- *Cut food into equal sized portions and discuss fractions.
- *Use cups in the bath and find out how many cups fill larger containers. This develops understandings related to volume.
- *Record your child's height and foot and hand sizes. Discuss the area of handspans.
- *Discuss mathematical ideas embedded in story books.
- *Play card games such as 'snap' or 'memory' to match numbers and groups of objects. Play board games.
- *To make sense of mathematical situations ask questions such as 'how many?', 'does it fit?', 'which way will it go?', 'how much is there?' and 'will there be enough?'

Out & About

In the car:

- *Count forwards and backwards from given numbers.
- *Count the number of red cars.
- *Read the numbers on letter boxes.
- *Read speed limit signs and numbers in number plates. If your child cannot read two-digit numbers, simply get them to recognise the digits.
- *Use positional language such as left, right, forwards and backwards.

When shopping:

- *Count the number of items placed in the trolley.
- *State the names of shapes seen in the shop.
- *Calculate how many food items you need. Eg. four people want 2 sausages each. How many do we need altogether?'
- *Discuss amounts of money and show children coins.

Children need to develop understandings of **pattern** and **structure** to develop essential mathematical ideas.

How to develop your child's literacy?

Learning to read and write are fundamental skills for school (and lifelong) success. A successful start to learning to read and write will set your child up for school success. Research has shown that students who struggle to learn to read and write in Kindergarten are highly likely to still be struggling readers and writers in Year 4: the gap between the more able and less able widens over time.

Research conducted in America by the National Reading Panel outlined key areas that children need to master to learn to read:

1. Phonemic awareness- an ability to break up words into their component sounds. It is an understanding that spoken words are made up of a series of sounds. See opposite page for details of phonemic awareness activities you can undertake at home.
2. Phonics- associating the sounds of letters with their written form. E.g. the sound /a/ starts words such as ant, apple, ate, aim. Be mindful not to confuse letter names and sounds- try to focus on sounds.
3. Vocabulary- which is an understanding of words. It is essential that you talk with your child. Play lots of games with language and ask your child questions. Predict the content of stories, discuss what you did during the day, visit the zoo, library or local park.
4. Fluency- fluent readers can read with expression and meaning. If a child reads in a staccato fashion, then it is likely that they are using so much of their mental capacity to decode words and will not be able to attend to the meaning in the text.
5. Comprehension- in order to understand what they have read children need to have a good grasp of vocabulary to decode words easily. It is essential that parents are aware of how these areas can be developed at home (and also at school).



Reading Skills

Parental involvement has been shown to be a key predictor of a child's literacy ability. In fact, early involvement results in more profound and positive affects, in terms of a child's academic performance. We have a new and scientific understanding of how children learn to read. We know that reading skills and habits can be developed in the early years between birth and age five.

There are many things that parents can do at home to cultivate essential pre-requisite reading skills. Some simple activities include:

- *Model reading practices
 - *Provide access to a variety of books and reading material (newspapers, comics, timetables, magazines)
 - *Engage in songs, rhymes, chants and oral stories
 - *Develop 'print awareness' by identifying the cover, author and illustrator of books.
 - *Identify the components of a book (cover, title, words, sentences)
 - *Show children how you read from left to right and top to bottom (return sweep).
 - *Discuss unfamiliar vocabulary with your child.
 - *Discuss the plot of stories. Predict what will occur next.
 - *After reading a story, ask questions to check your child has understood the story.
 - *Read non-fiction books on topics that are of interest to your child. Encourage them to recall facts from the book.
 - *Re-read familiar stories- allow your child to join in and retell the story.
 - *Encourage your child to retell stories.
 - *Develop phonemic awareness skills (see opposite page for practical ideas)
- *READ, READ, READ with your child every day!**



Being able to recite the alphabet song may sound impressive but it is no indicator that a child will be successful in learning to read and write...

Phonemic Awareness

Learning to read is a complex process and there are many theories as to how best to teach children. However, research has consistently acknowledged that phonemic awareness is an essential element required in a child's progression into literacy. Phonemic awareness is defined as the ability to break words up into their component sounds (e.g. dog is made up of 'duh-o-guh'). Whilst this may seem painfully obvious to adults, many small children find this an onerous task, but it is a critical step in learning to read.

What can parents do to develop phonemic awareness:

- *Play 'I Spy' and use sounds instead of letter names (e.g. 'I spy with my little ear a word beginning with 'duh').
- *Sing songs and recite chants and nursery rhymes- discuss rhyming words
- *Read rhyming books such as Dr Seuss
- *Segment words into their component sounds (e.g. cat is made up of 'kuh-a-tuh'). Use jellybeans for each sound.
- *Blend sounds together (e.g. 'buh-ir-duh' = bird)
- *Count the syllables (beats) in words (e.g. 'rainbow' has two syllables)
- *Discuss letter-sound correspondences (e.g. 'meat' begins with the letter 'm' and makes the mmmmm sound)
- *Use picture cards and identify words that start with similar sounds

Writing Skills

Children generally move through stages as they learn to write:

1. Invented writing stage- this is where children role play the act of writing by scribbling, using random strings of letters and using letter-like symbols. Children may read their writing to you but no one else will be able to make sense of it. This is typical of preschool children.
 2. Experimental writing stage- the child understands that speech can be written down, but may not consistently read their writing the same way.
 3. Early writing stage- children attempt to spell words phonetically and understand the purpose for their writing.
- What can parents do to support their child's writing skills at home?
- *Model writing- write lists, write in a calendar, complete forms, send emails
 - *Praise your child's efforts for writing.
 - *Encourage your child to label objects they construct.
 - *Encourage your child to write notes, letters and stories and share these with family and friends.
 - *Use magnetic letters to attempt to spell words (this is only appropriate if your child understands letter-sound correspondences)

How to develop your child's physical skills



How to develop fine motor skills required for school?

Children need to have developed their fine motor skills before starting school to enable them to learn to write and cut with ease. Young children need to learn how to manipulate their thumb and first two fingers. Some simple activities that you can do at home include:

- * using pegs
- * playing with play dough
- * finger painting
- * playing with Lego or construction blocks
- * use a range of writing implements such as pencils, crayons, textas
- * arrange fridge magnets on the fridge or on a cooking tray
- * thread beads
- * complete jig-saw puzzles
- * use a calculator
- * paper weaving or folding
- * use scissors to cut out a variety of shapes
- * create and use finger puppets
- * use a water sprayer to water plants

When teaching your child to write at home, remember:

- * Do not teach your child how to write their entire name in capital letters (only first letter)
- * Praise all of their efforts to write (invented writing is appropriate for some children until the end of Kindergarten)
- * use shaving cream on a flat surface

Children need to develop a range of gross and fine motor skills before starting to school. Interestingly, there is a significant body of research which confirms that physical development milestones are essential prerequisites for cognitive development. For example, a simple physical milestone such as crawling establishes neural pathways in the brain essential for reading and writing.

Can your child:

- *Use a dominant (preferred) hand by 4 years?
- *Cross the mid-line of their body by 3 years (i.e. draw a line across a piece of paper without swapping hands)?
- *Crawl, creep and move on their stomach?
- *Skip, hop and climb stairs using alternative legs?
- *Kick, strike and catch balls of various sizes (essential for 'tracking' which is required for learning to read)?
- *Roll, tumble and rock? This promotes the development of their vestibular system so that they can understand where their body is in space- this is essential for sitting in a classroom setting.

Movement is a fundamental prerequisite for developing cognitive skills and competencies.

Ensuring a smooth transition

Starting formal school, or 'big school' as it is often referred to is a major milestone in a child's life (and for their parents too). For many children, despite being in childcare and preschool arrangements previously, starting school presents new challenges as adult to child ratios are different, a bigger physical setting is typical and usually, there are more children and more rules to abide. However, this does not need to be a daunting experience. With correct preparation starting school can be a positive experience for all parties involved.

It is important to recognise that whilst this is an important milestone and to acknowledge its significance we should not place too much emphasis on this event, as this can sensationalise the event and cause your child unnecessary angst.

In the lead up to commencing school ensure your child has attended the orientation days/ mornings organised by the school. During these sessions, try to find out the names of some of the other children who will also be commencing school at the same time as your child. You can discuss and role play how your child can initiate friendships with particular children, using their names to make it authentic. It may also be helpful if possible, to arrange a play-date with a couple of children before school starts to enable your child to have an established friendship base before commencing school.

Whilst there are an array of skills and concepts your child needs to have mastered before starting school, as outlined in this e-book, one of the most important attributes your child can have is independence. This will enable them to function more successfully at school as they will have the skills and resilience to adjust to this new learning and social environment.

Is My Child Ready?

Make an informed decision to determine if your child is ready to start school. Speak with the preschool teacher or arrange for a formal school readiness assessment to be conducted (Every Chance to Learn offers these assessments in Sydney). Success in the early years of school has implications for future achievement in school and beyond: if children commence school and are not ready, they find it difficult to catch up', as their peers do not wait for them. It is also very difficult for schools to change the learning trajectories of children, if they are not 'ready to learn'.

It is important to note that there are biological differences in physical and language maturation between boys and girls and this can have ramifications for early learning. Therefore, it is paramount to determine if a child is ready to cope with the demands of formal schooling. Whilst there is a current tendency to 'hold children back' so that they start school at a later age, this may not always be advantageous. Staying in a preschool program may not be appropriate if the child is not being challenged.

Final Tips

- *Talk positively about the experience (even if you did not enjoy school).
- *Ensure they have a healthy breakfast and no TV before school (this sets the brain up for rapid-fire input which they are unlikely to receive at school and therefore, they can be easily distracted).
- *Role play getting dressed and packing bags in the lead up.
- *Show your child where the bathrooms, bubblers and other important places are.
- *Ensure you are in the playground to pick up your child or knows who is picking them up.
- *Practice eating a school lunch and putting shoes on and off.



Enhancing
children's
learning &
development in a
digital age...



e-books

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