



Preparing Your Child for School

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by Martha J. Zaslow, PhD and Tamara G. Halle, PhD*

Expert panels have reviewed the evidence on what makes a child ready to engage productively in learning when they enter school. A respected group of researchers and educators convened by the National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, and a group convened as part of the National Education Goals Panel, reached very similar conclusions. The research these panels reviewed confirmed that while it is important that very young children are interested in learning the alphabet and numbers, there are other dimensions of their lives that can influence how well - or how poorly - they will do when they enter school. What are these dimensions? The National Education Goals Panel identified five:

Physical well-being and motor development

Children already have a jump-start on learning if they are in good health, receive regular medical attention, have physical abilities (such as gross and fine motor skills) that are appropriate for their age, and have not been exposed to toxic substances (such as lead paint).

Social and emotional development.

Children are better able to adapt to school if they can form positive relationships with adults and children, know how to take turns and to cooperate, and if they understand the emotions of other people and can interpret and express their own.

Approaches to learning.

Enthusiasm for learning, curiosity about what makes things tick and persistence on tasks equip children well for the business of school.

Language development.

Children with some understanding of verbal language and what educators call "emergent literacy" will have a good foundation for reading and writing. Verbal language includes listening, speaking, and vocabulary. Emergent literacy includes such things as assigning sounds to letters; understanding that stories have a beginning, middle, and end; and recognizing that ideas can be represented through drawing, letter-like shapes and letters.

Cognition and general knowledge.

Children will be more attuned to the kind of thinking that will be required of them in school if they know something about the properties of particular objects (that water can be boiled for tea or frozen for ice, for example) and can not similarities, differences, and associations when looking across objects, events or people (that policeman, firemen, and doctors all are community "helpers," for example, but in different ways). And yes, children will be in for smoother sailing academically if they have some familiarity with shapes, spatial relations, number concepts, and letters.

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Many children are already disadvantaged when it comes to these dimensions of school readiness. Some

children' abilities to learn have already been compromised by their exposure to lead paint, for example, or by disabilities that interfere with their cognitive development. Other children are growing up in "language poor" homes or in homes where their natural curiosity is squelched by troubled parents.

Information from childhood development and early education research can be a valuable resource for communities as they seek to initiate or expand school readiness efforts so that they can reduce the number of children at risk for experiencing academic difficulties. After all, it's in everyone's best interest to ensure that all of America's children have a fair chance to learn when they first approach the schoolhouse door.

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