



KINDERGARTEN READINESS

It is at this time of year that we start to hear the first questions from parents regarding their child's readiness for kindergarten. As a result of those inquiries, I would like to take a moment to define the criteria for kindergarten readiness and then discuss how to assess those criteria in individual children.

Many research hours have been spent trying to devise a test or checklist of skills that would be a competent predictor of kindergarten success. Unfortunately, so far those attempts have failed. The best researchers have been able to develop is a list of developmental or behavioral stages that will help the child transition well into the kindergarten class. Of course, as kindergarten programs vary, so do the skills required to succeed.

I have mentioned to many parents that while they often first think of reading readiness as a critical indicator, skills such as letter recognition or emergent reading skills are completely absent from most lists. Those readiness checklists that do contain reading readiness categories list skills such as, "can listen to stories without interrupting", "recognizes rhyming sounds" or "look at pictures and then tell stories". Identifying some letters of the alphabet is found on a smaller subset of these. Writing skills are completely absent, with the exception of *attempting* to write one's first name being present on some lists. A child might know a lot about the alphabet, but it is a student's ability to appropriately contribute to a classroom, follow its routine, and interact with the other members of that classroom community that serve the student best.

The National Association of Health commissioned one of the broadest studies of this subject, entitled, "A Good Beginning: Risk Factors for Early School Problems and Selected Federal Policies". They concluded that, "Social and emotional school readiness is critical to a successful kindergarten transition, early school success, and even later accomplishments in the workplace. Those children who are not successful in the early years of school often fall behind from the start and may be plagued by later behavioral, emotional, academic and social development problems."

The National Association for the Education of Young Children, citing the large developmental range still present among five-year olds, refuses to even develop a checklist. They maintain that it is the schools that must have programs that meet the needs of the children and not the children that must meet the requirements of the schools.

There is another unexpected, but consistent finding in the research: Students who are held back a year before entering kindergarten are much less likely to have later school problems than comparable children who repeat kindergarten.

It is also instructive to note that there are very few local kindergartens that require that students meet entrance criteria. For JDS, for example, the evaluation form we must complete for the students list *absolutely no academic requirements*. Their pre-academic requirements include such topics as:

- Is attentive
- Contributes to group discussion
- Follows directions
- Works cooperatively
- Completes tasks
- Is willing to try new activities.

The Maryland Public Schools use a checklist to evaluate new kindergarten students called the Maryland Model for School Readiness. This checklist includes 66 exemplars (typical student skills) in 7 different categories, including, Personal/Social, Language and Literacy, Mathematical Thinking and Physical Development and Health. They do not expect any student to be proficient in all of these areas at the start of the year, but use these categories to evaluate each student upon entry and set goals for the kindergarten year.

Again, many of these skills are self-help related, such as:

- Follows classroom rules and routines
- Manages transitions
- Uses classroom materials purposefully and respectfully
- Moves with balance and control; and
- Uses a variety of art materials to explore and express emotions.

Among the Mathematical Thinking exemplars, are sorting and patterning skills, beginning to have a visual sense of relative quantity, beginning to recognize shapes and correctly using directional words such as over, under, beside and behind.

The Literacy exemplars include following directions, showing interest in books and reading, recognizing a few letters in their first name and speaking clearly and conveying ideas orally.

We make sure that we are familiar with all these criteria and expose the children to the different concepts over time.

So after all this, how can one decide on the right course of action for one's own child? As children often behave very differently in the group classroom setting than they do at

home, I would encourage all parents to have a regular sharing of information with their child's classroom teachers.