



# Ready to Learn

## Explaining developmental readiness for kindergarten to parents

by Jacque Sell

There is currently a great deal of attention paid to whether or not young children are ready for kindergarten and ways to reduce the 'achievement gap.' With such a focus on this gap and the effect it has on academic concepts and skills, parents tend to have as much concern about these areas of their children's learning as their overall growth and development. Research has repeatedly shown that both academic and nonacademic school readiness skills at entry to kindergarten are significantly related to eventual reading and mathematics achievement in fifth grade. Unfortunately, readiness is still narrowly interpreted as a child's ability to perform isolated academic tasks, rather than a more holistic assessment of a child's readiness to learn.

Content in kindergarten-readiness workshops has evolved over the past several years and is currently more often referred to as 'school readiness.'



Jacque Sell, Quality Assurance and Training Manager, is responsible for supporting quality initiatives, NAEYC Accreditation and staff professional development, and some project management for CCLC centers in the West. She earned her Bachelor of Arts

Degree in Child Development from California State University, Chico, and later earned her Master's Degree in Human Development at Pacific Oaks College. She also presents parent and teacher workshops on a variety of topics related to early care and education and child development at local, state, and National conferences and ECE programs.

This change is in response to considering a child's developmental readiness, as well as academic readiness, for a formal education environment rather than the specifics of 'kindergarten.' Using the phrase 'ready to learn' empowers parents to recognize the importance of growth and development as indicators of children being ready for a formal education setting. Throughout infancy and early childhood, growth, development, and mastery of skills and concepts all contribute to children's success when they enter formal education systems, such as a kindergarten program. Parents may not be aware of growth and developmental milestones that are required for mastery of cognitive and academic skills and concepts. This can create unrealistic expectations for children, as well as frustration and stress for families and care providers.

### Understanding Milestones

Growth and development are frequently associated with milestones such as walking, talking in sentences, or successful toilet learning. Parents may not be aware that each milestone requires a complex balance of growth, experience, and other factors to occur — much of it without notice. Using mobility as an example: it is expected that as infants

grow, they will scoot, crawl, toddle, walk, and run — usually in that order, with each milestone a more advanced form of the previous one. However, parents may not recognize that these next milestones don't only require the previous milestone, but also joint and muscle strength, experience, and encouragement to explore. It's typically expected that these milestones will occur if the child is healthy, in a stimulating and caring environment, and does not have any conditions preventing typical patterns of development.

An even more complex example is reading. There seems to be an assumption that if children are read to, exposed to books, and learn their alphabet and letter sounds, they will be able to read. As young children enjoy a favorite book and memorize the story, parents may believe their children can 'read' that particular book. Similarly, when a young child realizes how to respond in ways that please parents or teachers, they may seem to have mastered a skill or concept, yet have not.

The developmental milestones that are prerequisites for reading often go unnoticed by parents because they don't stand out in the child's daily life and they aren't highlighted during annual

Reprinted with permission from Exchange magazine.

Visit us at [www.ChildCareExchange.com](http://www.ChildCareExchange.com) or call (800) 221-2864.

Multiple use copy agreement available for educators by request.

check-ups. However, to be successful at reading, children also need to be able to:

- Track across a page with their eyes.
- Cross the midline with their limbs.
- Focus on one item in the midst of many.
- Understand part-to-whole concepts.
- Demonstrate one-to-one correspondence.

These physical and cognitive milestones are precursors for the mental and physical processes required in reading.

Supporting parents' understanding of these requirements in growth and development and translating them into their child's school success relieves a great deal of stress and anxiety for parents — and in turn the children and their early childhood teachers. It's important to explain that when children enter a formal education system 'ready to learn,' they are developmentally ready and will experience success in kindergarten and be prepared for life-long learning. Success occurs when children are developmentally ready in all domains, including social, emotional, physical, cognitive, and language. This means they are able to take full advantage of the education system and acquire knowledge, concepts, and skills. When children have achieved developmental milestones and mastered necessary skills in all domains, they have the foundation to be successful in their next learning environment.

There are a variety of lists of developmental milestones that can be shared with parents, as well as articles and studies citing the importance of nurturing children's social and emotional development. The challenge is in helping parents understand how these developmental milestones translate into their child being ready to learn *and* how they support their individual child's academic success. Following are some tips for working with parents.

### Explain what 'ready to learn' means:

Provide parents with a list of behaviors and skills that will support their child's success in a formal education setting. Children are supported when they:

- Feel secure in new environments.
- Have a positive self-concept and positive self-esteem.
- Practice self-regulation and emotional regulation.
- Are able to communicate with peers and adults.
- Demonstrate fine and gross motor control and coordination.
- Demonstrate curiosity and a disposition for learning.
- Demonstrate problem-solving and critical thinking skills.
- Engage in pretend, interactive, and cooperative play with peers and adults.

These indicators reflect all domains of development and do not include demonstration of concepts, knowledge, skills, or other academic information. When children display the characteristics listed above, they will also have acquired early literacy and mathematics concepts, vocabulary, and self-help skills. Additionally, they will be primed for continuing similar learning and acquisition when opportunities arise.

### Relate 'ready to learn' to kindergarten readiness:

A child's readiness for kindergarten indicates a belief that they will be successful in a learning environment as measured through grade reports, self-regulation, social interactions, and acquisition of academic skills and concepts. Children's success is related to being *ready to learn* these academic skills and concepts, rather than an indication of the academic skills and concepts their child has *already learned*.

The foundation that is instilled from these behaviors and skills is a sense of security and belonging. Children who

do not have a sense of safety and self-acceptance will be distracted by this and not be able to participate fully in learning opportunities. For instance, if a child is not able to communicate to his teacher that he needs to use the toilet, he will be focusing on managing his physiological need, protecting himself from embarrassment, and trying to find a solution, rather than focusing on the curriculum in the classroom.

**Readiness can't be forced:** Once parents understand that their child needs to be ready to learn, they will be ready to help them get there. There are aspects of a child's development that we can't influence, but that we can support and encourage. A good analogy for this is the process of losing baby teeth — that are eventually replaced with permanent ones:

*A baby tooth can come out under a variety of circumstances — the root may die and the tooth falls out, the child falls and knocks it out, or a permanent tooth starts to grow in and pushes it out. However, the permanent tooth does not always quickly follow to fill the gap, and there is not much we can do to make it come in sooner — it will erupt and take its place when it is developed and ready to do so. The child's overall health, nutrition, and dental hygiene will impact the emergence of the permanent tooth, but it can't be prodded or pressured to come in before its time.*

— Cindy O'Mara,  
CCLC's Senior Director of  
Center and Services Development

Similarly, we can provide healthy, developing children with stimulating and challenging learning opportunities as well as support their development, yet there are developmental gains that we can't make happen until the time is right.