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The Importance of the Kindergarten Year

Getting Off to a Good Start

All I Ever Really Needed to Know I Learned in Kindergarten

—Robert Fulghum

Most of what I really need to know about how to live, and what to do, and how to be, I learned in kindergarten . . . These are the things I learned: Share everything. Play fair. Don't hit people. Put things back where you found them. Clean up your own mess. Don't take things that aren't yours. Say you're sorry when you hurt somebody. Wash your hands before you eat. Flush. Warm cookies and cold milk are good for you. Live a balanced life. Learn some and think some and draw and paint and sing and dance and play and work some every day. . . . When you go out into the world, watch for traffic, hold hands, and stick together. Wonder (Fulghum, 1988, p. 2).

Kindergarten is a landmark year in the lives of children and their families. It is the first year of formal schooling for many children. Although many children attend preschool, kindergarten is often seen as the beginning of the elementary school years and can set the tone for children's educational future. Children at this age are excited about learning. They want to be part of the *community of learners* who can read and write as they see family and friends doing. We can build on that excitement to help children learn and meet standards in joy-filled, developmentally appropriate ways.

Children won't learn *everything* they'll ever need to know in kindergarten, but it is a place where we can help them build the foundation for much of what they will need in the future. Recent research indicates that the first five years of life are incredibly important to the development of

children's brains. As children take part in activities in kindergarten, the nerve cells (neurons) in their brains are making connections that can last throughout their lifetimes and form the foundations for new connections. Playing with blocks, sand, water, and a variety of hands-on materials will help these connections (also called *synapses*) to form. As children listen to stories and express themselves through art and writing, more of these connections take shape. It is important that children have quality experiences in their first five years and beyond that promote this synaptic growth. With rich environments and opportunities for play and learning, children will have about 1,000 trillion synapses by the time they finish their kindergarten year (Gullo, 2006). This makes kindergarten an even more critical year in the life of a child, and one filled with potential to help children develop solid foundations for future learning.

As children begin to acquire new skills and knowledge their self-confidence will also blossom. This can begin a beautiful cycle of learning where children gain new understandings and build their sense of self-worth, which motivates them to learn even more and feel even better about themselves as the cycle continues. A developmentally appropriate kindergarten, where children are learning at their own levels in ways that are appropriate for their age through play, exploration, and engaging activities, will help children think of themselves as learners and ignite a flame inside that creates a desire to continue to discover and learn.

Developmentally Appropriate Practices

The National Association for the Education of Young Children's (NAEYC) document *Developmentally Appropriate Practices for Programs Serving Children Ages Birth through Age Eight* outlines best practices for implementing a quality kindergarten program. "Developmentally appropriate practice requires both meeting children where they are—which means that teachers must get to know them well—and enabling them to reach goals that are both challenging and achievable" (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009, p. xii). It is our role to continually make decisions about how best to meet our children's needs and intentionally plan experiences that will help them learn. As we do so, there are three key sources of knowledge we need to attend to (1) knowledge of how children develop and learn, (2) knowledge of each individual child in our program, and (3) knowledge of the social and cultural context of each of our children. This means we must know our children, respect them as members of their family and culture, and design experiences that are meaningful for them as individuals and will help them make progress in their development and learning (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009).

REACHING STANDARDS IN KINDERGARTEN AND THE POWER OF PLAY

There has been increased emphasis on standards and accountability throughout the educational system. This has had a profound impact on many kindergarten programs. Some teachers and administrators wonder how they can meet all the state and national standards that they are expected to achieve. With knowledge of the standards that children are expected to meet and knowledge about individual children in the classroom, kindergarten teachers can intentionally plan experiences that will help them

learn in each of the content areas. Lilian Katz (2007) suggests not only focusing on content standards, but on the *standards of experience* that benefit each child:

- “Be intellectually engaged and absorbed.
- Be intellectually challenged.
- Be engaged in extended interactions.
- Be involved in sustained investigations of aspects of their own environment and experiences worthy of their interest, knowledge and understanding.
- Take the initiative in a range of activities and accept responsibility for what is accomplished.
- Experience the satisfaction that results from overcoming obstacles and setbacks and solving problems.
- Have confidence in their intellectual powers and questions.
- Help others to discover things and to understand them better.
- Make suggestions to others and express appreciation of others’ efforts for what is accomplished.
- Apply their developing literacy and numeracy skills in purposeful ways.
- Feel that they belong to a group of their peers” (p. 95).

As we help our children meet content standards, we can ensure that they are getting the *standards of experience* that will enrich them as well.

Research has shown that play is one of the best ways for children of kindergarten age to learn. Through play, children are able to learn at their own pace. Play is motivating and maintains children’s interest, enabling them to learn new skills. As children interact with engaging, hands-on materials they can be learning in all subject areas. There is no better way for children to learn geometry than by playing in the block area with a caring teacher who can help them experience shapes and their properties firsthand. Scientific understanding blossoms as young learners predict and observe objects sinking and floating in the water table. “Simply put, children talk more, integrate new knowledge, and are most engrossed and enthusiastic about learning while engaged in richly layered play” (Heidemann & Hewitt, 2010, p. 11).

What Research and the Experts Tell Us

Play and the History of Kindergarten

Frederick Froebel established the first kindergarten in 1837 in Germany. Froebel, who is credited with being the “father of kindergarten,” believed that children learn best through play in a natural, informal environment. In his book, *The Education of Man*, Froebel (1887) wrote, “The mind grows by self revelation. In play the child ascertains what he can do, discovers his possibilities of will and thought by exerting his power spontaneously . . . In play he reveals his own original power” (p. vi). Froebel believed that children need free activity and opportunities to be creative. He understood that we need to nurture children’s ability to play and created sets of blocks and other hands-on materials which he called *gifts* and *occupations*. He believed in active learning, including songs, stories,

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games, and opportunities to learn from interacting socially with others. Using Froebel's theories, Susan Elizabeth Blow instituted the first public kindergarten in the United States in 1873 in St. Louis. Like Froebel, Blow recognized the importance of having well-educated teachers who understand how children learn best. Both of them devoted a great deal of their time to training teachers, as well as working with the children. Over the years, researchers have continued to affirm the importance of play as one of the best ways for kindergarten children to learn and meet standards. Many of our top educational theorists have emphasized the power of play for children's learning, including Piaget, Dewey, Brunner, and Vygotsky who called play "the preeminent educational activity" for our children (Berk & Winsler, 1995, p. 57).

There are many developmentally appropriate experiences teachers can plan for children that will help them meet standards. Children benefit from both large and small group experiences, as well as time to work individually. They gain from both child-guided and adult-guided experiences (Epstein, 2007). Knowing children's interests can help teachers plan long-term studies that capture and sustain children's attention. Children can learn in all areas of the curriculum as they read about, research, and learn more about the topics they are studying. There is great potential for children to cultivate new skills as they begin to represent what they are learning through drawing, writing, speaking, painting, sculpting, and other forms of expression. Learning about subject areas in the context of a long-term study or investigation can make learning more meaningful and, therefore, help children better remember and use what they have learned.

READY FOR THE CHILDREN

Nationally, there is increased awareness of the importance of the kindergarten year. When the president and 50 governors convened to form the National Educational Goals Panel in 1990 to improve teaching and learning for the country's children, the first goal they established was that *All children will start school ready to learn*. This sparked a nationwide effort to ensure that children received the health care, nutrition, physical activity, and education experiences they needed to get off to a good start in school. Children are naturally ready to learn; however, there is a great deal that needs to be done in order to help children be more *successful* in kindergarten and future school years. This includes making sure children have their basic needs met and that their families have sufficient resources to support them. Part of the ready-to-learn goal is that every parent will be their child's first teacher, spend time each day helping their children learn, and receive the training and support they need in order to be able to do this (National Governors Association, 2005).

Instead of looking at readiness as something solely within children, we need to have ready schools and ready communities to support our children in order for them to be successful in kindergarten. It is our job as kindergarten teachers to welcome each child who comes through our doors and be ready ourselves to help make this year the best beginning possible.

TRANSITION TO KINDERGARTEN AND FORMING PARTNERSHIPS WITH FAMILIES

One way to ensure that children will be as successful as possible is to plan their transition into kindergarten. A smooth transition can make a tremendous difference, not only in kindergarten but in their attitude toward schooling as they proceed through the grades (Pianta & Kraft-Sayer, 2003). Simple planning and activities can make a large impact. However, to have a lasting influence, transitions need to involve families, begin before the school year starts, and continue throughout the first several weeks or even months of school. Many parents find that they feel comfortable with the routines of their children's preschool and child care settings. With the changes kindergarten brings, parents will also benefit from a thoughtfully planned transition, which helps them feel welcomed and begins productive, back and forth communication. There are many types of transition activities you can plan, depending on your circumstances and the children you teach.

Making home visits is a wonderful way to begin to form relationships with children and families and learn more about them. Asking about children's interests, favorite books, songs, strengths, and needs can help with planning a curriculum that corresponds with children's current skill levels, gains their attention, and motivates them right from the start. A home visit can provide the opportunity to learn more about children's cultural backgrounds as well. Visits are helpful for children who are shy or have a hard time warming up to new situations and people, resulting in less trauma and tears the first week of school. They also assist us in understanding children who might otherwise demonstrate challenging behaviors, which may be prevented if we know more about their interests, motivations, and concerns. The more we understand children's social and cultural contexts, the more developmentally appropriate kindergarten we will be able to offer for all of our children.

If home visits aren't feasible, invite parents, guardians, and children in for short, scheduled visits at the beginning of the year. Mail letters or postcards that welcome families to the new school year, sharing your excitement and some events for the year ahead. This message or an e-mail could also invite them to drop by the week before school starts while you are working on setting up the classroom, including one evening to accommodate families' schedules. Realizing the importance of the transition to kindergarten, some schools arrange these visits during the first few days of school instead of having all of the children start on the opening day. In these schools, small groups of four or five children and their parents and guardians spend part of the day during the first week. The following week the entire class begins together.

Transition activities can begin the spring before kindergarten and include meetings with preschool teachers to share information. Many schools plan *kindergarten round-up* events as a way to bring children and families into the school, begin the registration process, and learn more about the kindergarten program. This is an excellent opportunity to begin a reciprocal relationship with families. Evening events can be planned for parents and guardians to provide information about the school and

curriculum, show them around the room, share schedules, and help them fill out necessary forms. The following day children can be invited to spend an hour or so in the kindergarten classroom to take part in a few fun activities. Some schools like to have children join the current kindergarten class for these events, while others choose to have the children in smaller, more intimate groups. If the community doesn't have a comprehensive program for screening three- and four-year-old children to identify special needs, children can also take part in a nonthreatening screening, including vision and hearing, to know how to better meet children's needs when they arrive. Round-up events can be a good start to the kindergarten transition, allowing children and families to meet teachers, administrators, and future classmates. They can also help families feel welcomed and secure from the beginning.

Try This!

At round-up or during opening transition activities with families, give them a monthly calendar with activities they can do with their children each day, such as *Count the doors and windows in your home*. The activities should be simple and require little preparation time for the parents. The Resources section of this book contains monthly calendars that could be sent home, beginning with August of the kindergarten year and extending through the summer leading up to first grade. The suggestions provide ideas that families can use to help their children meet kindergarten standards, reinforcing what is learned at school. The calendars can be personalized by adding upcoming field trip dates, events, or opportunities for families to volunteer and get involved, specific to your program. It may be most effective to send the calendar home each month with a suggestion that families hang it on their refrigerators and replace it when a new one comes home the following month. Some communities give out free magnets with emergency contact information that they would be happy to share with teachers to send home with the calendars.

If funds are available, provide each family with a paperback book to read together, encouraging them to read to their children each day. A book such as *Mamma Loves You* by Caroline Stutson is a good choice for this purpose; it's easy to read, predictable, and shares a message about the love parents have for children. Instead of purchasing books for each family, you could also have books to lend from your classroom or school library. Children can take a different book home when they have returned the one they currently have.

Some teachers enjoy hosting family picnics, potlucks, or other play events before the start of the school year. This is a good way to meet the children and families, as well as for families to get to know one another. Parent-teacher organizations, United Way, or other community groups may be willing to help fund transition efforts to help this important year get off to a good start. Once the school year begins, hold an open house at a convenient time for families to further introduce them to the activities their children are doing.

Try This!

Setting up centers or interest areas for parents or guardians to visit with their kindergartener is a wonderful way to introduce them to the classroom. These centers may include a math area where they make simple patterns with colored blocks, a science/discovery area where families plant flowers or bean seeds together, and an art area where they draw pictures of their families. There could also be a simple snack area where families prepare and eat snacks together. This might include measuring out ingredients for a simple snack mix with written directions for them to follow.

**STRENGTHENING RELATIONSHIPS**

Creating meaningful relationships with families extends and strengthens children's learning. Research has shown that the more parents are involved in their children's education the better outcomes their children will have (Arndt & McGuire-Schwartz, 2008; Knopf & Swick, 2008). There are many ways to involve families throughout the year. Invite parents, guardians, and grandparents to volunteer in the classroom to read to children, help them with skills such as learning to tie shoes, or write stories on the computer.

What Research and the Experts Tell Us

When the National Governors Association's Task Force on School Readiness wrote their final report in 2005, they emphasized the need to focus on classroom quality. Research has shown that the quality of our classrooms and teaching and the interactions between teachers and children are critical to student learning. The Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) developed by the Center for Advanced Study of Teaching and Learning was designed to measure the quality of these interactions. CLASS describes three domains of classroom quality that need to be considered. The first domain, **Emotional Support**, includes the dimensions of *Positive Climate*, *Teacher Sensitivity*, and *Regard for Student Perspective*. The second domain, **Classroom Organization**, includes *Behavior Management*, *Productivity*, and *Instructional Learning Formats*. The final dimension, **Instructional Support**, consists of *Concept Development*, *Quality Feedback*, and *Language Modeling*. Research has shown that when teachers excel in these dimensions, their students also excel, learn more, and have higher outcomes. Information about CLASS can be found at <http://www.classobservation.com/> (Pianta, LaParo, & Hamre, 2008).

MEETING THE NEEDS OF ALL CHILDREN

It is critical that kindergartens meet the needs of all of our children. The final report of the National Governors Association Task Force on School Readiness (2005) described *Ready Schools* as

those that demonstrate a commitment to the success of every child, regardless of his or her prior experiences, family and economic circumstances, linguistic and cultural background, and natural abilities and interests. These schools adopt curriculum and instruction methods that are research-based and support high standards. . . . Moreover, they are responsive to individual children's needs, provide environments that are conducive to learning and exploration, and incorporate children with special needs in regular classrooms whenever possible. Ready schools also ensure that second-language learners receive age-appropriate, culturally sensitive, and challenging curriculum instruction (p. 21).

Throughout this book there will be suggestions for helping the many diverse learners in our classrooms, including English Language Learners, children with special needs, as well as those who are gifted.

SUPPORTING CHILDREN LEARNING ENGLISH AS A NEW LANGUAGE

Children who are learning English as a new language and their families will need additional consideration as they make the transition to kindergarten. Interpreters who can translate when we meet with families are essential. Providing written material in the language of each of the families is also important. There are software programs and Web sites available that translate written materials, including <http://wordmonkey.info> or <http://babelfish.yahoo.com>. It is a good idea to ask someone who speaks the language to look over any translated materials to ensure that the meaning has been translated clearly. Keep in mind that when writing anything that will be translated, use simple, clear language without idiomatic expressions that might be difficult to understand in another language, such as "hang in there." Let families know you honor and value their culture and language and invite them to share some of their language and traditions with the children throughout the year.



WORKING WITH CHILDREN'S INDIVIDUAL NEEDS

Planning the transition to kindergarten is especially critical for children with special needs. Ideally, this begins a year ahead of the transition by forming a team that includes the family, preschool and kindergarten teachers, therapists, and administrators. The first step is to find out as much as possible about the child, including strengths and needs. Designing a strong Individual Education Plan (IEP) with the team that outlines goals for the child and how the goals can best be met will be a key component. The

plan should include the transition and how it can best be accomplished. This will involve cooperation and planning by all involved.

With the wide range of ages, as well as socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds found in many kindergartens today, there is an expansive array of skills and abilities children bring with them to the kindergarten setting. Meeting all of their needs is challenging. Knowing children's strengths and needs, including those who have special needs as well as those who are more advanced, will help us to make sure they are receiving the support they need. Talking with families and keeping communication flowing throughout the year will help to ensure that all children are continuing to progress and learn.

Summary

Kindergarten is an important milestone in the educational lives of children. A positive kindergarten experience makes it much more likely that the coming years of schooling will also be positive. Research has demonstrated that the first five years are especially important to children's future brain development. Kindergarten provides a tremendous opportunity to help children build a strong foundation in all areas of development. This can be done best by providing a wealth of hands-on activities where children can learn through play and exploration, with the guidance of a caring teacher who intentionally plans experiences for them. Research has shown that play is one of the best ways for children in kindergarten to learn and has been an integral part of kindergarten since it was established. Forming relationships with families and ongoing communication with them is critical. Helping children make a smooth transition to kindergarten makes it more likely that the year will be successful for both children and their families. Our role is to welcome children, with their many unique gifts and needs, and provide them with a strong, developmentally appropriate kindergarten that will not only help them reach standards, but provide them with experiences that will ignite a love of learning that can last a lifetime.

