

Purposeful Play Leads to School Readiness

What can adults—teachers, families, and the community—do to help prepare young children to succeed in kindergarten? Explore the connections between purposeful play and school readiness in this timely, practical discussion.

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Initiatives such as the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (No Child Left Behind [NCLB], 2002) reflect this country's recent emphasis on literacy and educational accountability. Policymakers have a heightened interest in educating children earlier and fostering brain growth, in part due to the increased awareness of research on brain development and the importance of the early years on learning.

As a result, teachers and families often feel pressured to help children be ready for school, but may not be clear on what to do or how to do it. This article assists families, teachers, and community partners by explaining the connections between purposeful play—including interactions, relationships, and learning during early childhood years—and school readiness.

What Is School Readiness?

School readiness is more than academics. It also includes children's physical, social, and emotional progress.

In 1994, the "Goals 2000: Educate America Act" was signed into law (Goals 2000: Educate America Act, 1994). In its first goal, the act specified that "All children in the United States will start school ready to learn" (Kagan, Moore, & Bredekamp, 1995). The National Education Goals Panel (1997) report further clarified school readiness as readiness in five dimensions:

- physical well-being and motor development,
- social and emotional development,
- approaches to learning,
- language development, and
- cognition and general knowledge.

There continues to be, however, some debate concerning the specific characteristics indicating readiness and how they are measured (Ackerman & Barnett, 2005, Saluja, Scott-Little, & Clifford, 2000). For example, the state of Maryland uses Work Sampling indicators to measure readiness (Maryland State Department of Education, 2008) while Florida and Wyoming have developed their own readiness indicators (Wyoming Department of Education, 2003; Florida Department of Education, 2008).

The only criterion for kindergarten entry across the United States is age eligibility even if the cut-off for age eligibility is different from state to state (Ackerman & Barnett, 2005). Over time, the cut-off dates have shifted to coincide with the start of the school year in September, with the majority of states requiring that children be age 5 by October 16. The change in cut-off dates may be related to school readiness. In the past school districts enrolled children who did not turn 5 until December or January (Ackerman & Barnett, 2005).

The National Research Council and the Institute of Medicine's (2000) Committee on Integrating the Science of Early Childhood Development conducted a comprehensive literature review search and found that a variety of entities including families, community partners, and educators contribute to children's development and school readiness.

Similarly, the National School Readiness Indicators Initiative study, which involved a partnership among 17 states, developed a "Ready Child Equation" (Rhode Island KIDS COUNT, 2005). This equation also reflects a comprehensive perspective by explaining the role and responsibilities for families, services, schools, and communities in getting children ready for school.

From an early childhood perspective, kindergarten readiness is best conceived of as the interaction among various related contexts and supports rather than as discrete skills (Clark & Zygmunt-Fillwalk, 2008). Social, attitudinal, and affective learning such as independence, self-motivation, creativity, empathy, resilience, assertiveness, and positive self-esteem are critical in children's potential for long-term learning and future schooling (Bertram & Pascual, 2002). According to Goleman (1996),

school success is not predicted by a child's fund of facts or a precocious ability to read so much as by emotional social measure; being self-assured and interested; knowing what kind of behaviour is expected and how to rein in impulse to misbehave; being able to wait, to follow directions, and to turn to adults and peers for help; expressing needs whilst getting along with other children. (p. 193)

Leaders in the field have concluded that factors associated with school success include math skills, vocabulary development, social-emotional skills, and eagerness to learn (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009).

Readiness Skills Grow Through Purposeful Play

Engaging in purposeful, intentional play with adults provides opportunities for children to implement all of these skills within the context of their lives. No one definition for play has been agreed on by researchers (Saracho & Spodek, 2006).

In general, play can be defined as unstructured peer interaction (Pelligrini, 2001), but it can also be defined on a functional or structural level. Play is the fundamental means by which children gather and process information, learn new skills, and

practice old ones (Ginsburg, 2007). Play also has been defined as having five attributes

- intrinsically motivating,
- freely chosen,
- pleasurable,
- non-literal, and
- actively engaging (Rubin, Fein, & Vandenberg, 1983).

Play becomes purposeful when children's potential for learning is enhanced while these attributes of play are maintained. These attributes can be heightened by people and/or the addition of objects of inquiry. For example, children engage in collaborative interactions as they negotiate resources, share ideas, and have conversations (Epstein, 2007), as shown in this interaction.

Henry and Lucas are playing in the preschool block area. Lucas puts a long rectangular block on top of their structure and it falls down. This happens two more times.

Miss Sandy asks, "What could you do **differently** to keep your **structure** from falling down?" (She models rich language with words such as *structure* and asks an open-ended question to help children think about changing their actions.)

As they rebuild, she uses parallel talk, describing what they have done differently. "It looks like you put the long, heavy rectangular blocks on the side instead of on top. Your structure is still standing."

Purposeful play enables children to develop social-emotional skills that are delineated in some state standards as problem solving and



Subjects & Predicates

Adults must know children within the context of their families and cultures when planning and interacting with children. Provide opportunities for purposeful play and rich learning environments so children can develop the tools for school success.

cooperation (Drew, Christie, Johnson, Meckley, & Nell, 2008). Children develop problem-solving skills as well as learn to help others as they attempt to meet their own needs, as shown by this example.

Four-year-old Peter and 3-year-old Sara are in the pretend play area. Peter is the daddy and Sara is the mom. They decide to use two dolls to be their children. They agree that they would each feed one of their children, but there is only one high chair. They discuss their dilemma and cannot decide who gets to use the high chair.

Miss Marsha hears them, so she asks, “How else can you feed a baby without a high chair?”

Peter thinks for a moment, smiles, and says, “Sometimes my mom feeds my baby brother holding him in her lap.” He looks at Sara and tells her excitedly, “I’ll feed my baby in my lap like my mommy feeds Jake.”

Knowledgeable adults who intentionally lead children’s learning

facilitate purposeful play, as evident in both of these examples.

Foster Children’s Purposeful Play

During early childhood, the first priority in working with all children is for adults to meet children’s basic needs and to provide opportunities for children to be actively engaged with the world around them. This process enables children to construct information about nature and how things work, the people around them, and themselves. Children are curious and naturally want to explore. Children reach out to people, objects, and materials because of their intrinsic motivation to learn and interact with the world around them (Piaget, 1952).

Adults perceive children’s initiation of learning and engagement in the process with the world around them as play because these behaviors reflect the typical dimensions of play: spontaneity, pleasure, and

intrinsic motivation. Babies repeatedly engage in actions, such as tasting their feet or waving their hands, because of the simple pleasure the motion brings, not because of any external compensation or praise. As young children continue to play with materials, objects, and people, they often receive messages about or reactions to their initiations—encouraging or discouraging. Depending on the feedback children receive, they learn to try again or give up.

Purposeful play provides opportunities for inquiry-based learning, during which children

- explore answers to their questions through hands-on interaction with materials,
- build their questioning skills, and
- enhance their understanding of key academic concepts (Drew, et al., 2008).

Bridging the Achievement Gap

Research shows that in the United States, an achievement gap—in which children from low-income families and children who are Latino and African American tend to lag behind their peers in academic performance—begins in early childhood (DiBello & Neuharth-Pritchett, 2008; KewalRamani, Gilbertson, Fox, & Provasnik, 2007; Lee & Burkham, 2002).

Factors that may place children at risk for starting school without the necessary skills are

- having parents who did not complete high school
- living in single-parent homes

- having parents who speak a language other than English at home, and/or
- living in welfare-dependent homes (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2001).

Children with one or more of these risk factors are more likely to be more aggressive, lack social skills, and have yet to develop a positive approach to learning (Rhode Island KIDS COUNT, 2005).

An Early Childhood Longitudinal Study followed the kindergarten class of 1998–99 (Denton & West, 2002; West, Denton, & Reaney, 2001). Results indicated that the achievement gap for children with risk factors at the beginning of kindergarten persisted through kindergarten and first grade.

Brain development research further emphasizes the impact of children’s experiences during their first 5 years on their

future development and learning (Gopnik, Meltzoff, & Kuhl, 1999; Hawley, 2000; Shore, 1997).

The revised National Association for the Education of Young Children Developmentally Appropriate Practice position statement emphasizes that intentional and purposeful teaching can reduce this achievement gap (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; NAEYC, 2009). Wise adults use their knowledge of individual children within the context of their families and cultures when planning learning experiences for and interacting with children.

Therefore, all adults (families, teachers, and community members) in children’s lives need to work together to provide positive experiences, opportunities for purposeful play, and rich learning environments so that all children, regardless of risk factors, can develop the skills for school success, including social-emotional skills and positive approaches to learning.

The amount and kinds of access children have to the world and the variety of experiences around them depends on the adults who care for them, especially when children are less mobile. Even as children’s capabilities and mobility grow, how adults respond and what kinds of experiences children are provided with help determine the levels of children’s problem solving, decision making, and learning. The quality of play, not just the quantity, affects children’s development and eventually their readiness for school.

Quality of play affects children’s school readiness.

Intentionally Shape Children’s Play

Adults have many opportunities to shape the quality of children’s play so that it is intentional, beginning with infancy.

Provide ample learning materials.

All children, especially infants and toddlers, benefit from having many different, safe things to play with and inspect. Many objects, typically found around home and the community, offer opportunities for children’s discovery and learning. For example, a set of metal or unbreakable plastic mixing bowls can become tools for children to figure out concepts such as big and small when they try to nest or stack the bowls.

Children typically make comparisons and sort items. Adults can enhance their play by slightly varying the items and/or the environment. If



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adults place similar metal or soft plastic cups in the bath tub and sand box, these cups can become boats, scoops, or whatever objects children choose. Children can experiment with weight and make comparisons related to volume. When children bang the cups together, they learn about sound awareness and production, which is one component of language and literacy (Epstein, 2007).

Engage in conversations. In addition to varying materials and the environment, the verbal interactions that adults have with children help facilitate learning.

When speaking with infants, well-informed adults use what has been called *motherese*—exaggerated intonation, slower pace, short phrases, and a higher-pitched voice (Parke, 1996). Adults who use this style of speaking that facilitates language development

- enunciate more clearly,
- emphasize one or two words in a sentence, and
- parrot sounds infants make.

It is also helpful to use *parallel talk*—describing the play of infants and toddlers—to help connect

actions and objects to children's developing language (Rosenkoetter & Barton, 2002). When introducing language, strive to use new words that describe a familiar action. For example, an adult might say "You're pressing the modeling dough. Press, press, press the dough" as the child experiments with the compound.

Be sure to pause during conversations to enable children to respond with their own sounds and words. Respond to children's utterances by repeating and expanding on what they say.

Depending on children's experiences, simplify meanings by supplementing familiar words with more complicated ones and labeling objects with their names as well as a familiar category (e.g., with a toddler, one might say both *bird* and *parrot*). Focus on naming objects, sounds, and events in the child's immediate environment.

Ask open-ended questions (Why...? How...? What could happen next?), rather than yes/no questions, to stretch children's thinking. Encourage children to find answers to their questions by experimenting or looking in books, for example, rather than jumping in with a response. Sing songs and read books with rhymes, rhythm, and repetition. Children who play with many forms of language develop more mature language skills.

Offer messy activities. Most young children revel in explorations where they use two or more of their five senses. Finger painting enables children to improve their fine motor skills as they squish the soft, slippery paint between their fingers and smooth it on a tray, paper, or other surface. As children pat their hands on finger paint, they hear delightful squishy sounds. The paint

colors get mixed together when they move their hands back and forth or round and round. This process delights their eyes and leads them to wonder: "What happened?" "What is this new color?" or "How did that happen?"

Messy activities also provide wonderful opportunities for adults to bring in language while children are emotionally and physically making sense of the medium. Adults can colorfully describe what they all see is happening (e.g., mixing colors), helping children to assimilate new information as well as accommodate this new experience into their knowledge base.

Engage children in their learning. As children grow, adults become guides for children to construct knowledge in increasingly greater depth. Adults observe children's actions and challenge their play by extending the activity, interaction, or experiment.

Adults facilitate preschool children's learning by posing follow-up or probing questions about the phenomenon children are observing. For example, ask "What do you think will happen if we add red and yellow food color to our dough?" After the children predict possible results, state "Let's add the two colors and see what happens."

Respond with descriptive statements such as "Wow, it did turn green!" or "Hmm, I wonder why it turned green instead of orange like we thought it might." Continue asking children questions such as "What do you think happened?" to get them to explain their thinking. Their responses enable adults to further extend children's knowledge and plan future explorations.

Supplementing familiar materials with unfamiliar items will lead preschool children to think about similarities and differences. Children will try to make sense of this new information or knowledge. Adults can also increase preschool children's command of language by introducing new vocabulary or concepts and adding new words during any hands-on activity.

For young children, the key to learning and eventual school readiness is their ability to engage with and learn about and from the world around them. This means having the opportunity to explore a variety of objects, relationships, and situations with plenty of time, freedom of choices, and guidance to make the most of each experience.

Knowledgeable adults facilitate purposeful play.

Informed adults enrich the children's familiar surroundings when they

- create rich learning environments,
- use a variety of appropriate instructional strategies, and
- build effective learning experiences across content areas by recognizing, planning for, and taking advantage of teachable moments (Epstein, 2007).

In order to create teachable moments filled with richer play, adults observe to see what is captivating the children's imaginations and interests, and then provide suitable resources: group trips, books, conversations, and materials.



Nancy P. Alexander

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Richer play provides opportunities for verbal interactions that focus on children's interests. Adults prompt these interactions by asking questions or creating situations that encourage children to respond with words, art, or movement, for example. Teacher-initiated learning opportunities promote children's problem solving abilities because an adult's responses intentionally help children scaffold their learning (Epstein, 2007).

Foster self-regulation. Part of being ready for school is learning how to get along with and interact with others. Development of these early positive relationships depends upon skills such as impulse control, perspective taking, and problem solving. Guiding children to use more mature social-emotional skills not only helps to prevent the emergence of challenging behavior, but also positively influences children's academic achievement (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2007).

Social-emotional health is another important part of school readiness that is influenced by children's relationships with adults. Warm, responsive care leading to secure attachment is a primary and critical element for children's development. Children must learn about the nature of emotions—how they arise, are expressed, and are regulated in everyday experiences (Gloeckler & Niemeyer, 2005).

Adults foster children's learning during the early childhood years by being genuinely available to support their growth. Young children who have secure attachment relationships with their caregivers have less elevation in stress hormones when a potentially threatening situation occurs, and they calm down after an upsetting event more quickly than their age mates with insecure attachments (Gunner, Brodersen, Nachmias, Buss, & Rigatuso, 1996).

Children, especially infants, feel better prepared to manage most circumstances when they trust that adults will meet their emotional and

physical needs, including love and security. Secure emotional attachments with at least one adult help children feel safe enough to try new things and motivate them to explore.

Prosocial behaviors such as respect, regard, honor, and values are essential to be modeled for young children from birth. Children learn these affective skills through close, sensitive contact with adults. Adults model for children how to relate to other human beings. They set the example through responsive care, which also communicates to children that their needs are important and will be responded to in an appropriate and timely way (Berk, 2002).

Adults also model how to react to conflicts, frustrating situations, and difficulties. Guide children to develop coping skills with strategies such as these:

- provide a phrase children can use to solve disagreements, such as "What can we do to solve this?",
- suggest alternative approaches to the situation,
- ask children to describe the incident,
- listen carefully to children's feelings,
- ask clarifying questions, and/or
- support children to invent and choose their own solutions.

When adults respond to children's displays of emotions by identifying their feelings ("You are crying. Let's snuggle for a bit and then you can tell me why you are sad."), children learn to appropriately express and deal with their emotions. They acquire words that will help them regulate their lives, resulting in an increased sense of self-worth and competency.

Looking Toward Kindergarten

When the early foundations of learning are stable enough to carry them through school and into adulthood, children are genuinely prepared to enter kindergarten (Wilens, 2003). Families, caregivers, and educators can promote school success by providing high-quality early learning experiences for children through purposeful play in homes, programs, and communities. Drilling children on skills may result in a temporary content learning, but children are not in control of their own play and therefore do not have the opportunity to make sense of their experiences.

Families, community partners, and educators contribute to school readiness.

Purposeful play provides a context for learning so that it is meaningful to children. That is the kind of learning that is likely to result in long-term understanding and concept development. When children play with a purpose, skills such as learning the alphabet and counting naturally develop through the relationships children establish with each other, adults, and the learning environment.

As children engage in purposeful play, they gain competency in social, affective, attitudinal, and behavioral skills along with subject content knowledge. Children are far more likely to succeed in kindergarten when they have had opportunities to begin developing

- social and emotional skills (such as confidence, independence, motivation, curiosity, persistence, cooperation, self-control, and empathy),
- language,
- problem-solving abilities,
- creative thinking,
- basic subject content, and
- general knowledge about their world.

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Kentucky Education Council, United Way Northern Kentucky Success By 6, Community Early Childhood Councils, and Dr. Harte, the second author, in the effort to measure and facilitate kindergarten readiness.

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Purposeful Play Leads to School Readiness

Families, teachers, and community members are responsible for providing positive learning experiences that lead to school success.

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Foster children's learning by providing opportunities for them to

- safely explore a variety of objects and ideas
- interact with diverse children and adults
- get messy
- experiment with all five senses
- watch and listen before they try new experiences



Ways to promote children's purposeful play

- observe children to inform appropriate planning
- ask "What if...?" questions to encourage inquiry
- describe events and emotions to focus understanding
- introduce new words in meaningful context
- elaborate on children's conversations to expand vocabularies



Strategies to guide children's development of self-regulation

- value children's cultures and languages
- meet children's individual needs
- choose learning materials that reflect diverse cultures and individual attributes
- respect children's learning styles and rate of development
- encourage children to appropriately express their ideas and feelings
- listen to what children say
- respond with respect

Remember....

Children are curious and naturally want to explore the world around them. They are always ready to learn.

Resources for activities and ideas

- Paulu, N., & Greene, W. (1992). *Helping your child get ready for school, with activities for children from birth through age 5*. Office of Educational Research and Improvement, Washington, DC.
- Local libraries, children's department
- www.bornlearning.org

Note: *Dimensions of Early Childhood* readers are encouraged to copy this material for early childhood students as well as teachers of young children as a professional development tool.