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ABSTRACT

There is a growing awareness today of the critical impact of the preschool years on a child's later academic success. Some studies indicate that many children today are less well prepared for school than were children beginning school 5 years ago. This publication examines what is known about school readiness; discusses the reasons why some children are unprepared; and outlines what schools, parents, and communities can do. Parental activities for building school readiness focus on providing support for a child's emotional, physical, and cognitive development. Information is provided on language development, an immunization schedule, choosing a good day school, and Head Start programs. Making schools ready for children involves parent, school, and community collaboration. Ensuring that all children start school ready to learn is crucial for the achievement of national education goals. Three figures, a calendar of suggested activities, and suggested readings for children are included. (LMI)

Getting Your Child Ready For School...

AND THE SCHOOL READY FOR YOUR CHILD

AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS

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GOAL 1

By the year 2000, all children in America will start school ready to learn.

From the National Education Goals

Children will receive the nutrition and health care needed to arrive at school with healthy minds and bodies, and the number of low-birth-weight babies will be significantly reduced through enhanced prenatal health systems.

Every parent in America will be a child's first teacher and devote time each day to helping his or her preschool child learn; parents will have access to the training and support they need.

All disadvantaged or disabled children will have access to high quality and developmentally appropriate preschool programs that help prepare children for school.

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INTRODUCTION

When the President and the nation's governors established an agenda for improving our nation's schools, they paid particular attention to the importance of children's early years by making school readiness the first of the national education goals.

Today, there is a growing awareness of the critical importance of the years *before* a child enters school, since they have such a vital impact on later academic success. Why? One reason is that some experts believe a child has developed nearly all of her[1] intelligence by the age of five.[2] Also, studies have shown that children who have had rich early childhood experiences make at least short-term academic gains.

Many educators would agree with David Allen, former president of the Delaware Association of School Boards, who testified at a National Education Goals Panel hearing, "If we don't achieve Goal One, we can forget about ever achieving any of the others."

Difficult to measure. In its first report card on the progress of the national education goals in 1991, the nation's governors were forced to admit that progress in this area was impossible to pinpoint. At this time, they said, no appropriate measures of readiness existed. The National Education Goals Panel and other groups then took up the task of finding specific measures.

Easy to observe. Sadly, many educators say that a large . . . and growing . . . number of children are not ready to learn when they arrive for their first day of school. In fact, when the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching asked kindergarten teachers to rate children on their readiness for school, they reported that 35 percent — more than one in three — are *not* ready for school. When teachers were asked how the readiness of today's children compares with those who enrolled five years ago, 42 percent said the situation is getting *worse*. Only 25 percent said children were better prepared.

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[1] Because we believe in the importance of individuals, we often use the singular pronoun To be fair, we alternate the use of "his" and "her" throughout this publication.

[2] David Gordon. *Teacher Effectiveness Training*. 1974

Percentage of Teachers Citing Serious Problems in Kindergartners' School Readiness						
	Language Richness	Emotional Maturity	General Knowledge	Social Confidence	Moral Awareness	Physical Well-Being
All Teachers	51%	43%	38%	31%	21%	6%

Source: *Education Daily*, December 19, 1991

To some extent, readiness is linked to economic conditions in the home. A 1992 study by the Tennessee Commission on Children and Youth found that 25 percent of the state's children entering school for the first time lacked basic skills, such as the ability to recognize colors or count to three. Not surprisingly, 33 percent of the state's youngsters were found to be living in poverty-stricken conditions.

This publication examines what we know about school readiness, discusses the reasons some children are not ready, and outlines what schools, parents, and communities can do to help children enter school ready to learn, for the year 2000 and beyond.

WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT READINESS?

To Juan, his first day of school seemed like a big adventure. When he walked into the classroom, he was happy to see some of the same children he played with in preschool, and others from his neighborhood. The classroom was decorated with brightly colored letters and numbers, some of which he knew from working with blocks and cards at home. There were things to climb on and move around, pictures of animals, and musical instruments to play.

The time flew by, as Juan shared toys and games with the other children and got to know his teacher. He came home bubbling with news for his parents, who listened as he told them about his day.

Karen was frightened when she entered the classroom for the first time. She had never seen so many other children in the same room. She wasn't sure how long she would have to stay, or why she was even there. The teacher was a stranger, and though she tried, Karen couldn't seem to follow her directions very well. When the teacher read a story, she had trouble sitting still. She didn't know people read books for fun.

By 9:30, Karen was hungry and couldn't concentrate. She hadn't had any breakfast because her mother had to leave early to go to work.

She tried to be brave, but a little boy teased her because she couldn't catch a ball, and she cried for a long time.

Though Juan and Karen are fictional, they illustrate a few of the experiences and feelings of children entering formal schooling for the first time. Either could have come from a poor or wealthy background; a single-parent, divorced, or nuclear family.

The difference is that in these stories, Juan had had some preparation before he entered school — he was more *ready* to be a student than Karen. While this is no guarantee of later academic success, studies have shown a strong tie between the level of a child's readiness to enter school and student achievement.

Basically, this new emphasis on "readiness" is nothing more than common sense: A child who is comfortable with other children, who can communicate well, who has some familiarity with learning and listening, who is patient, and who is well-fed and healthy is a step ahead of a child who comes to school lacking any or all of these advantages. To young children, being even a little behind can lead to feelings of inadequacy and failure that haunt them throughout their schooling. On the other hand, it makes sense that children who enter school confidently are better able to develop and keep a lifelong love of learning.

In the past, children were thought to be ready for school if they had certain *skills* — for example, if they could recite the alphabet, count to 10, recognize colors, and tie their shoes. Today, educators and parents know that children need more than a list of accomplishments to succeed in school and in life.

Children's readiness for school depends on a number of factors. They must be *healthy* — because children who are tired, hungry, or sick cannot concentrate. They need the ability to *speak and listen*, because reading and writing are the foundation of all other learning. They need *self-esteem* so they can keep working when a task is difficult. And they need to *cooperate with others*, because students cannot have the undivided attention of their teacher.

Kristin Sonquist, a Minnesota kindergarten teacher and a mother of four, outlined what children need to be ready for school in the Carnegie Foundation's publication *Ready to Learn*:

"Children need to be healthy in mind, soul, and body to be ready to learn. They need more lap time with their parents so they know they are loved. They need to know, for sure, that there will be a roof over their heads and food on the table tomorrow. Here in Minnesota, they need mittens and boots in the winter. These things should be basic rights."

Many Rivers To Cross

No child can get himself ready for school. It takes caring families and a nurturing community to give a young child the things he needs.

Sadly, many of today's families face problems that make it even more difficult for children to learn.

According to a study released by the U.S. Census Bureau in March 1990, America's youth are at far greater risk for social, economic, and health problems than are children of the world's other developed nations. They fared the poorest in these categories:

Number of children affected by divorce
Number (and percentage) of youths living in poverty
Infant mortality rate
Teenage pregnancy.

Joblessness, drugs and alcohol, physical and sexual abuse, and broken homes are just some of the troubles that take their toll on parents' abilities to provide the needed support to their children. These problems are often interwoven, and when one family member suffers, it affects all others like ripples in a pond.

Despite these grim realities, concerned citizens have made the vital difference in the lives of children. There is evidence that disadvantages can be overcome . . . and all children can start school ready to learn. Perhaps the most well known success story is the Perry Preschool Project in Ypsilanti, Michigan, the first major study to measure the effects of preschool education throughout children's lives. In its 1984 report, "Changed Lives: The Effects of the Perry Preschool Project on Youths Through Age 19," the researchers found that good early childhood programs help lessen children's risk of failure in school and

in life. The Perry study indicated that in contrast with those that do not attend preschool, at-risk children who attend good preschool programs are:

Assigned to special education classes less frequently
Held back in class less frequently
More likely to graduate from high school and pursue college or various types of training.

An Investment in the Future

For every dollar invested in quality preschool education, society saves between $4.75 (according to the Committee for Economic Development) and $7 (according to High/Scope) in reduced welfare benefits, reduced criminal costs, and increased earnings and tax revenues.

WHAT PARENTS CAN DO

More Than the Three "R's"

Readiness for school involves much more than academic knowledge and skills. For example, the Ulysses School District No. 214 in Ulysses, Kansas, defines school readiness as "the ability to cope with the school environment physically, socially, and emotionally, as well as academically, without undue stress, and to sustain in that environment." School readiness is based on children's health, their confidence in themselves, and their ability to work with others. For example, children who are ready to learn should:

Be curious, active, and eager to learn;

Take pride in their ability to do things for themselves, whether that means tying their shoes, putting things away, or controlling their behavior;

Want to please others;

Be able to express themselves in words;

Ask questions about how things work and the world around them;

Believe they can learn.

As your child's first and most important teacher, you play the most critical role in ensuring that your child starts school ready to learn. For a mother, these responsibilities begin before her child is born. By eating nutritious food and receiving prenatal care, mothers are helping their babies begin life on the right track, free from illnesses and defects. Parents' contributions continue throughout the early years, when they provide a loving, healthy environment in which children can grow and develop.

Today, there is less emphasis on specific *skills* children must have before they can be successful in school . . . and more emphasis on *experiences*. For example, children who cannot tie their shoes may be quite successful in kindergarten; children who have never had the chance to play with other children may not. The National Association of State Boards of Education noted, "School readiness is far more than academic knowledge and skills."

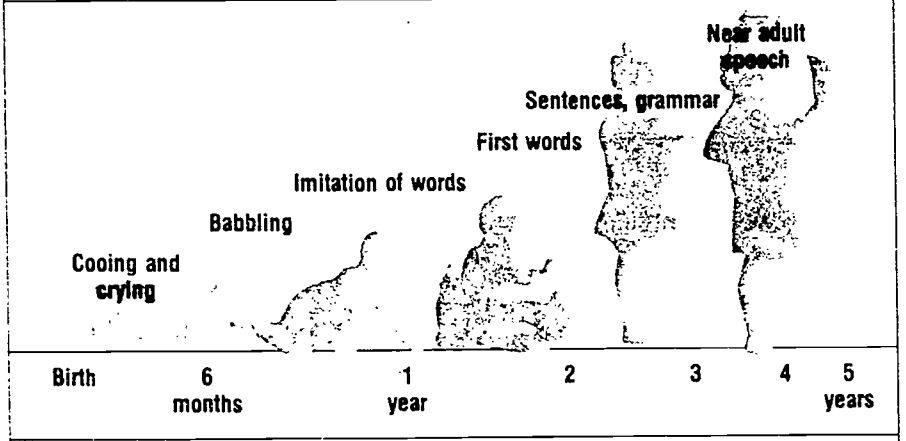
Talk, Listen, Love

Language, without question, is the key to learning. It is tied to everything a child learns or does in school. Children who fail to develop adequate speech and language skills in the first years of life are up to six times more likely to experience reading problems in school than those who receive adequate stimulation.[3]

One of the most important things parents can do for their children, then, is talk with them. "Parents, as well as day-care providers, must speak frequently to children, listen for responses, answer questions, and read aloud to them at least one-half hour every day, preferably longer," recommends Ernest L. Boyer, President of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, in *Ready to Learn: A Mandate for the Nation*.

It also is important that you pay attention to what your child is trying to tell you. When you listen to your child (even if you think it is just "baby talk"), you are sending a message that she is important, that she is worthwhile. Make sure your body language shows you are listening, too. Face your child when she is talking, and don't simply nod while you are doing other things. These are good ways to build your child's listening and speaking skills, as well as her self-esteem.

Language Development: The Child's Ability to Think and Talk



Source: Adapted from *Human Development: From Conception Through Adolescence* by Kurt W Fischer and Arlyne Lazerson (New York: W.H. Freeman and Company, 1984), p. 365.

[3] Genevieve Clapp, *Child Study Research: Current Perspectives and Applications*, Lexington Books, Lexington, Mass., 1988, p. 192.

Have you hugged your child today? Physical contact — especially hugging or touching — helps children thrive. In a University of Miami Medical School experiment, premature infants were given gentle massages several times a day. These babies gained almost twice as much weight as those who were left alone. Also, their nervous systems matured more rapidly, and they were discharged from the hospital earlier. Later, they tested better than "control" babies on follow-up tests of physical and mental ability.[4]

IMMUNIZATION PROTECTS CHILDREN

Routine checkups at your doctor's office or local health clinic are the best way to keep children healthy — even if your child isn't sick.

By ensuring that your child gets immunized on schedule, you can provide the best defense against dangerous childhood diseases. Childhood immunization means protection from nine major diseases: hepatitis B, polio, measles, mumps, rubella (German measles), pertussis (whooping cough), diphtheria, tetanus (lockjaw), and *Haemophilus influenzae* type b. Is your child fully protected from these diseases?

The chart on page 10 includes immunization recommendations from the American Academy of Pediatrics. Check with your doctor or health clinic to find out whether your child needs additional booster shots or if other new vaccines have been recommended. It could save a life or prevent a disability.

If you don't have a pediatrician, call your local public health department. It usually has supplies of vaccines and may give free immunizations.

This information should not be used as a substitute for the medical care and advice of your pediatrician. There may be variations in treatment that your pediatrician may recommend based on the individual facts and circumstances.

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[4] Revised from Daniel Goleman "The Experience of Touch: Research Points to a Critical Role," *The New York Times*, February 2, 1988, p. C1.

Recommended by
American Academy of Pediatrics

	DTP	Polio	MMR	Hepatitis B★	Haemophilus	Tetanus-Diphtheria
Birth				✔		
1–2 months				✔		
2 months	✔	✔			✔	
4 months	✔	✔			✔	
6 months	✔				◆	
6–18 months				✔		
12–15 months					◆	
15 months			✔		◆	
15–18 months	✔	✔				
4–6 years	✔	✔				
11–12 years			(✔)			
14–16 years						✔

(✔) Except where public health authorities require otherwise

◆ As of March 1991, two vaccines for *Haemophilus influenzae* infections have been approved for use in children younger than 15 months of age. The schedule varies for doses after four months of age depending on which vaccine for *Haemophilus influenzae* infections was previously given.

★ Infants of mothers who tested *seropositive* for hepatitis B (HBcAg+) must also receive hepatitis B immune globulin (HBIG) at or shortly after the first dose, a second hepatitis B vaccine dose at one month, and a third hepatitis B vaccine injection at six months of age. Pediatricians may decide that infants of mothers who tested *seronegative* begin the three-dose schedule after the baby has left the hospital.

—The American Academy of Pediatrics, 1992.

Socialize Your Child

Children must also be *socially* ready for school. Parents can help their children get ready for school by giving them the opportunity to be part of a group of children — whether in a play group, a preschool classroom, at day care, or in a church school.

When children are used to spending some time away from their parents in the company of other children, they are more likely to adjust to being a part of a kindergarten class of 20 or 25 students. They also will be more apt to follow the teacher's directions if they have learned to accept authority from adults outside their family.

Children also need to know how to:

Take turns
Make compromises
Approach unfamiliar children
Obey those in a position of authority
Be generally nice to others.

Build Coordination

Children need physical skills to be successful in school. Marguerite Kelly, author of *The Mother's Almanac*, explains: "The better a child uses his body, the better he can use his mind, because all basic mental skills are built on physical accomplishments." Whether your child is reaching for a ball, crawling, or climbing on play equipment, "he's programming the circuits in his brain in the same patterns he'll need one day to read a story, add numbers, or draw abstract conclusions," she says.

As your child learns to use his muscles in new ways, help him practice a skill over and over. For example, color or draw with your child. Or, toss a ball back and forth in the yard. You can even help develop a baby's coordination by playing patty-cake or building a block tower. In this way, you teach him to concentrate and help lengthen his attention span. Both are important for success in school. Rule of thumb: At age two, a child can be expected to concentrate on a task for as long as 10 minutes. By age six, your child may be content when doing a single activity for a half-hour or more.

Other simple childhood activities can pay off in later learning benefits. When your child strings beads, he's helping his eyes and hands work together — a skill he'll use someday in writing. When he plays follow the leader, he's learning to be part of a group.

Physical activity is important for boys and girls. Coordination is vital to both boys and girls. Sometimes without meaning to, parents teach boys and girls stereotyped physical activities. In fact, both benefit from a wide range of activities such as throwing and kicking a ball, dancing, jumping rope, swimming, and working puzzles.

The academic connection. When we read, our eyes move naturally from left to right. Young children need to be taught to develop this left-to-right progression naturally. If you are sorting silverware, have your child sort from left to right. When you are reading to your child, move your fingers under the words.

Know When To Let Go

Children need emotional skills to be successful in school. One of the most important is responsibility. As a result, avoid performing tasks your child can do for herself. Whether it's allowing a toddler to feed herself (even though it's a messy and time-consuming process) . . . or letting a preschooler pick out her own crayons for a coloring book picture (and settling for a red elephant or a purple fire truck) . . . allow your child the pleasure of learning to do things for herself. Readiness for school does not mean that a child does everything right. The child who has everything done for her, who has everything given to her, and who is incapable of making her own decisions is not learning to be independent.

Instill Confidence

Self-esteem is also critical for a young child. Bright children who think poorly of themselves may do poorly in school, but average children who have confidence in their abilities can succeed in school.

Children who have high self-esteem are willing to tackle tough learning assignments. They're willing to try something new. And even if they don't get the answer right the first time, they can keep on trying until they get it right. Every time you teach your child a new skill — whether it's memorizing her address or riding her bike — you're helping build her self-esteem.

Keep in mind when a child says, "I can't," she sometimes means, "I don't know how." Help your child by showing her each step of a new task. Have her practice that step until she learns it. (She will probably take at least twice as much time as you to do the job.) Then move on to the next step.

Make Learning Sound Fun

Tell your child about the fun things you remember from school. Describe what a typical day might be like, and be sure to mention the playing and friendship your child will experience, along with the learning. "Set a tone that learning is good, fun, and important," said Gary Salyers, 1990 president of the National Association of Elementary School Principals, "and that school is where your child is supposed to be."

GUIDELINES FOR PREPARING CHILDREN TO LEARN

Here are steps parents of preschool children can take to ensure that their children are ready to learn:

1. Be there when your child needs to talk to you.
2. Provide a variety of enriching experiences from which relationships can be learned.
3. Provide good verbal opportunities, especially by reading to your child regularly and by encouraging your child to describe thoughts and experiences.
4. Teach your child, by your own example, how to deal with difficult situations and how to overcome life's everyday problems. Talk about a problem you faced at work and how you solved it. Let your child hear you "think out loud" as you solve a problem in your home.
5. Encourage creative play.
6. Help your child get organized for a successful school experience.

—Adapted from *Empowering Your Child*, by C. Fred Bateman. Hampton Roads Publishing Co., Inc., Norfolk, Va., 1990.

HOW TO CHOOSE A GOOD PRESCHOOL OR DAY CARE

In 1992, Ohio Attorney General Lee Fisher, a vigorous enforcer of the state's day-care licensing laws, published tips on how to choose good day care.

"The vast majority of child-care providers do an excellent job, but there are some bad apples out there. Parents need to pay attention, ask questions, and make smart choices for their kids," Fisher said.

Fisher suggested parents consider the following when choosing child care:

- Always visit more than one child-care facility so you can compare choices.
- On frequent occasions, visit the center during the day without prior notice. You should be able to drop in unannounced to see your child's activities at any time.
- Don't be afraid to look into a situation that bothers you.
- Make sure that medical records of children are kept on the premises, and check to see that allergies are noted boldly on the medical chart.
- Don't be afraid to ask questions.
- Determine whether the provider has cared for other children and if you can contact their parents for a reference.
- Find out how long the center has been operating and ask for references.
- Confirm that the child-care center's license to operate is posted and current.
- Confirm that health, fire, and building inspection reports have been obtained by the center and are current.
- Tour the facility to determine cleanliness and the number of children; inspect play and eating areas. Be alert to staff supervision of children.
- Ask for written guidelines from the facility detailing its policies regarding ill children, discipline, etc.
- Talk to your child about the care he is receiving.
- Don't be afraid to contact your state's Human Services Department to find out about your child-care centers. The Ohio Department of Human Services inspects each licensed child-care center at least twice a year. The agency keeps a list of licensed facilities.
- Check with local resource and referral services.
- Check to see if facilities have ample, secure outdoor play space. Check the condition of the outdoor equipment.

—Revised with permission from the office of Ohio Attorney General Lee Fisher, Columbus, Ohio, 1992.

How Do You Know When a Child Is Ready?

How do you tell when a child is "ready"? Some elementary schools give children "readiness" tests or developmental screening tests. While readiness tests attempt to identify a child's level of skills and ability to benefit from a specific academic program, developmental screening tests are intended to point out when a child may need early intervention or special education services.

Readiness tests usually include a list of skills a child should have before entering school. They can be useful in providing a general idea of what most children can do at a certain age.

However, children develop at different speeds. Some children start kindergarten already reading, while others learn to read during kindergarten and first grade. This does not mean the children who can read are any smarter than those who cannot.

Indeed, some educators are concerned that not all children taking these tests are treated equally. The California School Readiness Task Force found that using tests for school readiness can lead to unfair treatment of different groups of children. For example, boys are held back more often than girls. Children who do not speak English are held back more often than English speakers. Even the National Education Goals Panel acknowledges no standardized test currently exists that can accurately measure whether or not children are ready to learn.

Gift of Time vs. Learning-By-Doing

There is no question that some children are not ready for school at age five. What can be done to help these children?

Some suggest that children who are not ready for school need extra time to mature. The most well-known advocate of this position was Dr. Arnold Gesell, an expert in child development, who suggested that some children need a "gift of time" — an extra year when they are held out of school. Others believe they need extra experiences with parents, peers, and their environments.

Others, however, argue that when children are in environments that stimulate and challenge them, such as classrooms, they will learn. Therefore, they believe, children should not be held out of school. The National Association for the Education of Young Children and the

National Association of Elementary School Principals are among the strongest advocates of this philosophy. NAEYC also believes, however, that schools must be made ready for children, with better trained teachers, smaller classes, and a curriculum that helps children acquire the skills they need to become successful.

PROGRAM GIVES KIDS A HEAD START

Head Start works with disadvantaged preschool children to improve their overall development and ensure they start school ready to learn. Increasing parent involvement is a primary objective of the program.

Since its founding in 1965, support for Head Start has grown steadily. The program received about $96 million of federal funding its first year; its 1992 appropriation was over $2 billion, when it was expected to serve 622,000 children.

Local governments, community action organizations, and public school systems can receive Head Start grants for several types of readiness programs. In addition to traditional preschools and home-based programs, Head Start also funds 106 parent and child centers, which provide child-care services and instruction to low-income families with children up to three years of age.

To participate in Head Start, families must meet a qualifying income level. At least 10 percent of the enrollment in any Head Start program is also reserved for children with disabilities, such as mental retardation or blindness.

For information on Head Start programs in your area, contact your local social services agency or public school district.

WHAT COMMUNITIES MUST DO

Many states and local communities have developed innovative programs to ensure that all children will be ready to learn. Here are some examples:

The Parent Connection

Parent education. Communities are recognizing that parent involvement is critical to the success of preschool education. In Guntersville, Alabama, in fact, children are not eligible to participate in a prekindergarten program for low-income four-year-olds if their parents don't agree to take part in biweekly parent meetings.

The parent meetings combine fun with learning. A popular activity involves viewing a videotape of a teacher working with the class to teach them an important concept. After they have watched the tape, parents talk about what the teacher was doing ... and why the children need to learn the particular skill.

Most of the parent meetings feature a "make-and-take" session, with parents making a toy or learning activity to use with their children at home. This session is videotaped ... and the children later have a chance to see their parents hard at work learning something that will help them do better in school.

Parent-child activities. The state of Minnesota has been a leader in encouraging communities to promote school readiness. In St. Cloud, a program for four- and five-year-olds involves parents and children in learning activities. Each week, parents and children attend a two-hour learning session held at their neighborhood elementary school. (Many schools use a kindergarten room.)

While at the school, parents work and play with their children at learning stations set up around the room. Parents watch how the teacher works with their child. Later, they hold their own discussion group facilitated by a parent educator. In a supportive, caring environment, parents learn how to promote learning ... and positive family interaction ... at home.

Following the session, parents receive activity kits they can use at home. These might include games, books, or suggestions of ways parents can work with their children to promote learning. Educators in the schools are convinced the program helps children do better in school. It also helps families feel more comfortable with their neighborhood school — and sets the stage for cooperation throughout a child's education.

Parents as teachers. The state of Missouri is another leader in recognizing the critical importance of early childhood education to later success. Through the state-funded Parents as Teachers program, local school districts begin to establish a partnership with parents from the earliest days of their children's lives.

Every four to six weeks, a PAT staff member visits the home of every child enrolled in the program. All children are eligible for the program, but districts make special efforts to reach out to parents of newborns and of children who may be at risk of school failure.

During the visits, parents can ask questions about their child's individual development in a variety of areas, including social, physical, and intellectual. Home visitors also try to share information on child development. Evaluations of the program show that children who have participated in PAT are more ready to learn when they arrive at school than those who do not.

Caring communities. One good way to help children become successful is to support their families. In St. Louis, Missouri, the Caring Communities program uses elementary schools as a hub for a network of local agencies that provide coordinated services to families. From substance abuse treatment to health care to parenting (through Parents as Teachers), the project helps link families to existing services.

Home-based learning for children with disabilities. The readiness goal specifically identifies children with disabilities as a target for readiness activities. In Portage, Wisconsin, a home-based program involves a home teacher who works with parents to assess, plan, and teach developmental skills.

Each week, the teacher visits a child's home. Parent and teacher discuss and choose long- and short-term goals for the child. For example, learning to walk may be a long-term goal for a child with physical disabilities. Together, parents and teachers develop the appropriate teaching activities that can help the child reach the goal.

Progress is recorded weekly, and activities are adjusted to ensure that children continue to achieve their goals. The program may also be combined with classroom instruction.

Community-based committee. In Poway, California, a community-based committee, consisting of teachers, administrators, parents, private day-care directors, and representatives of community agencies, has been organized to develop and implement programs that will respond to the need for high quality preschool education.

Over the past four years, the committee has forged partnerships with local preschool and day-care centers, established preschool programs in the schools, and reached out to parents in a variety of ways. One inexpensive pamphlet, which describes child growth and development as well as strategies for raising healthy children, is distributed free to local hospitals so parents of newborns can get their children off to a good start.

Mobile classroom. In the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains, a mobile classroom on wheels brings preschool activities to young children. Known as MCSMILES, for Mobile Classroom Instructional Laboratory for Educational Success, the classroom is actually a blue-and-white school bus that travels the roads outside Marion, North Carolina.

The bus typically makes two or three stops a day, serving roughly 10 children at each stop. During the first hour of the hour-and-a-half session, children spend time at activity centers throughout the bus. At the same time, the two teachers work individually with children on specific skills that will help them do better in kindergarten.

The last half hour is spent in group activities such as singing, cooking, and reading together. When the children leave the bus, they are given a book to read, an activity sheet, and something they can do at home to reinforce what they've learned.

One day a week, teachers visit the homes of students who will be entering kindergarten the next year. Parents of children with learning or behavior problems also can receive guidance in preparing their children for school.

BRINGING READING TO THEIR LEVEL

In 1992, Philadelphia opened its first Free Library preschool center. The center is custom-made for little children, with toddler-sized tables and chairs; computer terminals and software; 30,000 books, videos, and cassettes; and puppets and programs. By 1995, the city had planned to have a preschool reading center in all 54 library branches.

The concept was developed by the Free Library's Office of Work with Children, when libraries found themselves unprepared for the preschoolers brought in by organizations such as Head Start and Get Set. It reflects a growing consensus that children's readiness increases their chances of success as they go through school.

The center is also an example of school/business/community collaboration: The first was funded through a foundation grant, with Bell of Pennsylvania expected to fund the other 10 centers.

FOUR WAYS COMMUNITIES CAN FOSTER* SCHOOL READINESS

1. Provide adequate health care for all mothers and young children. Every dollar spent on prenatal health care saves $3.38 in later health costs. Every $1 spent on childhood immunizations saves $10 in later medical costs.[4]
2. Make sure every child can take advantage of a preschool program. In 1991, according to the National Education Goals Panel, less than half of the children aged two to five from families with incomes below $10,000 attended preschool, compared to 75 percent of children from families earning more than $75,000 a year. Children from disadvantaged homes are in great need of preschool services.
3. Provide adequate salary and training for day-care providers and preschool teachers. About 70 percent of child-care workers earn only poverty-level wages.
4. Make it easier for families to get the support they need. In many communities, agencies work together to make sure that services ranging from health care to nutrition to employment are available to parents.

*—*Caring Communities: Supporting Young Children and Families*, The Report of the National Task Force on School Readiness, sponsored by the National Association of State Boards of Education, 1991.

[4] Children's Defense Fund, *The State of America's Children*, 1991.

MAKING SCHOOLS READY FOR CHILDREN

In the ever-changing scheme of today's society, schools bear more responsibility than ever before for the welfare of young children. "As more is added to our professional plates, educators legitimately question how, with what resources, and with what impact we must act," wrote Sharon Lynn Kagan, senior associate at the Yale Bush Center in Child Development and Social Policy in New Haven, Connecticut. For one thing, many educators feel a sense of, "If we don't help them, who will?" Sadly, many young children are left alone or live in families incapable of preparing them to learn.

Develop New Ways of Operating

The hard truth is, no one sector of society can claim sole responsibility for readiness. Parents are a child's first teachers, but they differ widely in the support and resources they are capable of giving to their children. Government, health, and social service agencies provide many services to children, but historically they have operated in isolation with each other and with schools.

According to Kagan, in order to achieve the national goal of readiness schools must not only collaborate within themselves, but also with:

Families;

Non-school-based providers of care and education to young children, such as Head Start, family day care, and for-profit programs;

Other community institutions, including health and nutrition, social services, welfare, employment and training, civic and cultural groups, business, philanthropic organizations, teacher preparation institutions, unions, and industry.

More than cooperation or coordination, collaboration means schools and other agencies reaching joint goals and strategies, sharing leadership, and developing a structure to support the work of the collaboration.[6]

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[6] Sharon Lynn Kagan, "Ready or Not! Collaboration is Fulcrum on Which Readiness Goal Rests," *The School Administrator*, May 1992, pp. 14-18

Start with the Classroom

It's important that parents and the community work hard to help children get ready to learn. But, as Samuel G. Sava, executive director of the National Association of Elementary School Principals, explains, schools themselves also need to get ready for today's children. "We have not yet learned to adjust the 'fit' between preschool and the primary school curriculum to sustain the initial gains," he suggests. In other words, something seems to happen between the "child-centeredness" of preschool and kindergarten or first grade.

Through the Eyes of a Child

Many early childhood educators today are concerned about the content of today's kindergarten curriculum, believing it is not appropriate for five-year-olds. Kagan notes some of the ways in which education for young learners should differ from traditional education: "Because they are not abstract thinkers, young children need to have their learning rooted in concrete experience . . . Because they have shorter attention spans than older children, young children need to be actively engaged in learning."

Here are some specific ways schools can help facilitate children's transition to elementary schools:

Reach out to preschool organizations. Many schools now facilitate children's transition from early childhood programs to kindergarten by making an active effort to share information and resources. By linking with children's early caregivers, schools learn more about individual children. They also open avenues of communication, so children and parents know more about what to expect of school.

Fashion child-centered classrooms. What would an ideal kindergarten classroom look like? According to *Caring Communities*, a 1991 report by the National Association of State Boards of Education, a classroom that responds to children's needs "should be organized with learning centers where children can read, work with blocks, explore science, listen to tapes of stories and music, create art, engage in dramatic play, and manipulate mathematics materials." In these classrooms, children would not sit in traditional rows of desks, but rather move between activities, working in pairs and groups, NASBE holds.

Kick the paper trail. Students in these ideal classrooms would not spend most of their time working in workbooks or completing worksheets. Instead, they would learn the way they do best — by trying things out for themselves. For at least some time each day, children would be able to work on an area of particular interest to them.

Instead of workbooks and worksheets, classrooms would contain large assortments of children's books, writing materials, sets of blocks, varied art supplies, computers, pets, and samples of children's long and short-term art projects.

Hire adequate staff. Finally, staffing in such a school would also reflect the special needs of young children. The National Association of Elementary School Principals recommends a staffing ratio of two adults for 20 children — one teacher and one aide. Having two adults in each class makes it easier to employ instructors who speak more than one language. Also, low child/staff ratios provide teachers with the opportunity to spend unhurried time with every child, to address each child's unique needs, and to develop good relationships with parents.

Pay staff what they are worth. One problem with staffing early childhood classrooms is that educators of young children are notoriously underpaid compared to teachers of older children. For instance, in 1988, full-time teachers of prekindergarten and kindergarten programs earned an average of $17,013, compared to salaries of $25-28,000 earned by their elementary and secondary school counterparts, according to the NAEYC.

Along with low salaries, early childhood educators often receive few benefits such as health care, retirement, or paid vacations. It is hard to attract and keep highly educated and skilled early childhood educators when these disparities exist.

Reach Out to Parents

Not all parents have the means or the language skills to link with schools in preparing children to learn. Carole Grosse, superintendent of the Alhambra Schools in Phoenix, Arizona, advocates reaching out to parents in every way possible to get them involved in getting children ready for school. In a school district with a heavily Hispanic enrollment, Grosse has conducted workshops for parents of kindergarten students that

feature Spanish-speaking interpreters. She says it sometimes takes several reminders, including notes home and phone calls, to get parents to attend.

Parents of preschool and kindergarten children often have younger children and babies as well, Grosse said. It is important, then, to have a nursery available during workshops and meetings with parents, for those who cannot afford to hire a babysitter.

Sometimes parents want to be involved, yet are unable to because of a lack of resources many schools never think about, Grosse said. She describes the surprise she felt when she realized that some parents of young children couldn't help them with simple projects because they had no crayons, scissors, or paste in the house. "How can you teach colors without crayons?" she said.

To overcome this obstacle, Grosse said area businesses donated funds so that every parent could get a "materials" kit.

ARE SCHOOLS READY FOR TODAY'S CHILDREN?

- Each year, about 350,000 children are born to mothers who were addicted to cocaine during pregnancy. Many of the surviving children have strikingly short attention spans, poor coordination, and other physical problems, including drug addiction.
- About 40,000 children annually are born with alcohol-related birth defects, which can cause a range of impairments, including mental retardation, hypersensitivity, and language problems.
- About 6.7 percent, or 260,000 children, are born each year with lower than normal birth weights. Those babies are one-and-a-half to two times as likely to need special education services.
- Twenty percent of America's preschool children have not been vaccinated against polio.
- One-fourth of pregnant mothers get no physical care of any sort during the crucial first trimester of pregnancy. About 20 percent of handicapped children would not be handicapped if the mother had received just one physical examination in the first trimester.
- Since 1987, one-fourth of all preschool children in the United States have lived in poverty.

—Harold Hodgkinson, *Beyond the Schools*, a joint publication of the American Association of School Administrators and the National School Boards Association, 1991.

Dive right in to summer!
Make water safety #1!

Kindergarten Homework Calendar

JUNE

Go on a summer adventure into reading!

SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
MAY S M T W Th F S 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30	Count 1 out 100 pennies.	Make 2 a boat.	Water the 3 lawn or garden.	Say 4 5 words that rhyme with cat.	Write 5 letters a–z.	Make 6 sundaes for dessert.
Find 7 5 things that float.	Make a 8 finger puppet.	Paint the 9 sidewalk with water.	Sing in 10 the shower or tub!	Practice 11 saying sounds a–l.	Read a 12 story about water.	Help 13 clean the house.
FLAG DAY 14 Make a flag have a parade! CHILDREN'S DAY	Make a 15 list of water safety rules.	Add 16 combinations of $5.	Make 17 sun tea.	Do 18 the swim! (dance)	Make a 19 card for DAD!	20 Celebrate Summer! SUMMER SOLSTICE
Give 21 Dad a big bear hug! FATHER'S DAY	Practice 22 saying sounds m–z.	Use water 23 to clean something.	Draw 24 animals that live under water.	Boil 25 water. What happens?	Read 26 the news.	Go 27 on a picnic.
Put an ice 28 cube on the sidewalk. What happens?	Blend 29 words that rhyme with cat.	Drink ice 30 water with a snack.				JULY S M T W Th F S 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31

Source: Alhambra Schools, Phoenix, Arizona.

Conclusion

The national education goals clearly recognize the critical importance of education to our nation's long-term prosperity. But the key to achieving all of these goals is to ensure that all children start school ready to learn. By working together, parents, schools, and communities can ensure that this essential goal becomes a reality . . . for all our nation's children.

THESE BOOKS CAN HELP YOUR CHILD GET READY FOR THAT FIRST DAY OF SCHOOL

Books are an excellent way to help children deal with their fears about the first day of school. By reading and discussing a book, children can have a "dress rehearsal" — walking through what will happen at school before the first day ever arrives. Here are some suggestions, developed by the librarians at the Princeton, New Jersey, Public Library:

Will I Have A Friend? by Miriam Cohen (Macmillan Children's Book Group). This book follows a boy named Jim through his first day at school. Everyone else seems to have found a friend. In the end, so does Jim.

Never Spit on Your Shoes, by Denys Cazet (Orchard Books Watts). A puppy named Arnie faces many mishaps on his first day of school. By the end of the story, he is looking forward to his second day at school.

Willy Bear, by Mildred Kantrowitz (Macmillan Children's Book Group). A child prepares for his first day of school and leaves his stuffed animal behind.

Welcome, Roberto! Bienvenido, Roberto! by Mary Serfozo (Macmillan Children's Book Group). Written in both English and Spanish, this book tells the story of Roberto's first day in school.

The Magic School Bus at the Waterworks, by Joanne Cole (Scholastic, Inc.). A school bus makes a wild and fantastical school trip.

I Need a Lunch Box, by Jeanette Caines (Harper Collins Children's Books). Younger children who are not going to school can feel left out.

"Children must have their basic needs for health care . . . and nutrition met if they are to be prepared to achieve in school. A child with an undiagnosed vision problem, or without the means to get glasses once a problem has been diagnosed, hardly can learn to his potential. A child whose intellectual development is stunted by lead poisoning cannot excel in the classroom . . . Nor can a hungry child . . . All of this is common sense. Any parent, any teacher, any doctor, any politician understands these connections. The puzzling thing is why we can't do what we all know makes sense, giving all children the essential and cost-effective early investments they need to prepare them to achieve."

—MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN, PRESIDENT, CHILDREN'S DEFENSE FUND

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