

Come As You Are

K i n d e r
g · a · r · t · e · n



for
NEBRASKA'S
CHILDREN

Nebraska Department of Education

Revised 2005

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The title, *Come As You Are Kindergarten*, is used with thanks to James L. Hymes, pioneering early childhood educator.

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The information in this booklet is intended to respond to common questions and concerns heard from parents of about-to-be kindergartners. It is based on research about the growth, development, and learning of young children and about the kinds of learning experiences that are most likely to promote their success in school and beyond.

Essential to this early school success is a strong partnership between parents and educators. This enables every young child to move through the elementary school as a successful and enthusiastic learner.



Children have been learners from the time of birth (and perhaps even before). These days the majority of children experience some form of early “schooling” prior to kindergarten entrance in full and part day child care and preschool settings. Even so, many parents and educators view kindergarten as the gateway to formal schooling.

“They are five only once.”

The Department of Education is concerned that what children are given to do in many kindergarten programs often places inappropriate demands on their physical, emotional, and intellectual capabilities. This has come about because people mistakenly believe that young children have become more capable and that upgraded skill oriented programs are in order.

Many kindergarten programs have become quite rigid and are failing to meet the needs of five-year-old children. Because parents often worry about whether children can be successful, it has become common over the past couple of decades for many parents to delay their children's entrance to school for a year or for the school personnel to suggest that some children were not "ready" for kindergarten.



The Nebraska Department of Education has always emphasized the importance of a successful kindergarten experience for all children and has been recognized nationally for its leadership in kindergarten education.

School accreditation standards protect young children from inappropriate and ineffective testing and prohibit school personnel from recommending delayed entrance.

Many Nebraska schools have responded to calls for reform of kindergarten programs and provide kindergarten learning environments which meet the learning needs of all the community's children.

More and more Nebraska schools are providing full day kindergarten so that children can have a richer program.

When may a child enter kindergarten?

The State Constitution speaks to the entitlement of children to receive free public education at age five. To further define this right to education, a law permits a local board of education of a public or a non-public school to enroll a child in kindergarten in the year he or she becomes five years of age by October 15th.



What if my child is younger than that?

If a school district chooses to, it can take part in the early entrance provision of the kindergarten entrance law. This provides that children with birthdays between October 15 and February 1 may enter kindergarten under certain limited conditions, including being tested to see if the child is likely to be successful as an early entrant.

Parents who are interested in enrolling their children early should contact the local school administration to find out whether their school permits early entrance.

Are children required to begin school when they turn five?

The compulsory attendance law in Nebraska requires that parents send their children between the ages of six and sixteen to an approved or accredited school.



Another law gives public and non-public schools the authority to assign children to the grade the school officials feel will best serve the child. Thus, even if a child enters school the year following eligibility for kindergarten, the school may require that the child begin at the kindergarten level or the school may assign the child to first grade.

Please refer to later sections of the booklet for a discussion of the reasons it is advisable for children to begin kindergarten the year they reach five by October 15.



What happens in a good kindergarten program?

The importance of active, worthwhile experience for young children's learning cannot be emphasized strongly enough. The best way to provide these experiences is to carefully plan the classroom environment so that for much of every day children select activities from a variety of materials that challenge their differing development and ways of learning. The program should be defined in terms of a set of experiences offered to children rather than by listing things children should "know" by the time they enter first grade. Nebraska's voluntary standards describe learning that should occur by the end of first grade—not the end of kindergarten.

For the most part, activities and materials will cross traditional subject lines, bringing many areas of the curriculum together at once. Here are some examples of how a good kindergarten teacher assures that children have these integrated experiences, which promote learning in each area of the curriculum.

Early Literacy

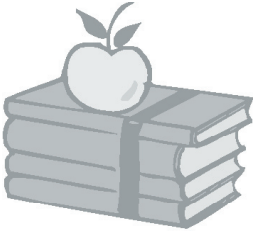
Many times in hearing books read to them, children come across references such as: “hard,” “round,” “smooth,” “heavy,” “soft,” or “rough.” These words are designed to call up an image in the mind. Children need the experience of feeling things that are hard, smooth, soft, or rough so that an image will present itself and so that the word or words will have meaning. What better way is there to assure this happens than by having the child experience the feel of these things as they interact with the materials in the classroom and talk with the teacher and their classmates.



Hard



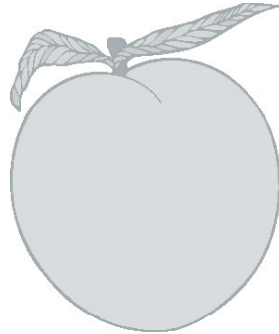
A rich selection of reading and writing materials helps children to develop their emerging concepts of literacy. In a classroom rich in informal conversations, they expand their oral language and correct speech immaturities. They begin to learn new ideas and to clarify half formed or confused concepts.



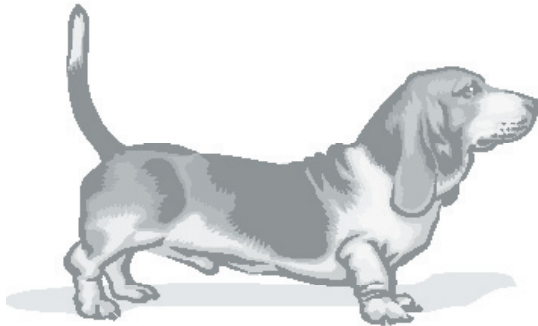
Children need daily experiences with books of all types so that they learn to love reading and begin to understand that words are talk written down.

Heavy

Lots of conversations, planned experiences with books, and opportunities to say and learn rhymes and poems lead children to understand that words are made up of sounds they can hear and say. Further, they learn that letters can represent these sounds, even though they may not yet know all the letters or the precise sounds they represent. All of these learnings are fundamental to becoming literate. A skilled teacher does not leave them to chance.



Round



Soft

Science

A kindergarten full of opportunities for children to see, hear, smell, taste, handle, investigate, experiment, converse, and look at books helps them learn many things about science and form beginning concepts about the natural physical world. These experiences encourage attitudes of “let’s find out” or “let’s try this.” All of these are ways to learn and sometimes the way can be as important as what is learned.



Investigate



Experiment

The Arts

Through music activities that provide for experimentation with rhythm and tone, children learn creative expression. Such freedom of expression and learned enjoyment of music form the basis for a lifetime of satisfaction in the endeavor and in wise use of leisure time.

In the area of art, kindergarten children need daily opportunities to paint and draw and mold and build. Repeated experiences with many materials should be provided. A sense of competence will come of creative effort, if time and encouragement are available.



Music

Mathematics



Small



Medium



Large

Kindergartners need to learn to answer such questions as: “How many?” “Which one?” “How full?” and about ideas such as: larger, smaller, thick, thin, long, and short. Children should begin to recognize spaces of time as in parts of a day and that a clock “tells” time even though they may not be able to yet. They should understand that a calendar shows days and weeks, and that different shapes such as round and square are all around them. These learnings are possible in varying degrees for children of this age and are the foundations for later abilities to understand higher mathematics.

Physical Development

Children’s physical development is one of kindergarten’s main concerns. Good physical coordination, large muscle development, and posture favorable to health are all fostered through challenging activities. Every day the program should provide safe and supervised, but largely unstructured, opportunities to run, jump, skip, lift, and balance; to build with large blocks and boards; to climb, catch and throw; and to pretend. This is how young children develop strength, bodily vigor, balance, dexterity and motor control. Small muscle development and increasing eye-hand coordination is also important in kindergarten. Children should have lots of opportunities to use scissors, markers, pencils, and crayons. Cutting, gluing, drawing and painting help develop small motor skills. Other activities such as fitting pieces together or pouring from one container into a smaller one also helps develop these skills.

Social Learning

In a sense, however, learnings in citizenship form the heart of a kindergarten program. Social interactions, sense of responsibility and relationships are important parts of the curriculum. As the children live and play (work) together under their teacher's guidance, they learn increasingly to:

- ♥ work cooperatively with each other;
- ♥ take responsibility for their own actions;
- ♥ consider the rights and feelings of others;
- ♥ become dependable members of the group;
- ♥ share in making and carrying out group and individual plans;
- ♥ practice reasonable self-control;
- ♥ assume responsibility for the care of equipment, materials, and the appearance of the room;
- ♥ listen and to follow directions;
- ♥ know about some of the work that adults do and to see the interdependence of people in the home, the school and the neighborhood;
- ♥ be appreciative of the contributions and differences of others;
- ♥ resolve minor conflicts.

This is a great deal to expect of our five-year-olds, and we must remember not to hold them all accountable for the same competencies in all of these things. They are just beginning.



Citizenship

Should reading be taught in kindergarten?

When we consider the wide range of activities that are conducted in a good kindergarten, we have to realize that many of them do bear directly on reading-- so, in reality, the child is being taught to read. The problem is that all too often the activities we have described are not recognized by the casual observer as having the purpose they do. Their importance is slighted or neglected altogether when reliance is placed upon the formal approaches to the learning of reading. Workbooks and skill sheets, usually part of a basic reading program, are largely inappropriate as an instructional tool in the kindergarten and early primary grades.

When there are so many important things for the five-year-old to do, it seems very undesirable to deny the child those opportunities in favor of some formal paper and pencil, sit-down instruction. If we give youngsters a chance to build a large store of experiences to draw upon later, their disposition to learn will be strengthened, and they can all experience success. Further, the more formal programs that the child is likely to encounter as he or she moves on through the school will be easier to handle.



Occasionally a child comes to kindergarten who has already learned how to read; or who has an intense interest and desire to do so. When this happens, the kind of kindergarten atmosphere described here will not be discouraging to him or her. On the contrary, that child's store of experiences can also be built to a very good advantage, and the interest in reading stimulated. It will grow as encouragement is offered to share stories with the teacher and with other children.

The attitudes toward school and toward reading that are formed by kindergartners will remain with them for a long time. It is essential that children have positive experiences on their learning journey to becoming successful readers.

You may hear a program or activity described as using ‘best practices’ or ‘developmentally appropriate practices’. These terms refer to teaching, curriculum and assessment, learning activities, and environments based on research and knowledge about how children grow and learn.

What works to achieve the best outcomes for children?

The goal in a kindergarten is to provide the best teaching and learning match for each child to assure a challenging, successful experience.

A developmentally appropriate kindergarten provides experiences anticipated to appeal to most children that age. It also attends to the learning needs of children who may be developing more slowly or more rapidly than the “norm” and does not view either as outside the responsibility of the program. Kindergarten is for five-year-olds, and it is normal to see children at differing levels of development at that age.

The program should be designed with a wide range of abilities and disabilities. It is not appropriate for a kindergarten classroom to be restricted to a limited range of learning activities or that does not readily accept children of diverse capabilities.



Kindergarten programs using best practices recognize that young children are active learners and are more likely to learn from materials that are real and relevant to their lives and from give-and-take conversations with other children and adults.

A limited amount of direct instruction, paper and pencil tasks, and work on isolated skills is appropriate in kindergarten. Such activities must be integrated in a curriculum rich with language and literacy experiences and hands-on activities to build on the strengths and interests of the children.

Best practice means doing what works. Doing what works in kindergarten keeps children excited about learning and leads to the best outcomes for children in the future.



Kindergarten should be about the joy of learning. If we say that play is an enjoyable activity, then we hope that kindergarten can be full of play. On the other hand, if we say that play is simply “fooling around,” then it has no place in the well operated kindergarten. What an adult might regard as play is, in reality, the child’s work--the opportunity to learn.

Skilled kindergarten teachers provide purposeful, challenging activities that foster competent joyful learners.

As with all education, the kindergarten helps to prepare children for the future and for more complicated tasks. But we must not forget the “here and now” and the knowledge that reactions to today’s situations can have a profound effect upon tomorrow.

*What does play
have to do with
learning?*

What about screening (testing) children before kindergarten?

The State regulations for school accreditation require that schools accept, without limitation, all children who have reached age five by October 15 of that year. School officials may not screen or test children or otherwise suggest that parents keep a child home for another year. For school officials to suggest in any way that a child is not ready for school is an admission that the school is not meeting its responsibilities under the Constitution and the statutes.

The school has the responsibility to accept the child and his or her stage of learning and development. Language in the laws dealing with special education give the details about the public school's responsibility to provide an appropriate educational program for all children in our state.

School is the place where a child and parents should expect to find opportunities for growth, development, and learning from whatever starting point the child brings along. We should not expect to gather together children of like abilities and accomplishments. Not only is this undesirable, but trying to accomplish it often leads to negative practices. Respected research confirms that children of all ability levels learn more and are enriched in other ways by being schooled in a diverse group, rather than in one composed only of children having similar achievement levels or characteristics.

Nebraska has had for many years, in the same law that deals with the entrance age for kindergarten, provisions for schools to require, along with verification of age, evidence of a physical examination and of immunization against certain diseases. Exemptions based upon religious convictions are available upon the parent's appeal.

What is meant by readiness?

There is no widely accepted understanding of readiness in spite of wide use of the term in connection with school entrance. In other words, perspectives about readiness have their sources in the belief systems parents and educators have about child development and the purpose of schooling.

A more productive way to think about readiness is to shift thinking from “Are they ready for kindergarten?” to “What must we do to make sure all children can be successful?” This approach places responsibilities on adults—parents, educators, and community leaders—to shape the early home and community environment to support children’s development and learning. Specific academic skills often thought to be prerequisites for school success can easily be learned by children whose needs in the following five areas have been met:

1. Health and physical well being;
2. Social and emotional well being;
3. Approaches to learning;
4. Language development;
5. General knowledge about the world around them.



Wouldn't many children benefit by waiting an extra year before starting kindergarten?



This question was rarely raised until about thirty years ago when many kindergarten programs started to become harder and more rigid. While every parent has the legal right to delay a child's entrance a year, this is not encouraged.

The more the kindergarten is made up of older six-year-olds, the more a "six-year-old" curriculum is provided, and the less the needs of the five-year-old child are served. Kindergarten begins to look more like first grade.

When the age and previous experience of children in an entering kindergarten class range from young five-year-olds who have not gone to preschool to six-year-olds with two years of preschool, an unfair situation is created.



Parents do their own and other children a disservice when they use delayed entrance as a way to gain an advantage. Research shows that the slight academic advantage older children seem to have all but disappears around third grade. School should not be viewed as a race where there are winners and losers, but rather a place for everyone to learn in appropriate ways.

Do children who have attended preschool have an advantage in kindergarten?

We note with growing concern the expectation of many parents and some kindergarten teachers that the preschool serve as a place for the child to “get ready” for kindergarten. This emphasis results in a focus on teaching a narrow range of academic skills such as rote counting and letter identification to three and four-year-old children (or the five-year-olds who have not gone to kindergarten.)

Just as the kindergarten should not be seen as a place for the child to “get ready” for first grade, it is also inappropriate to view preschool programs in this way. A good preschool looks very much like a good kindergarten. It is a place for young children to begin to work and play in a group and to have experiences with a wider variety of materials and people than might happen in their home or neighborhood.

A growing body of research shows that children from less advantaged backgrounds who attend high quality pre-kindergarten programs do come to school on a more equal footing with children from more advantaged homes. This is why there is now so much emphasis on providing public support for such programs.



What are “Readiness” or “Developmental” Kindergartens?

A few school districts have created extra-year programs prior to or following the kindergarten year for kindergarten age children who school personnel believe are unlikely to be able to cope with curricular demands for achievement in their “regular” kindergarten.

When these programs come before kindergarten they are often called “readiness” or “developmental” kindergartens. After kindergarten, these programs are usually called “pre-first” or “transition first.”

Extra-year programs do represent a genuine effort on the part of school personnel to remedy problems associated with inappropriate kindergarten and first grade expectations and their effect on children who come to school from very different backgrounds. However, most extra-year programs focus on perceived deficiencies of the children.

Such early ability grouping of children appears to establish a pattern of lowered expectations that influences future educational experiences for those children. Research conducted on such programs does not indicate that they are of benefit.

Therefore, the Nebraska Department of Education does not recommend using extra-year programs to solve what is really a problem with inflexible curriculum and unreasonable expectations for children.

Is retention in kindergarten a way to deal with children who are developing more slowly?

As is true of the extra-year programs described on the previous page, retention seems like a logical solution to the differences in some children's development and is used with the best of intentions; but it simply does not work. Few educational practices have been so thoroughly researched with such consistent findings.

Although research does not support grade retention, many educators and parents do. Sometimes it is true that teachers do see children who have been retained, placed in extra-year classes, or held out of school for a year making progress. But it is also true that they have no opportunity to see how well the children might have progressed had they been promoted or moved along with their age-mates.



Students recommended for retention but advanced to the next level end up doing as well as or better academically than comparable non-promoted peers. Children who have been retained demonstrate more social regression, display more behavior problems, suffer stress in connection with being retained, and more frequently leave high school without graduating.



*Is the trend toward full-day kindergarten
beneficial to children?*

Full-day every day kindergarten is becoming more common in schools across Nebraska. This schedule provides more opportunity for children to interact with materials and peers in a more relaxed time frame.

Studies of full-day kindergarten show many positive learning and social benefits for children. At the same time, it is important to be sure that the curriculum and expectations are appropriate.

Life has become very complicated for some young children. The full-time kindergarten, in addition to providing an extended learning environment, simplifies child care arrangements and often cuts down on the number of different social settings a child must adjust to within each day.

In a very few years it is anticipated that every Nebraska kindergarten age child will have the opportunity to attend a full-day kindergarten program.

IN CONCLUSION

Today's good kindergarten provides an educational setting for five-year-olds:

- to collect a rich store of experiences (worthwhile and challenging content);
- to build healthy self-concepts based upon a growing understanding of themselves and of their abilities;
- to begin to understand how to resolve conflict between self and others; and
- to form attitudes about school and learning that will encourage further learning.

When a sound kindergarten program is followed by an equally sound early elementary program, learning problems are lessened, retentions disappear, and enthusiastic students result. Let's ensure that all children have this opportunity.

**THEY ARE ONLY
FIVE ONCE!!!**

RESOURCES FOR FURTHER READING

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