

The *ABCs* of Preparing for Kindergarten

By Lauren Rose

When we sent our eldest daughter off to kindergarten, we were prepared. We had shopped together for a list of supplies a mile long. We bought the cutest shoes and clothes, sharpened her pencils, readied the box of 100 crayons, picked a great spot for that all-important first day photo. But most importantly, we prepared her emotionally.

Times have changed from when the majority of us went to kindergarten in the 1970s. Then, most programs were half-day. Children didn't eat lunch in the cafeteria and interaction with the older kids at school was minimal. We weren't expected to know our letters and numbers. We went to school to play with blocks, to color and paint, and to learn how to get along with our peers.

Today's children have much greater expectations placed upon them. Today, there are expectations not only about academic readiness, but social readiness, fine motor skills, and language development. Kindergartens now provide a greater coordination of services, including special assistance to help a child function on the same level as his peers. The coordination implies that more services are available and these often do not involve the traditional "pull-out" model. Instead, a therapist frequently comes into the classroom to work with one or a group of students. Several therapists may join forces to implement a plan for a child.

In the 1970s, few children received services. Today, it's common. Children receive reading assistance; speech and language therapy; occupational therapy to address fine motor, balance or sensory issues; physical therapy for gross motor difficulties; and counseling for emotional issues. Others may require a combination of services to address attention issues or more intense global



delays. Some children need nursing services to address severe asthma, diabetes, feeding or allergy issues, or paralysis. In addition, many children receive private therapy and educational services outside the school system. Years ago, these children would not have been in a typical kindergarten class. Today many are.

In my practice, I see children with a wide range of developmental issues. I teach parents to advocate for their children. As parents, we must speak up if something doesn't seem right. We need to know what services are available, and to know how to access and use them. Parents need to treat any issues which may arise just as you would a reading or math problem.

So many differences exist between preschool and kindergarten! Bend down on your knees and look up at another adult. How large and looming does he seem? This is your child's perspective. There are big kids all around and lots of them. Look at your child, who seemed so big and grown up yesterday. Place him in this new setting and suddenly he seems so small! When my second daughter went to kindergarten, she was terrified. This despite the fact that she had been driving there with her sister

and me twice a day for four years! She had helped in the classroom, she knew half of the students and most of the teachers, and she could probably guide a new parent around the school. But the idea of actually going to school as a student suddenly made the whole place seem different.

Size is an issue. Not just your child's size, but building size, class size, even the size of the steps and the playground. Elementary schools are extremely large compared with most nursery school settings. They may have been expanded over time, resulting in a building that often feels like a maze. While most nursery school programs limit class size to fewer than 15 children, kindergartens contain up to 25 children.

The expectations placed upon your child will be different from those at preschool. Staff will expect your child to find his way around the building, use the bathroom independently, remember his belongings, and listen.

After all this learning, a child could use a break. Lunch and recess sound like fun, but remember: Your child will generally be left to manage on his own here. Can he open all the packages you send in his lunch box? Will he eat your choices of food? Do the

school's dietary rules limit choices dramatically (without peanut butter, our daughter had almost nothing to eat). How about recess? Your child's school may mix several grades on the playground or in the school gym at recess time. This alone can create anxiety for a young child. Now consider the child who doesn't know many of the other kids.

There are tactics you can use to help your child adjust. Help her plan a meeting place with friends in other classes. Visit the playground before school starts, and help her feel confident on the equipment. Discuss how to handle the inevitable playground conflicts.

Your child may ride the school bus or be in a carpool for the first time. For some children this is the most exciting part of the day, but for others it is terrifying. You may be required to drop off and pick up at a designated entrance rather than walk your child to his classroom. Will this be tough for him (or for you)?

What is expected of kindergartners will vary from school to school, but here are some general guidelines:

ATTENTION SPAN: Schools look for children to be able to listen to a story without interrupting and to complete a brief, adult-directed activity.

ACADEMICS: Many schools encourage familiarity with concepts such as understanding of the general time of day; identification of beginning sounds of words and letters of the alphabet; recognition of his name and simple rhyming patterns; counting to 10; and sorting similar objects by color, shape and size.

FINE AND GROSS MOTOR SKILLS: Kindergartners should demonstrate hand dominance, be able to copy simple shapes, cut with scissors, color beyond scribbling, and bounce and catch a ball.

Kindergarten...

SELF-HELP SKILLS: Children should be able to manage buttons, zippers and basic clothing items, as well as their own bathroom needs.

UNDERSTANDING AND USE OF LANGUAGE: Kindergartners should speak in complete sentences using five to six words, appropriate sentence structure, and age-appropriate articulation skills.

SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND READINESS: A child ready for kindergarten should separate easily from her caregiver; recognize authority; share with others; and follow rules.

Some schools have created screening programs, a time for the kindergarten teachers to get a general sense of who is entering the school and what their particular needs may be. Screenings help the teachers identify children with undetected needs who may require additional services; they can then balance kindergarten classes with different personality types and energy levels. During screenings, children generally meet other incoming kindergartners, draw a picture, play with blocks, and listen to a story. They

have a chance to see an actual classroom and some of the activities that go on in them. Other staff (such as a speech therapist, occupational therapist, or psychologist) may use this time to observe or work directly with the children.

So this brings us to the big question. What can I do to help my child get ready?

- *Prepare.* Buy the supplies recommended by the school, using this as an opportunity to create excitement for your child. Spend time talking about school, but don't belabor it. Read stories about children starting kindergarten. Relate your own personal memories.

- *Play with your child.* Help him to develop the play skills that can't necessarily be taught, such as sharing and turn taking. Do this with children you know and with new children from your child's class. Play games — sing the alphabet song, go on letter hunts, count everything in sight, practice sorting.

- *Visit your child's school.* Meet the teacher, see her classroom, lunchroom and bathrooms, play on the playground.

- *Strive for age-appropriate independence.* Teach your child to put on his own coat and shoes. Shop for clothing that is easy for your child to manage alone.

Does it matter where you've sent your child to preschool? Some preschools focus more on academic readiness than others. However, Michelle Forzaglia, a kindergarten teacher in Rye Brook, notes that differences created by schooling balance out fairly quickly. Initially, children may come into school with a different knowledge base, but very quickly, the children who are ready begin to soak up the academic opportunities offered. Those who are not quite ready will need more time. For these children, it won't matter where they went to preschool. Some schools focus more on social preparedness. Kindergarten has greater expectations in this area, so having had previous opportunities to gain these skills will help your child adjust more quickly. But if your child's program did not focus on these areas, many of these skills can be learned outside school.

Participating in general structured programs provides children with opportunities for obtaining and practicing important social skills they will later need in school. Depending on the type of class, children may work on

attention, fine motor, gross motor, or language skills. Just through general play, children are learning about their world and practicing their social and language skills. On the playground, they improve gross motor skills. Drawing on the sidewalk or at the kitchen table exercises fine motor and creativity. Building with blocks addresses all these areas, plus spatial relations and eye-hand coordination.

Finally, don't forget about your feelings as a parent in the midst of this process. Some parents take pride in their child's accomplishments and this very obvious and important step in their growth. Others, while not negating the positive, may feel sad. This is a big step for your child. She is no longer a baby, a toddler, or even a preschooler, and she may let you know this and expect new, more grownup treatment. How do you feel about this? Don't hide from your feelings; acknowledge them to yourself and your friends and you'll be surprised how many people feel similarly. If you look around, you probably aren't the only parent who's following the school bus!

LAUREN ROSE, L.C.S.W.-R., is a social worker with a practice focusing on counseling of children and families in Rye, NY. She has two daughters, entering the first and fifth grades, and twin boys beginning preschool. She can be reached at (914) 937-3566. ♦