

Ready for Kindergarten?

Five teachers tell you what preschoolers really need for next year.



If your child's preschool years are coming to an end, your thoughts are probably turning toward kindergarten. But is your child ready to move on to the "big" school? What skills do kindergarten teachers expect their new students to have? To help answer those questions (and ease your mind), we've asked highly regarded kindergarten teachers from around the country to share their insights on helping your child gain the right mix of kindergarten-readiness skills.

The skill sets they are looking for might surprise you. Because of the national focus on improving education and meeting standards, you might think that it's most important for children to enter kindergarten knowing their ABCs, numbers, shapes, and colors so they can keep up with the curriculum. While teachers would love children to come in with some letter and number recognition, they don't want you to drill your kids on academic skills. There are equally — if not more — important readiness skills that set the stage for your child's learning. Raising an eager learner is the goal, and it can be achieved easily through play and day-to-day activities.

What follows are the top readiness skills that kindergarten teachers look for.

Enthusiasm Toward Learning

Solid Oral-Language Skills

The Ability to Listen

The Desire to Be Independent

The Ability to Play Well with Others

Strong Fine-Motor Skills

Basic Letter and Number Recognition

Enthusiasm Toward Learning:

"I look for those qualities that prime children to be successful in school," says Kim Hughes. Does the child approach learning enthusiastically? Is she eager to explore and discover? Does she ask questions, take initiative, and persist when tasks are difficult?

"Parents can set aside a little time each day to investigate the world with their preschooler and answer those endless questions," says Sandra Waite-Stupiansky. As you drive or walk along in the park, point out your child's surroundings — the different trees or the various birds at the feeder. Demonstrate how things work. "You'll help your child develop beginning science skills — the ability to form a hypothesis, test it out, and come up with new questions and theories," Waite-Stupiansky explains. "The more kids notice, the more curious they'll become. And we'll be building on that curiosity in kindergarten."

Solid Oral-Language Skills:

"Children need wide background knowledge about their world and the words to go with it," says Lisa Mosier. "I want to know where they've been and what they can talk about." You can help build language skills by taking your child to many new places and giving him words and descriptions for what he is seeing. At the zoo, explain, "There's a tiger. See how he has stripes and looks different from the lion?" Mosier says these experiences have a huge impact on literacy. "If you're reading a book about zoo animals and it says 'Look at the tiger,' and you can't tell the difference between a lion and a tiger, then you won't have the background knowledge to help you tackle the word. When children come to words that they don't know, they won't be able to make a good guess because it isn't in their vocabulary."

Research shows that one of the best predictors of later reading success is a well-developed oral vocabulary in kindergarten. "PreK kids are learning vocabulary at the rate of five to six words a day," says Waite-Stupiansky. "It's just amazing how they will retain words if you use them several times in context and conversation."

The Ability to Listen:

Children's literature is a rich resource for expanding language. "We expect parents to be reading to kids every day," says Jayne C. Isaacs. "I can tell which children have been glued to the TV or computer for hours at a time. When we read them a story and ask them to tell us in their own words what they liked or remembered, they're unable to do so." Besides fostering vocabulary and comprehension, reading develops the attention skills necessary in a kindergarten classroom. "Listening is a key part of school behavior," Isaacs notes. Students must be able to concentrate on what the teacher is saying, listen carefully for directions, and tune in to the sounds in letters and words.

"The more animated you are as you read, the better you'll focus your child's attention on what she's hearing," says Armando Argandona. Use different voices for the characters. Promote critical thinking by asking questions like, "Why do you think that happened?" and "How would you feel if that happened to you?" and "What do you think will happen next?" Engage kids by inviting them to clap or stomp when they hear a rhyming word, and letting them finish sentences in familiar stories. Books with rhyme and repetitive refrains (like those by Mother Goose and Dr. Seuss) help kids predict what's coming and detect consonant sounds at the beginning and end of words, which fosters phonemic awareness—the ability to hear and break down the subtle sounds in words. Your child won't be able to read the word "cat" until she understands that it actually has three sounds: "cuh," "ah," and "tuh."

Singing fosters pre-reading skills too. "Take turns substituting new sounds in nursery rhymes and songs," suggests Mosier. For example, transform "Twinkle Twinkle Little Star" to "Dinkle Dinkle Dittle Dar" or "Zippety Doo Da" to "Bibbety Boo Bah."

The Desire to Be Independent:

Encouraging self-help skills is an important step to preparing your child for kindergarten. "It's amazing how many kids come to kindergarten not knowing how to hang up a jacket," says Argandona. It might be quicker for you to do it, but "independence is critical for helping your child adjust to school," he emphasizes. Teachers expect children to:

- Get coats on and off and hang them up
- Follow simple two-step instructions such as "take off your boots and put on your sneakers"
- Go to the bathroom and wash their hands
- Blow their nose and cover their mouth when they cough
- Fasten and unfasten simple buttons and snaps
- Eat neatly and pour into a cup
- Open up a juice box and get the straw in.

"Some children are so dependent on their parents that they expect the teacher to do these things for them," says Hughes. "But when you have 20-plus kids in the room, it's hard to worry about wiping noses!" However, she notes that tying shoes is a developmental skill that often doesn't come until the first grade. If kids can't yet tie their shoes, Hughes suggests sending them in slip-ons or sneakers with Velcro fasteners.

The Ability to Play Well with Others:

Your child will need your assistance refining essential social skills such as sharing, compromising, turn-taking, and problem-solving. "Children are naturally egocentric at this age, and we don't expect them to be able to share everything," says Waite-Stupiansky. "But by the time they reach kindergarten, they should be able to express their feelings in words and begin to understand that two people can use the same thing at the same time."

If you and your child are building with blocks and he reaches for one you're using, Hughes suggests you first encourage your child to ask, "May I have the block?" Then model sharing by saying something like, "I'm glad to share my block with you." When you notice your child sharing with others, celebrate it by saying, "I'm so proud of you. It's really hard to share your favorite doll, but you were able to do it. Good for you!"

On play dates and park outings, stay within earshot so you can help kids problem-solve when conflict occurs, Hughes recommends. If your son gets in a power struggle over a toy and can't seem to work it out, step in and say, "It looks like we're having a problem here. What can we do about it?" Encourage him to come up with possible solutions, offering your own suggestions, if necessary. "Help kids understand the feelings of others," says Hughes. "I want them to know when a friend is sad by looking at her face and seeing that her mouth is frowning or her eyes are crying." This nurtures compassion and empathy, values that are prized by kindergarten teachers.

Strong Fine-Motor Skills:

Your child's hands must be strong enough to master coloring, cutting, pasting, and holding a pencil — fine-motor tasks that kids use every day in kindergarten. "By week one, we're already writing a letter of the alphabet," says Argandona. "If kids can't hold the pencil correctly, they will fall behind."

To hold the pencil the right way, kids need to develop the small muscles in their palms and fingers. Hughes suggests giving your child a pipe cleaner and some Cheerios (or similar, colorful cereal) to make bracelets. "It requires you to pinch with your fingers," she explains, the same motion needed for grasping a pencil. Or ask your preschooler to mist your houseplants with a spray bottle, an activity that boosts both writing and scissor skills. Scribbling in clay with fingers is a fun alternative to doing it on paper and especially helpful for kids who are resistant to writing and drawing. (A child can practice cutting the clay into small strips too.)

"Offer writing utensils in a variety of sizes and shapes," advises Hughes. "Some people think that fat pencils are easier to hold, but that's not always true. For a child with weak hands, a smaller, shorter pencil might be easier to manage."

Basic Letter and Number Recognition:

Kindergarten teachers believe that it is their responsibility to teach kids letter sounds and how to write, but they do hope incoming students can recognize most letters by sight. They also hope children can count to 10, identify numbers 1 to 5, and know some shapes and colors.

But teachers don't want you to quiz your child or use workbooks, flashcards, or phonics kits. "So much learning can happen without quizzing or sitting down with a pencil," says Isaacs. The lessons unfold naturally as you and your child sort Legos by color or shape. Your daughter practices counting as she doles out pretend cookies for the dolls in her tea party. Your son builds letter recognition while scrambling alphabet magnets on the fridge.

"Every outing is a spontaneous opportunity to learn," Isaacs adds. Play guessing games like, "I spy with my little eye something with the number 3."

Teach by "immersion" and "show kids how letters are all around us," says Mosier. "Say, 'Hey, that spells K-Mart. Let's spell it together. K-M-A-R-T.'" Point out objects that contain the letters in your child's name.

Most important, always keep the focus on fun. "Relax, and enjoy your children," Mosier says. "Read, play, and go places. And talk the whole time you're doing it!"

Meet the Teachers:

Armando Argandona has been teaching for 25 years. He is president-elect of the California Kindergarten Association and a master teacher for California State University at Domingus Hills. He teaches kindergarten at the Ford Boulevard School in East Los Angeles, CA.

Kim Hughes has been teaching PreK and kindergarten for 21 years. She serves on the Governing Board of the National Association for the Education of Young Children and is a PreK/kindergarten teacher at Project Enlightenment, in Raleigh, NC.

Jayne C. Isaacs has been teaching kindergarten for 35 years and has served on her school district's Diversity Committee and Early Intervention Committee. She teaches kindergarten at the Great Plain School in Danbury, CT.

Lisa Mosier has been teaching 4- and 5-year-olds for 21 years. She received an award from the National Center for Learning Disabilities and currently teaches at the Frances Starms Early Childhood Center in Milwaukee, WI.

Sandra Waite-Stupiansky has taught kindergarten for the last 8 of her 27 years as a teacher. She is co-author of several Scholastic *Learning Through Play* books and teaches kindergarten at Edinboro University's Miller Laboratory School in Edinboro, PA.

