

Let's Go to Kindergarten!

A Family Guide to School Readiness



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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

With heartfelt thanks to Paul and Natalie Orfalea of the Orfalea Family Foundation for their generous support in making this work possible; our students and their families; the children, families and staff of City College of San Francisco, Orfalea Family Center; and the Child Development Faculty of City College of San Francisco.

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Dear Families,

As your child approaches kindergarten age, you may be asking the following questions:

“Is my child ready for kindergarten?”

“How can I help prepare my child for school success?”

Today, there is great pressure placed on academic accomplishments—from high school exit exams all the way down to preschool success. While educators agree that preparing your child for school is very important, there are many views on “how” to meet this goal.

Based on our years of experience as educators of young children, we have found that rich, facilitated play is an excellent way to prepare your child for kindergarten. With this approach, teachers and families provide a healthy balance of:

- Sensory experiences
- Gross and fine motor activities
- Opportunities for communication and social interaction
- Encouragement of independence

Our approach for promoting kindergarten readiness is based on the following concepts:

- Encouraging children to do what is developmentally appropriate will naturally benefit their growth.
- By mastering age and stage appropriate skills, children will build upon their experiences and be ready to move onto the next stage of development.
- Sensory and large motor experiences precede hand skills and should be a major focus of preschool.
- Fine motor experiences should be explored and encouraged, keeping in mind that kindergarten is a developmentally appropriate time to build upon and refine fine motor skills and prepare for academics.

There are three parts to this booklet:

1. Identifying the experiences and activities necessary for kindergarten success.
2. Answering questions and exploring ways to help your child prepare for kindergarten (see Questions and Activity Guide sections).
3. Accessing resources to learn more about kindergarten readiness.

We hope you will find our work helpful. We wish you and your child every success in school!



Melissa Krager



April Pennebaker

Moving



“Look what my body can do!”

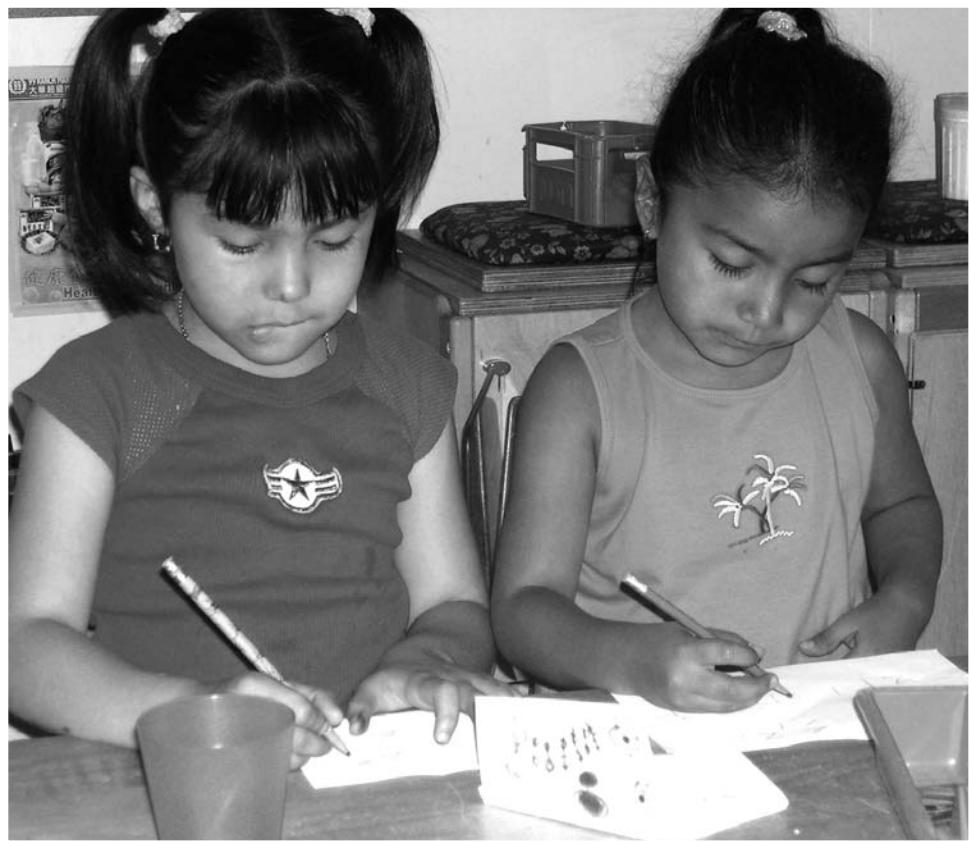
Large Muscle Skills (Gross Motor)

Is your child able to ...

- Walk and run using the arms and legs together
- Start, stop and turn when running
- Throw, catch, kick and bounce a ball
- Climb, slide and swing
- Ride a tricycle or bicycle (with or without training wheels)
- Walk up and down stairs using one foot for each step
- Turn a somersault
- Hop on one foot
- Balance on one foot for 5–10 seconds
- Jump up, down and forward

Experiences and Activities

Hand Work



“My hands help me make
lots of things.”

Small Muscle Skills (Fine Motor)

Is your child able to ...

- Write, eat and cut using the same hand most of the time
- Pinch-hold a pencil using the first two or three fingers and the thumb
- Copy lines, circles, squares, triangles and crosses
- Build structures using small blocks
- String small beads
- Complete a variety of puzzles
- Cut lines and circles with scissors
- Glue paper and art materials effectively
- Use a variety of tools with play dough (cookie cutters, rolling pins, presses, etc.)

Experiences and Activities

Talking



“I can say what I mean.”

Language and Communication

Is your child able to ...

- Say his or her first and last name
- Remember and say names of family members and caregivers
- Tell a teacher when he or she is hungry, thirsty, happy, sad, mad or sick
- Greet teachers, parents and other children
- Say “no” to teachers and other children
- Ask for help when needed
- Make requests in home language and in English
- Answer basic yes/no questions
- Sing songs in home language and in English
- Follow song lyrics and movement games
- Stop and listen when a parent or teacher is giving directions
- Listen for 10–15 minutes to a story being read
- Share ideas and talk about a variety of topics
- Converse with peers

Experiences and Activities

Brain Power



“I’m figuring out new things
all the time.”

Thinking Skills (Cognitive)

Is your child able to...

- Count and understand the concept of “how many”
- Recognize letters, numbers and basic colors
- Pretend to write
- Solve simple problems that arise during play
- Follow a direction with two parts
- Actively explore new places/environments
- Figure out how an unfamiliar toy works by playing with it
- Approach learning with curiosity and excitement
- Understand and follow rules of a simple game
- Understand the concept of first and last
- Take turns

Experiences and Activities

Feelings



“I know how to make a friend
and to be a friend.”

Social and Emotional Development

Is your child able to ...

- Be respectful of others in both words and actions
- Listen to others when they are talking
- Demonstrate self-confidence and pride in personal accomplishments
- Express to adults and children how he or she feels
- Interact with other children
- Play and engage in activities by him or herself
- Make and keep friends

Experiences and Activities

Calming and Balance



“I can be wild
and be calm too.”

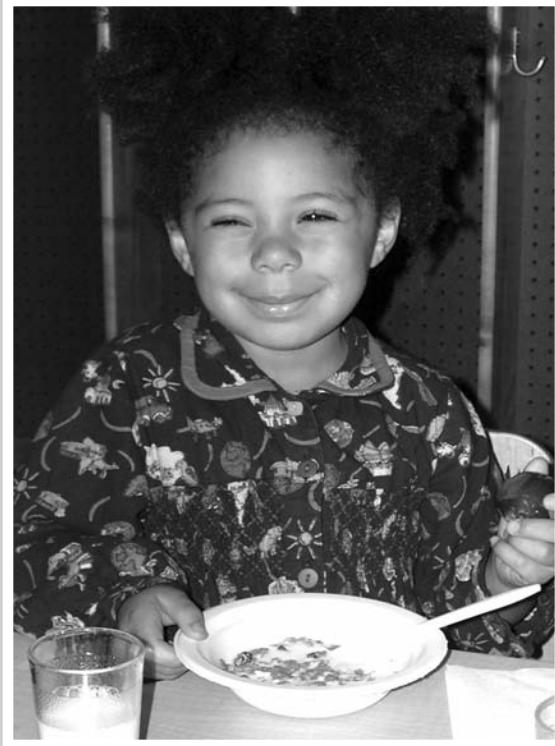
Self-Regulation

Is your child able to...

- Calm him or herself during stressful situations
- Maintain an “even keel” during most of the day
- Recover from tantrums or meltdowns with adult support
- Transition between activities without difficulty
- Adjust energy levels to attend to both seated and more active experiences
- Adapt easily to new environments
- Organize self and belongings
- Regulate voice volume when talking (whispering to yelling)
- Tolerate distractions without losing focus or control
- Stand in line without difficulty

Experiences and Activities

Independence



“Doing things by
myself makes
me happy.”

Activities of Daily Living

Is your child able to...

- Dress and undress without help (except for buttons, zippers, tying shoes, etc.)
- Eat with a fork and spoon without spilling
- Drink from a regular cup
- Serve food to self and pour from a small pitcher
- Open and close simple containers
- Use the toilet independently
- Wash and dry hands independently
- Brush teeth without help
- Set up and clean up work and play areas
- Assist adults with basic chores (sweep, dust, set the table, water plants, etc.)
- Understand and follow daily routines

Experiences and Activities

Questions

KINDERGARTEN READINESS FAQS

Q: How do I prepare my child for kindergarten?

A: When nurtured, development is usually a natural unfolding of skills that will combine and transform into school readiness. Having trust in this process, along with being an active guide for your child is key.

- Offer your child a wealth of experiences in all developmental areas.
- Maintain an attitude of encouragement in skill building, rather than one of enforcement or pressure. Play is how children learn, and is their most important “work”. Use play to build on your child’s natural motivations—make learning both meaningful and enjoyable.
- Provide experiences in all the areas highlighted in this booklet!

You can also refer our Activity Guide section, as well as consulting with your child’s teachers and your local school district.

Questions and Answers

Q: Should my child be reading and writing when they enter kindergarten?

A: Not necessarily. Many children are not developmentally ready to read or write before kindergarten. Teachers used to say that children were only ready to read when they lost their front teeth! Others sources say that reading should be taught when children are 6-7 years old. More and more, early literacy is being stressed in preschool, mostly to prepare children for the increasing demands of kindergarten. Children in kindergarten subsequently have higher and higher expectations placed on them academically, all the way up through high school. These pressures seem to be based on understandable concerns regarding our educational system. In the end however, they may mostly serve to push children unnecessarily and foster resistance to reading and writing.

According to Dr. Jane Healy, author of *Your Child's Growing Mind: A Practical Guide to Brain Development and Learning from Birth to Adolescence* (1994), children need a variety of pre-reading and pre-writing skills before reading and writing can be mastered. She stresses that until reading and writing have meaning for a

child, they will not be able to use these skills functionally, if at all.

Preschool is a time for preparing the young child to read and write by raising awareness of all the processes involved in reading and writing. Teaching pre-literacy skills is the best way to prepare children for reading and writing. Consult our Activity Guide for more information.

Q: What if I don't think my child is ready for kindergarten?

A: First, communicate with the preschool teachers (i.e. through conferences and review of educational assessments) to find out particular areas of need. Then, talk to your child's teachers to find out how you can support your child's development in the challenging areas. You can also enroll your child in a transitional kindergarten program. Seek out additional professional assistance (i.e. from a speech or occupational therapist or an educational specialist) as needed. Remember however, that working regularly with your child at home, in a non-stressful manner can make a HUGE difference in skill acquisition and readiness.

Questions and Answers

Q: My child does not want to participate in tabletop activities (i.e. drawing, coloring, cutting, pasting, painting, etc.). What can I do?

A: Children develop at different rates, and development is rarely smooth or even across skill areas. This means that while some children are ready for tabletop activities at 3 years of age, others won't be ready until significantly later. Meet your child where they are, not where the "other kids" are, to work on hand skills. Demonstrate how-to information on grasp and technique, but allow your child the opportunity to explore and find their own way. Encourage enjoyment in the process and creativity in the activity, and the skills will develop.

What will help is facilitating (not forcing) short periods of tabletop work using motivating materials or themes. For example, for the child who loves dinosaurs, help draw a picture of a T. Rex, but allow the child to add the eyes, claws and teeth. Or, have the child snip "grass" for the dinosaur to walk across. Or, make a picture with dinosaur stickers. Make the learning fun, and provide a doable challenge that will result in success. Praise participation

(not just success)! Growth happens in “baby steps”, not huge leaps. Help your child break down skill acquisition into the small parts that yield a sense of accomplishment and success. See our Activity Guide for more ideas.

If you are concerned that your child has a motor difficulty, consult the school staff or seek out the assistance of an occupational therapist.

Q: How can I help my child be successful in kindergarten?

A: Every child’s needs and talents are different, but here are some general guidelines:

- Advocate for your child. You know your child the best—if there is a problem, take an ACTIVE role in helping the school and teacher understand and solve that issue.
- Participate in your child’s education. Volunteer in the classroom, come to work days or join the Parent Teacher Association.
- Establish a positive relationship with your child’s teacher and other school personnel.
- Know when to “step back” and allow your child the necessary time and space to grow.

Questions and Answers

- Educate yourself to educate your child. Know what is expected of kindergarten children, and how that growth happens. Read about early childhood education, talk to other parents and teachers about their experiences, be a detective to see how your child learns the best. See our Resource section for more information.

Q: What about computer use?

A: We live in a world that is filled with computers. Preparing children to be proficient with computers is helping them to participate in many activities of daily life. Be aware however, that computers cannot replace active learning with tangible materials in an interactive setting!

Some sources would say “the earlier the better” to get children started on computers. Others would say that computer use is detrimental for children—it dulls their brain development and prevents them from actively learning. We take a position somewhere in the middle: provide computer access to children over ages 3–4, but for limited periods of time only. To protect the eyes, body and mind from harm and fatigue, a

maximum of 20 minutes of computer time per sitting is recommended. Provide age appropriate programs and web site access for short periods, and then encourage your child to explore more active pursuits. Balance passive learning on the computer with outside time (in nature or at the park) and time engaged in creative gross, fine and sensorimotor experiences.

With television and hand held computer games, our advice is the same. Limit their use! Lots of passive learning and play can harm your child's wellbeing—obesity, coordination difficulties, limited attention span, and stunted creativity are some of the dangers of too much time with TV and other screen media. Again, balance is key: promote active exploration and learning as often as possible and limit TV.

Q: What is a “play based” approach and why should my child use it?

A: Play is the primary way that young children learn. Play provides children with new experiences and opportunities to learn about

Questions and Answers

themselves, others, and the world. By engaging with materials (a.k.a. “toys”) in a variety of environments, children develop skill in using their hands, bodies and minds. They begin to use tools (i.e. crayons and scissors), to gain coordination and control over their bodies, to solve problems, to develop strategies and systems for completing projects, to interact with others and to have knowledge about the physical world.

Preschools and child care centers that use a “play based” approach should be actively engaging children in a variety of activities every day. Areas include:

- Fine motor: hand use, tabletop, manipulative work with *Legos*, etc.
- Gross motor: climbing, sliding, running, riding cars/trikes, ball play, etc.
- Sensory (tactile): play dough, birdseed trays, water table, sand play, painting, etc.

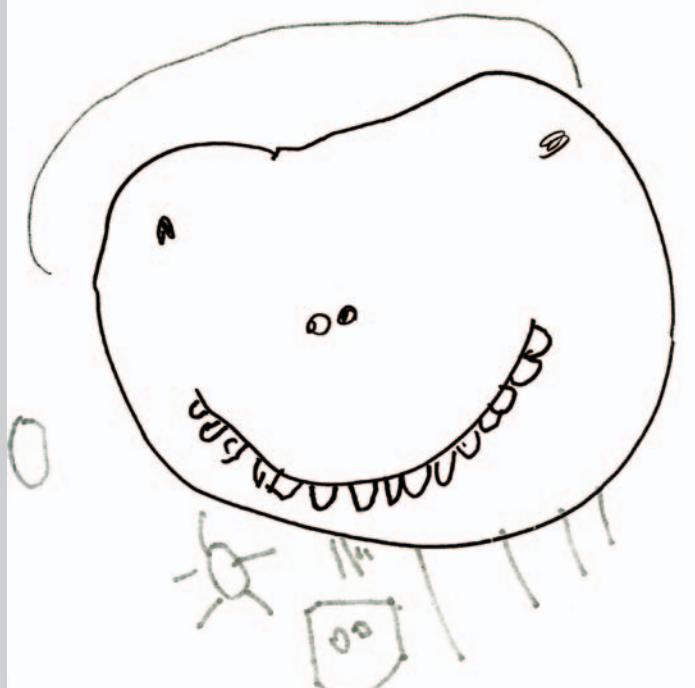
Activities should be changed on a daily basis and focus on a variety of skill areas. Teachers should be active in engaging with the children.

Activity Guide

KINDERGARTEN READINESS ACTIVITY GUIDE

If you suspect that your child is not “on target” with readiness skills, here are some activity suggestions to help. Activities are best done on a daily basis, in small doses (5–10 minutes at a time). Children learn more easily and comprehensively by being exposed to new ideas/skills frequently, but for short amounts of time.

Activity Guide



SKILL AREA: LARGE MUSCLES (GROSS MOTOR)

Gross motor development is the gaining of strength, flexibility and coordination in the arms, legs, back and stomach for play, sports, walking, sitting upright in a chair and many other activities.

Gross motor activities are fun and exciting for most children, but they may be difficult and frustrating for a child with difficulty in this area. If gross motor is hard, do NOT force participation. DO ENCOURAGE participation by doing the activity with your child and offering additional physical support (i.e. a hand hold to help balance or a close presence when climbing the bars). Praise your child often for both participation and small victories. Make the time more enjoyable by incorporating themes your child likes (i.e. princesses, astronauts, trains, etc.) into the activity. Children benefit the most from daily gross motor opportunities; make the time to go to the park, beach, recreation center, to take a walk or run, or to incorporate other gross motor opportunities into your child's day.

Activity Guide

Activities:

- Climb—at the park on the play structure, on a rocky beach, at a climbing wall.
- Slide—in all different positions on all different slides.
- Swing—on a variety of swings.
- Balance—on one foot, to hop, on a curb or balance beam, for yoga postures, etc.
- Play ball games—use a beach ball or balloon for the child who has fear of the ball.
- Play park games like Hide and Seek, tag, Ring Around the Rosy, etc.
- Visit the beach to hike, run, play safely in the water, dig in the sand, etc.
- Participate in tumbling, gymnastics, swimming, martial arts, dance or other classes.
- Move—Dance, run, jump, hop, skip, walk, turn somersaults, and move!

SKILL AREA: SMALL MUSCLES (FINE MOTOR)

Fine motor development is the gaining of skills for hand use. Writing, drawing, coloring, cutting, using a fork/spoon, opening containers, managing zippers and snaps are all fine motor activities. If fine motor development is an area of need, work with your child in a non-stressful environment for short periods of time (5–10 minutes) on highly motivating activities (i.e. if your child loves farm animals, make a duck egg out of play dough, or work on drawing pigs and then cutting them out for stick puppets).

Gross motor development comes BEFORE fine motor skill and is an important foundation for fine motor development. If your child is having difficulty with fine motor, consider increasing the focus on gross motor skill building, while also continuing to present fine motor activities.

The following materials and strategies are recommended for providing preschoolers with plenty of opportunities for developing age appropriate hand skills. Letting your child explore the materials and use what appeals to him/her is a starting point. You can also

incorporate a few supplies into a “project” so that your child has a bit more structure with which to work.

- Crayons: cutting or breaking thick crayons into small pieces (1 inch) for little hands to hold is an effective way to work on grasp. Provide long crayons as well.
- Markers: regular, washable markers, scented markers, color changers and stamper markers are all fun. Reinforce taking tops off/replacing them as well as drawing and coloring, as working with caps builds use of two hands and works on strength. For children who are not ready to use a “school” grasp on markers, “bulb based” markers (with sea, animal and castle themes) are available through specialty/educational toy stores and art stores.
- Pencils: short “golf” pencils are good for small hands. Otherwise, “thick” pencils work well for preschoolers. Be sure to use pencils with soft lead for darker, easier to read marks.
- Paint: finger paint, brush paint, sponge paint and dot paint are all options. Cover your child in an old shirt or smock and let him/her explore

the fine motor and sensory aspects of finger paint. Dot paints are great for helping kids learn to squeeze and direct the paint. Dot Art design books are available to use with the paints, and are a fun and easy way to structure the activity. Non-toxic, water based paints, a variety of brushes, some sponges to cut up into shapes, and some “non-spill” paint containers are other supplies to have on hand.

- Paper: construction paper in a variety of colors, newsprint, printer paper, shiny colored paper and scraps of wrapping paper are all great for activities.
- Scissors: small *Fiskar* brand scissors work well for many kids and are easily obtained from variety and office supply stores. It is important that the blades of the scissors meet well, and the handles are molded and comfortable for small hands. If the scissors are low quality, they will not cut easily, which is disappointing and frustrating for young children. Lack of success may also make preschoolers reluctant to cut. For those who have difficulty with cutting, selecting specialty scissors from a therapy supply store may be helpful.

- Cutting Projects: beginning cutters will have an easier time cutting construction paper, card stock or laminated paper rather than thin paper. Other materials like play dough, plastic drinking straws and corn tortillas can be motivating for beginning cutters. Paper scraps work just fine to make “fringe”, “feathers” or other snipped items. More skilled cutters will need thick, straight lines drawn on the paper as a guide. Eventually, children will be able to cut simple shapes like squares, triangles and circles. Be sure the shapes are at least 4”–6” in size to provide for ease of cutting.
- Adhesives: glue sticks and white glue are good to have on hand. Colored masking tape and transparent (“scotch”) tape are other adhesives to explore. A large tape dispenser helps kids tear their own tape. Have a stapler available for use with adult supervision.
- Stencils: plastic stencils work on pencil/ marker control and lend themselves to project themes. You can also make stencils from scrap cardboard.

- Hole Punch: a single hole punch can be used for making instant hanging projects. You can also provide decorative hole punches but be sure they are the “easy push” type.
- Easels and Slanted Surfaces: many young children, and children with poor tool use skills can benefit from working on a vertical or slanted surface. This angle takes some of the pressure off of the wrist and assists in control. A four inch binder works well for table top activities. Using an easel or taping paper to a wall (at eye level for young artists) can be helpful for painting and drawing. Chalk or white boards are nice for other projects. Lying under a table and painting on paper taped overhead is another activity idea.
- “Decorations”: glitter, glitter glue, small pom poms, beads and bangles, stickers, craft sticks, foam/ wood shapes, feathers, yarn, ribbon, cotton balls, aluminum foil, rubber stamps/ink pads, confetti, tissue paper, pipe cleaners, wiggle eyes, doilies, dry noodles etc. are all wonderful to have on hand. They may seem unnecessary, but for many children, they take an unmotivating activity (fine motor) and make it into a fun, skill-building experience.

- “Found Items” are also inspiring for kids. Collecting sand, small shells/stones, twigs, leaves/flowers, etc. makes for a great nature project. Use boxes, paper towel/toilet paper rolls, egg cartons, brown bags, foil, buttons, etc. to create interesting and creative projects like masks, robots, bird houses, etc. Styrofoam cups, paper plates and fabric scraps are other material ideas.
- Play Dough, and clay/play dough tools. Have a variety of “tools” available. Include rolling pins, hammers, cutting tools and cookie cutters. If you make your own play dough, try experimenting with various food colors, extract scents (in the baking section of the grocery store) and textures. Some sand, glitter or ground coffee can make a creative addition. Corn starch and water, putty, modeling clay, ceramic clay and bread/cookie dough are other options. Consider two types of activities: play with dough that is kept moist and reused, and projects with clay that will be dried or be baked to make permanent art pieces.

- Manipulatives: *Legos*, *Lincoln Logs*, large or small pop beads, *Zoob Dudes*, or any other plastic/wood/foam join-together items that suit the age level of the child will work. The act of building encourages the hands to work together and fosters problem solving and creativity, as well as hand skill.
- Sewing Cards/ Beads and String: sewing cards can be purchased inexpensively in a variety of motivating designs and come with sewing laces. You can also make your own with cardboard and a hole punch. With the sewing cards, younger children can sew however they like, older and more skilled kids can be shown a whip stitch and then a running (in and out) stitch and be encouraged to use each hole in turn.

There are a huge variety of beads available for bead stringing, and you can also use *Cheerios* or noodles. With beading, younger children should focus on stringing a variety of beads on pipe cleaners if string is difficult to manage. Encourage older or more skilled children to create a simple color and/or shape patterns with their beads. Sewing cards and bead stringing work on two-handed skill and fine motor control.

Activity Guide

- Eye Droppers: with colored water/ink makes a wonderful, simple project. Drop ink onto absorbent paper like paper towelling or paper coffee filters. Kids can learn the pre-scissors movements of squeeze/release as they make design projects with colored liquids. They also learn about control and coordination with tools.

SKILL AREA: SENSORY

Exposing your child to a variety of experiences in all sensory areas is important for nurturing development. If your child is having difficulty with processing sensory information, consult an occupational therapist trained to address these issues.

Sensory exploration should be child directed. This means that the adult provides the materials/environment and the child chooses how he or she will interact within the situation. For example, allow your child to direct how long and how forcefully he or she is pushed on a swing (or pumps independently). Or: provide your child with messy art activities, but do not force participation—instead, encourage your child to explore.

Here are some ideas to get started in sensory exploration. Many of the movement and body awareness ideas are also included in the Gross Motor section:

- Touch: to build knowledge and comfort with various textures and temperatures for development of the tactile system. Also, to

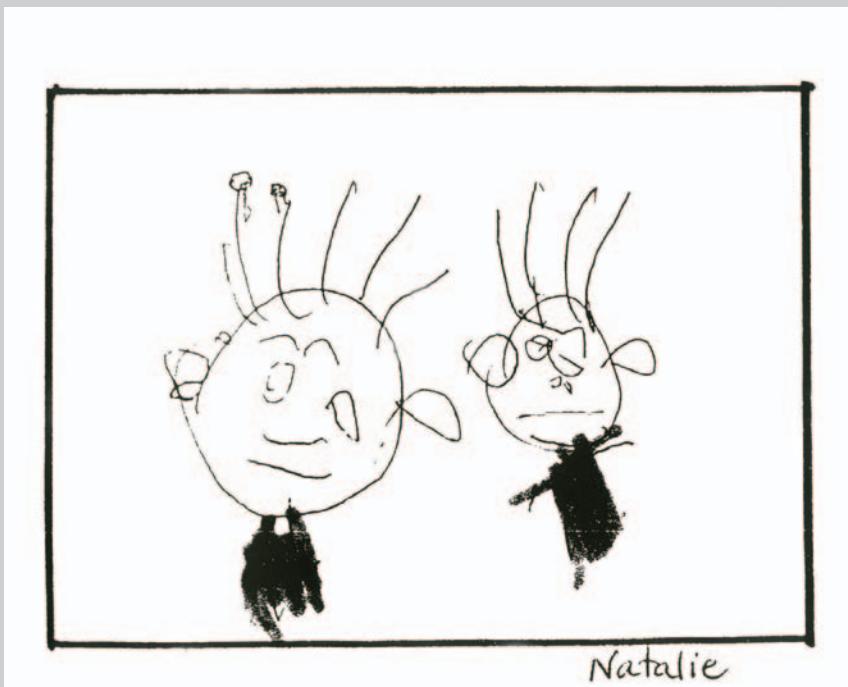
develop touch sensitivity (discrimination) for fine motor. Cook with dough (pizza, bread, or cookies), use play dough or clay, set up a water table with soap bubbles, finger paint, use glue and paste, play in a bin full of beans/rice/birdseed, use pudding or shaving cream to draw on a tray or table (be sure your child knows not to eat the shaving cream), explore fabric and other textures. Play with warm, cool and cold water, make something out of ice, explore the differences in temperature.

- Movement: to develop balance, coordination, muscle control and organization for activities. Go upside down, roll, climb, jump, spin, ride a tricycle or bike, slide, swing, dance and tumble.
- Body Awareness: to move confidently and with appropriate speed, force and space from people/things in the environment. Push, pull, carry, squeeze through small spaces, crash into pillows, jump, bounce on a big ball, crawl through a tunnel or under the table and play wrestle.
- Sound: to tune the ears for hearing, listening and processing important information from the environment. Listen to a variety of types of

music, go to the park and listen for bird songs and bug sounds, whisper, shout and provide times of no TV/radio/music in the house.

- Sight: to teach the eyes to scan, track, see important things and find relevant information in the environment. Walk around the neighborhood and city—look for street art, interesting buildings, and different colors and letters. Encourage your child to look at art of all kinds. Go to the zoo or aquarium and look at the creatures. Look for particular colors and shapes in the environment. Provide books with hidden pictures (like “I Spy”). Look at nature. Balance time by looking at things up close (like computer and TV) with looking at things from afar.
- Taste and Smell: to encourage a tolerance for a range of healthy foods and a willingness to explore unfamiliar tastes and smells. Provide a variety of healthy meals and snacks. Encourage, but do not force “tasting”. Identify sweet, sour, salty and bitter. Note smells in the environment and identify those odors.

Activity Guide



SKILL AREA: PRE-LITERACY

Pre-literacy is the preparation for learning to read and write. It focuses on the concepts and foundation skills needed for academic preparedness.

- Count numbers and then count things (toys, pieces of fruit, candles on a cake, etc.) using a finger to mark each one (one-to-one correspondence).
- Identify numbers that are written in books and on signs.
- Learn to recognize the letters of the alphabet and to sing the ABC song.
- Learn to recognize basic shapes: circle, triangle, square, rectangle, diamond and star.
- Label objects in the environment.
- Use measurement tools (ruler, tape measure, measuring cups, scales, etc.).
- Link real life experiences (i.e. going to the zoo) with pictures in a book.

Activity Guide

- Have your child take pictures with a camera, label the pictures and put them in a book or on a poster.
- Write down stories your child tells you and make drawings to go with them.
- Set the table to reinforce the concept of left to right (the direction we read and write).
- Play Lotto, Bingo and memory games.
- Have your child use “emergent writing” for imaginary play. Emergent writing has the intention and actions of writing, although the letters and words may not resemble written language at all. Emergent writing is an important step towards literacy. Activity ideas: take orders in a restaurant, send a letter to a friend, do a school assignment, or play doctor’s office.
- Sing rhyming songs, including the alphabet song, and clapping and body imitation games.
- Read, read, read to your child!

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ON-LINE:

American Academy of Pediatrics; Developmental Milestones
<http://www.med.umich.edu/1libr/yourchild/devmile.htm>

First 5 California School Readiness Initiative information.
<http://www.ccfc.ca.gov/SchoolReady1.htm>

Brigance Screen: Kindergarten and First Grade. Commonly used assessment tool to measure the development of individual children in kindergarten and first grade (preschool screen also available).
Curriculum Associates.
<http://www.curriculumassociates.com/order/newproduct.asp?topic=T0A&sub=T0A1&title=brigscreenk1&Type=SCH&CustId=1452054624909061204093>

Developmental and school readiness information.
<http://www.smartstart-nc.org>

Developmental Milestones in Early Literacy.
http://www.reachoutandread.org/resource_develop.html

National Association for the Education of Young Children: Position Statement on School Readiness.
<http://www.naeyc.org/about/positions/psredy98.asp>

NOTES

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