



Understanding Children

Kindergarten Ahead



It all began that day your baby was born. From the moment of your child's birth, you have shared many firsts – first smile, first tooth, first steps, and first words. Now you are approaching another important first – the first day of kindergarten.

Both you and your child may have several different feelings about this new adventure. It is very normal to feel excited, afraid, and curious, all at the same time.

You can help your pre-kindergarten by talking together about what to expect. Provide opportunities to try new things, new ideas and new friendships. Children who have been introduced to a few basic skills and who can get along well with others are sure to have a positive kindergarten experience.

■ Make a friend. Be a friend.

Learning how to make friends and get along with others is an important skill for all young children to learn. Strong social skills provide a good foundation for learning.

Provide opportunities to learn

Look for opportunities for your child to be with other children. Swimming, dancing, or craft experiences are available in many communities. You can also organize something with one or two other parents. Trips to the zoo, a neighborhood picnic, or just an afternoon together can provide many opportunities to learn social skills.

Guide your child

Remember that social skills don't just happen. Watch your child closely and gently step in when a little adult coaching is

Ask yourself these questions:

- How well does my child play with others?
- Does he/she know how to ask others to play?
- Can he/she share and cooperate well with others?
- Is he/she good at asking for help?
- Is he/she good at answering questions?
- Can he/she follow directions?
- Can he/she express thanks and appreciation?
- Is he/she good at solving simple problems when faced with a challenge?

If you are not sure about the answers to these questions, you may want to take some time watching your child play and interact with others.

needed. Even children who attend preschool or child care can sometimes use a little help. Strengthen these new skills by practicing them at home together.

Use books to teach

At school children will be learning to share toys, time, space, and the attention of their teacher. A good way to talk about sharing and getting along is with a book. Check with your local library for good children's books on this topic.

■ Learning About Routines

Sometime before school starts, you will want to help your child put order in his or her day. Try to establish some daily activities that become routine. Doing things in a predictable order each day helps children feel secure and adapt more readily to school routines. Establishing a routine also makes it easier for children to develop healthy habits such as washing hands or brushing teeth.

Make meal times count

Eating snacks or meals at about the same time each day can help your child get used to daily routines. A good breakfast will help your child focus on learning. Sharing new ideas and experiences while eating meals together will help your child learn how to talk about new things that are happening at school.

Keep regular bedtimes

Routines should also include going to bed at a certain time and getting up at a certain time. You might try getting your child an alarm clock. It is fun to learn to set it at night and shut it off in the morning. A clock can help your child feel a little more independent and make getting up much easier.

■ Building Blocks for Learning

The days your child spends in kindergarten will be filled with learning. You can help prepare your child for that experience by reviewing a few basics such as color or shapes. Use everyday activities as opportunities to teach and learn. Treat each learning opportunity as an adventure and make it fun!

Talk about colors

Point out red, yellow, blue, green, orange, purple, brown, and black wherever you see them. Look for shades of these colors and use the labels light, dark, and medium.

Point out shapes and sizes

There are circles, squares, triangles, ovals, and rectangles all around us. In the supermarket find the biggest box of cereal or the smallest apple.

Talk about directions and position

Discuss ideas such as up, down, front, back, top, and bottom. This can make a great game, with each of you taking turns following the other person.

Point out similarities and differences

Try sorting objects by color, size, or type. Encourage your child to sort everyday objects such as silverware, socks, or blocks.

Identify numbers

Look together for numbers on things around the house – calendars, can labels, rulers, or newspapers.

Count together

Learning to count works best when a child can touch and count



real objects. Buttons, seeds, rocks, and macaroni are all great everyday items that can be counted.

Use many words

Expand your child's vocabulary by naming and talking about many things. Try to use the proper label for things, such as refrigerator, blender, television, alarm clock, and newspaper.

Help your child learn about books

Beginning readers enjoy familiar stories filled with words they already know that are repeated over and over. Choose books that you can first read together, tying the pictures and printed words with spoken words. Ask your child to predict what will happen next. Encourage him or her to retell the story.

Help your child learn to recognize printed letters and words

Print your child's name and encourage him or her to copy it. Identify common words in books, signs, or grocery store items.

Help your child learn to listen

You can take turns telling stories. Try playing games that involve following directions, repeating sounds, or making up rhymes. Be sure to take advantage of your local library's story time programs for children.

Encourage basic physical skills

Learning how to use finger and hand muscles helps children

develop good writing skills. Give your child opportunities to draw shapes or pictures. Show him or her how to use scissors to cut through one inch strips of paper or along simple lines. Spend some time at the kitchen table playing with play dough. Provide a space to build with wooden or plastic blocks. Try throwing and catching a ball together.

■ Self-help Skills

School is more than just book-learning and making new friends. It also is a place for your child to take a new step toward independence. Be sure your child learns a few important self-help skills before school starts.

Practice dressing skills

Putting on and taking off coats, shoes, and boots are a big part of every school day. Purchase clothing that is easy to put on and be sure your child knows how to handle zippers, buttons, and shoe fasteners.

Teach responsibility

Begin encouraging your child to take responsibility for personal belongings. This will lessen the number of lost mittens, caps, and pencils later on. Learning to clean up after a task is also an important skill.

Teach good health practices

Many colds and illnesses can be avoided by learning to wash hands before eating, after toileting, and blowing noses.

Common questions children ask:

- How will I find my classroom?
- What do I do if I get lost?
- Where (and what) will I eat?
- Where will I put my coat?
- Where will I go to the bathroom?
- Will I have friends?
- What will I do if I get sick?
- Will I see my brother (or sister)?

Teach safety skills

Practice recognizing stop signs and lights. Learn about crosswalk safety. If your child will be riding a bus or will be near buses or cars dropping off children, it is a good idea to go over additional safety rules. Reminders to stay on sidewalks and avoid walking in the streets also should be discussed.

Teach emergency information

Your child should know his or her name, address, and phone number and your name(s) too. This will help in case of an emergency.

Teach personal safety

Your child should know with whom he or she goes to and from school. If there is a change in who picks the child up after school, call the school and have the teacher tell the child the changes. Be certain that your child knows never to go with strangers or even people he or she knows unless you or the teacher authorizes it.

■ Looking Forward

One of the best ways to help your child prepare for school is for you to spend time talking with each other about everyday activities. Sharing information with your child can help him or her to get a better picture of what kindergarten will be like.

Talk about familiar activities

Many of the things that happen at home will happen at school. Playing games, singing songs, reading books, and playing with toys are all part of kindergarten. There will be many new things, too. The teacher will help your child learn about letters, numbers, and words. There will be many new games, songs, and stories to share.

Show respect for the teacher

A new person who will play a big part in your child's life is the teacher. Make sure your child understands that the teacher is there to help anytime he or she needs it. Tell your child the teacher will be helping him or her learn new things and meet new children. The teacher will answer questions or solve problems that come along.

Visit the school

Part of the fear of beginning school is being unfamiliar with what school is like. Plan a visit to the school ahead of time. If possible, visit the classroom when children are there. Consider taking pictures of common areas such the front entrance, the cafeteria, the library, the office, and even the bathroom.

Many schools encourage families to visit on a special day in the spring or summer before their child starts kindergarten. Contact your local school to find out more.

■ Staying in Touch

You may be a little uneasy about your child's first day at school. Starting school is a big step; it's very normal to feel a little sad as those delightful preschool years slip into the past. Starting kindergarten represents a new stage in your child's life and in your role as a parent. Here are some things that can make your child's school experience easier for both of you.

Get to know the teacher

Open the lines of communication so that his or her job of teaching can be easier. No one knows or understands a child

quite like a parent. You have much to offer that will help the teacher.

Share information

Be sure to let the teacher know about events that can affect the way your child acts at school: a new baby, a visiting grandparent, or a child care change.

Stay involved

Be a part of your child's school experiences. Learn about the new discoveries he or she is making. Eat lunch with your child every so often and get to know his or her friends. Working parents find that volunteering to assist with weekend or evening school events helps them keep in touch.

If your child knows you care about him or her and what happens at school, that first year will be easier. Show your interest and offer your support as your child faces all those new challenges ahead. Knowing you will be there when needed can make going to school a pleasant "big moment" in life. Both you and your child have many new things to learn and discover. Best of all you both will be growing together as you each experience the special moments kindergarten has to offer.

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