

What Teachers Wish Parents Knew

The inside scoop on preparing your child for kindergarten — starting now

By Diane Benson Harrington

When Mitchell Tea of Eden Prairie, MN, came home from his first day of kindergarten two years ago, his mom was excited to hear about his experience. But she was disheartened when the first thing Mitchell said was, "How do I make friends?"

"It never occurred to me that he might not know what to do," says Amy Rea. "I should have told him to say something like 'Does anyone here like Pokemon?' Basic social skills — like how to start a conversation and ask people questions — were the things that really worried him."

Many parents, say experts, simply don't know what's needed most to prepare their kids — socially or academically — for kindergarten. That can be frustrating for moms and dads, kids, and teachers alike.

One thing to keep in mind: Kindergarten isn't what you remember from your own school days. Many of today's students are starting to learn how to write sentences, add and subtract, and work together on problem solving. It's not too soon, say teachers, to begin to lay the groundwork for preparing your child for kindergarten in the fall. And they have some surprising — and fun — advice for doing that. Here's what you need to know.

Social skills — listening, taking turns, sharing, following directions — are vital

If your child doesn't know how to make friends or borrow things, she won't be able to share classroom materials with her peers. If she can't follow three-part instructions or sit still for the 20 minutes it takes to do a project, she'll lag behind. And any student who's struggling not to speak out of turn will have trouble focusing on the lesson.

What to do:

It takes time and practice for a 5- or 6-year-old to learn to pay attention and not poke her neighbor. Kids in group daycare or preschool have some experience with taking turns and cooperating; others can learn through summer camp or art, sports, or music classes.

At home, role-play. "How do you ask to borrow something? What if a kid says no? Being prepared for situations like these will help your child get through the day," says Tracie Paquette, a kindergarten teacher in Satellite Beach, FL.

Teresa Savage, author of *The Ready-to-Read, Ready-to-Count Handbook: How to Best Prepare Your Child for School*, suggests a game of Lids and Bottles to help a short attention span grow. "Collect peanut butter jars, shampoo bottles, or other containers. Put the lids in one box and the jars in another. Ask your child to match the lid to the correct bottle," she says. To encourage following directions, play Simon Says.

Kindergarten isn't just fun and games

Good teachers strive to make classes fun, so what your child does in school may seem like play. But the work children do really is important for learning. A picture, for instance, is rarely just a picture, says Paquette. "It's about listening. Did the child draw what he was told to draw? Sometimes we talk about shapes: What shape is a house? Can you draw that?"

Singing songs subtly introduces kids to memorization, rhythm, and tempo, all of which will come in handy for learning reading, math, and science. Something as simple as cutting and pasting can hone fine motor skills, as well as teach such lessons as patience and how to follow instructions.

What to do:

Start now by sharing with your child your excitement about all the Big Kid things that he'll be doing. "Eagerness to learn is at least as important as knowing specific facts and skills," says Marilou Hyson, Ph.D., associate executive director for professional development at the National Association for the Education of Young Children.

In the fall, help him understand the importance of school by being involved yourself. Contact your child's teacher before the first day (many schools will already know who it is) and ask how parents can assist in the classroom./font>

Children need a broad range of experiences

From such eye-openers as museums to fun activities like combing the seashore for shells, broadening your child's world is a smart move. "The more kids are able to experience by the time they get to kindergarten, the easier it will be for them to learn and build upon what they're learning," says Laurie Marple, a kindergarten teacher in Davenport, IA.

Diverse activities can also help increase vocabulary. "One of the best predictors of a child's later success as a reader is the size of her vocabulary when she begins school," Hyson says. Helping your child explore her corner of the world will provide her with the chance to learn new words associated with visits to zoos, forests, lakes, stores, libraries, and so forth.

What to do:

Even young kids can get something out of a trip to an art or science museum, whether it's seeing the difference between watercolor and oil paintings (then wanting to create both at home) or understanding that some animals sleep during the day and play at night. Go fishing or to a sporting event; call the fire department or police station to arrange a tour. Take a trip to the zoo, a local animal shelter, or a farm. Head to a gardening store and talk about plants and seeds, then buy some to grow together at home. Visit a pet store to buy tadpoles, put them in a fish tank, and watch them develop into frogs. "These simple activities aren't things a parent necessarily thinks of as wonderful experiences, but to a five- or six-year-old who's never experienced them before, they're fascinating," says Paquette.

Independence and problem solving are the cornerstones of success

Teachers say they can pick out the children whose parents do everything for them: In reading groups, they want to be told the words instead of applying sounds; or, when it's their turn to write, they wait to be told which words to put down.

What to do:

Assign chores at home, such as making the bed, feeding the dog, or taking plates to the sink. "This way, when we're teaching about the classroom community, it's not something new," says Paquette.

Teach your child to think creatively to work through everyday problems. "Kids' lives can be bumpy — they're going to spill milk. Use the opportunity to say, 'Can you think of another way we could have done that so you won't spill the milk again?'" says Sharon Wilkins, author of *Ready for Kindergarten: An Award-Winning Teacher's Plan to Prepare Your Child for School*. Ultimately, you'll be giving him not only the gifts of autonomy and problem solving but the courage to keep trying too.

Basic academics give kids a head start

Ideally, to fit in with today's learning curve, children heading into kindergarten should already:

- Be familiar with the letters of the alphabet (uppercase) and the sounds they make.
- Be able to hold a pencil and safety scissors.
- Know how to print their first name or even just the first letter of their name.
- Be able to recognize basic shapes.
- Be able to count from one to ten and identify those numbers.
- Count out objects correctly (blocks, crayons, and so on) and be familiar with the idea that numbers are used to measure things (four feet tall, one cup of sugar, for example).
- Know most colors.
- Understand and recognize similarities and differences (for instance, in comparing letters or objects).
- Realize that stories have a beginning, a middle, and an end. If they don't know these things but are eager to learn and have social skills, they should be able to pick up the academics fairly well. But having a leg up can make a difference in the long run. "Children who start ahead tend to stay ahead all through high school. Those who start behind tend to lag behind all the way through," Savage says.

That doesn't mean you need to look at worksheets at home. "The goal is for kids to love writing and reading, and to see a point to it," says Toni Bickart, coauthor of *Preschool for Parents*. "When you do a workbook page and just write 'cat,' there's no purpose in that. But if you pretend to take a telephone message for Dad, there's a reason behind that kind of activity."

What to do:

Give your child plenty of opportunities to cut, paste, write, and draw. Help her hold pencils, markers, and scissors correctly. Read, read, and read some more.

Even going to the grocery store can be a fun learning experience. If you need four cans of tomato soup, let your child help you find the labels that start with the letter *T* and count four cans.

Ask her to help you sort laundry, and talk about similarities and differences between the clothing: Dad's socks are bigger; Mom's T-shirts look very much like Dad's.

Knowing the little things ahead of time can calm fears

Last year, Paquette's nephew, Mark, was waiting outside school for his mom to pick him up after kindergarten. "When he got out to the car loop, there was a line of vehicles and she wasn't the first one, so he got scared. He didn't realize she had to wait her turn to get to him," Paquette says.

A child may be too timid to ask where to put his coat or lunch box. Remember how nervous you were the first day of your new job? Magnify that times a zillion, and you've got the jitters of a kindergartner.

What to do:

Sometime this spring or right before school starts, take a tour of the building with your child. Ease his anxieties by focusing on all the areas where he may spend time and by asking questions: Where's the bathroom? Will he have to get permission to go or can he simply excuse himself? Where's the cafeteria? What time will he be eating? How does he get a tray of food? Does he have to stand in line even if he brings his own lunch? Will the teacher sit at the table with him or will other lunchroom monitors be there? How will he find the classroom? Where does the bus let children off? Give your child the chance to hear all the details. At home, let him practice opening his lunch box, thermos, milk cartons, and zipper-lock bags. He'll be a pro by the time his first day rolls around.

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