



Successful Transition to Kindergarten: The Role of Teachers & Parents

By Pam Deyell-Gingold

While new kindergartners are worrying about whether or not anyone will be their friend and if they'll be able to find the bathroom, their preschool teachers are wondering if they've succeeded at preparing their small students for this big transition. In recent years the role of kindergarten has changed from an extension of preschool to a much more academic environment because of new standards in the public schools that "push back" academic skills to earlier grades.

How can we ensure that our students make a smooth transition? Are our students mature enough? What can we do to make them "more" ready? This article will explore the skills that constitute kindergarten "readiness," how preschool teachers can collaborate with parents and kindergarten teachers to make the process more rewarding for all, and activities to help prepare children for what will be expected of them in kindergarten.

The Transition Process

Children go through many transitions throughout their lives, but one of the most important transitions is the one from a preschool program to kindergarten. "During this period behavior is shaped and attitudes are formed that will influence children throughout their education" (PTA and Head Start, 1999). Children's transitions are most strongly influenced by their home environment, the preschool program they attend, and the continuity between preschool and kindergarten (Riedinger, 1997).

In 1995, Head Start and the Parent Teacher Association (PTA) began a plan to create a partnership between the two organizations in order to create effective transition practices and to promote continuity in parent and family involvement in the schools. Three pilot programs were studied to determine "best practice" in kindergarten transition, and to foster the continued strong involvement of families in their children's education. They worked with elementary schools to create parent-friendly environments and to develop strategies that lessen the barriers to involvement (Head Start & PTA, 1999). Even Start, a federal program for low-income families implemented to improve educational opportunities for children and adults, also helps parents to work with the school system to help their children succeed. Their research found that parents felt that the way in which Even Start focuses on the family strengths rather than weaknesses and allows the families to identify their own needs, empowered them more than anything else to help them to support their children in school (Riedinger, 1997).

Kindergarten Readiness

A 1998 study by the National Center for Early Development & Learning of nearly 3,600 kindergarten teachers nationwide indicated that 48 percent of children have moderate to serious problems transitioning to kindergarten. Teachers are most often concerned about children's skills in following directions, academics, and working independently. There seems to be a discrepancy between the expectations of teachers and the actual skills of kindergarten children. Therefore, a need for kindergarten teachers to collaborate with both parents and preschool teachers exists (Pianta & Cox, 1998). School readiness is more than a matter of academics, though. As reported in a National Education Goals Panel in 1998; "The prevailing view today, however, is that readiness reflects a range of dimensions, such as a child's health and physical development, social and emotional development, approaches to learning, language and communication skills, and cognitive and general knowledge" (California Department of Education, 2000).

Historically, kindergarten was a “children’s garden”: a place to interact for the first time with a group of age-mates, and to learn basic skills through play. Today, because of increasing numbers of working mothers, single-parent families, and strict welfare regulations, many children begin having group experiences in a child care program or family child care home at a much earlier age. Together with the concern that America’s children are not getting adequate education to compete in a global market, our schools began to make the transition from the children’s garden to “curriculum escalation” (Shepard & Smith, 1988) and “academic trickle-down” (Cunningham, 1988). While the trend towards focusing on academic skills continues at a fast pace, early childhood professionals argue for a more integrated curriculum that addresses the developmental needs of each child.

Social Adjustment

Although academics may be becoming increasingly more important, research shows that social skills are what most affect school adjustment (Ladd & Price, 1987; Ladd, 1990). Preschool teachers should not feel pressured into teaching academics beyond what is developmentally “best practice” (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997) but should continue to focus on social and emotional development. Children who have been rejected by their peers in kindergarten tend to have poor school performance, more absences, and negative attitudes towards school that last throughout their school years. “Three particular social skills that are known to influence children’s peer acceptance: play behavior, ability to enter play groups, and communication skills” (Maxwell & Eller, 1994).

Play Behavior and Communication Skills

Specific behaviors that cause rejection by fellow students include things like rough play, arguing, upsetting things in class, trying to get their own way, and not sharing. Children who exhibit these behaviors also tend to be less independent and less cooperative than their peers. Most children prefer playing with others who are polite, caring, and attentive. Preschool teachers and parents need to teach young children social skills, especially how to enter social groups. For example, children who say, “Looks like that’s a fun game, can I play?” are more likely to be accepted than those who shove others aside and whine, “I want a turn!”

Another important social skill is the ability to participate in complicated fantasy games and take part in making up and extending the story. Children who lack sufficient experience playing with age-mates may feel frustrated at not being able to keep up with the capabilities of their classmates. “A generous amount of guided social experience with peers prior to kindergarten helps children do well in this new world” (Maxwell & Eller, 1994). Some children need assistance to learn how to play make-believe. A teacher can help model this by giving verbal cues like, “You be the mommy, and I’ll be your little girl. Can I help you make dinner, Mommy?” Some children need reminders to keep them focused on their roles. Others may need help to read the emotions on people’s faces. “Look at Nick’s face. He is sad because you pulled the hat away from him.” Because young children do not have a large enough vocabulary to express themselves, teachers can help them find words to express their feelings such as, “You’re feeling frustrated. Let’s go find a puzzle with fewer pieces.”

Communication skills, such as being able to take part in a conversation, listen to others, and negotiate are also important. For example, children who speak directly to peers, are attentive to others in the group, and respond to the initiations of others tend to be liked by the other children. Disliked children are more likely to make irrelevant comments, reject the initiations of other children without reasons or explanations, and often make comments without directing them to anyone (Maxwell & Eller, 1994). Part of a teacher’s task is to quietly remind children to look at the person they’re talking to, and listen to what another child is saying.

Immaturity and Redshirting

A common practice when dealing with children who are not socially mature is to keep them out of school for a year, in the hope that “readiness will emerge.” In academic circles this is referred to as “redshirting,” a term borrowed from college athletics. However, “Research shows that redshirts are not gaining an academic advantage, and the extra year does not solve the social development problems that caused initial concern” (Graue, 1994). Parents who are told that their children need to stay home for a year should ask for the reasons.

“Developmentally appropriate practice is less common in kindergarten, and primary teachers face many constraints and pressures that teachers of younger children are not yet experiencing in the same intensity [although preschool appears to be next in line for “pushdown” curriculum].” (Jones, Evans, & Rencken, 2001).

“If we think inclusively we have to problem-solve in ways to accommodate the incredible diversity presented by the characteristics of kindergartners....Redshirting and retention are outmoded tools that should be replaced by more appropriate practices. One step in the right direction is collaboration between preschool and elementary school educators” (Graue, 1994). A second step is to have parents understand what experiences can help their child have a successful transition.

Learning About Classroom Styles

In collaborating with kindergarten teachers, preschool teachers and parents need to visit the school and pay close attention to details that may affect their students in kindergarten. “When teachers and parents agree on a philosophy of education, children usually adjust more easily” (Maxwell & Eller, 1994). Children feel more secure in their new environment if they feel that their parents support the teacher and the school.

The first step may be either a meeting with the kindergarten teacher or a class field trip to the elementary school. “Observe kindergarten classrooms to identify teaching styles, classroom management techniques, and routines. Also try to identify skills that are needed to be successful in participating in the kindergarten classroom” (Karr-Jelinek, 1994).

In her research, Karr-Jelinek used a checklist of what parents (and teachers) should look for in a kindergarten classroom, to see if their children – both normally developing and with special needs – are ready for the classroom they visit:

- How many steps are given at a time in directions?
- What types of words are children expected to understand?
- How does each individual child compare to the other children?
- How long are children expected to sit still in a group?
- How often do children speak out of turn or move around when they should be sitting?
- How much independence is expected?
- What type of work is being done? (small groups, seatwork, etc.)
- Where might my special needs students need extra help?
- What kind of special information can I pass along to the teacher about each child? (Karr-Jelinek, 1994)

Although expectations vary by teacher and school district, by the time children reach kindergarten they should be able to listen to a story in a group, follow two or three oral directions, take turns and share, follow rules, respect the property of others, and work within time and space constraints. They need to learn the difference between work and play, knowing when and where each is appropriate. “Most five-year-olds can express themselves fluently with a variety of words and can understand an even larger variety of words used in conversations and stories” (Nurss, 1987).

Many kindergartens make use of learning centers, small group instruction, and whole group language activities. However, others use “structured, whole group paper-and-pencil activities oriented to academic subjects, such as reading and mathematics. The curriculum in these kindergartens often constitutes a downward extension of the primary grade curriculum and may call for the use of workbooks, which are part of a primary level textbook series. Many early childhood professionals have spoken out on the inappropriateness of such a curriculum” (Nurss, 1987).

Preparing Parents for the Transition

High-quality preschool programs encourage parent involvement in the home and in the classroom. Volunteering to read during story time, to share cultural traditions, or to be a lunch guest are all ways for parents to feel that they are a part of their child’s school life. According to the National PTA, parent and family involvement increases student achievement and success. If preschool teachers can make parents feel welcome helping in the classroom, they will be more likely to remain involved in their child’s future education.

Many parents worry about their children entering elementary school because of their own negative school experiences. They may feel intimidated by teachers and uncomfortable showing up at school events – even for orientation and enrolling their children in school (Reidinger, 1997). Parents' expectations of how well children will do in school influence children's performance. It appears that parents who expect success may provide more support, encouragement and praise, which may give their children more self-esteem and confidence. The most important thing is that children who believe in their own abilities have been found to be more successful in school (Dweck, 1991).

To assist parents, preschool teachers can arrange visits to the school and take parents along on the kindergarten field trip. They can ask for children to be paired with a kindergarten "buddy" who can take them around, while parents meet with the teacher or go to the office to register their child. A study done by Rathbun and Hauskin (2001) showed that the more low-income students that were enrolled in a school, the less parental involvement there was. Involving low-income families in the schools may help to break the cycle of poverty of future generations.

One way to really help the family with transition is to empower the parents to act as advocates for their children. Parent meetings and newsletters can help parents learn how to work with school staff, learn about volunteer opportunities at school, as well as how to prepare their child at home for kindergarten. They may need some advice on how to help their children and themselves cope with anxieties related to transitions from preschool to kindergarten.

Preparing Children for Transition

In the last few weeks of summer, children start getting excited about going to kindergarten, and are apprehensive at the same time. It is important for parents to treat the child's entrance into kindergarten as a normal occurrence and not build up the event in children's minds. An important way to provide continuity for the child is to find preschool classmates or other children who will be in their kindergarten class. According to research, children who have a familiar peer in a new group setting have fewer problems adjusting to new environments (Howes, 1988).

Transition Activities for Parents and Children

The more you discuss this transition in a matter-of-fact way, the more comfortable children will become. Encourage parents to prepare their child for kindergarten with the following:

- Visit the school so the children can meet the kindergarten teacher and see what kindergarten is really like. Try to arrange for them to see more than one type of classroom activity, such as seatwork time and free choice time. Show them where the bathroom and cubbies are located.
- Find out what lunchtime will be like. If the children are going to be getting a school lunch, they may have to learn how to open new kinds of containers.
- Read books about kindergarten.
- Answer children's questions in a straight forward way about what they will do in kindergarten. Tell them they will listen to stories, do counting activities, have group time, and play outside.
- Explore how long the kindergarten day is and what the daily routine will be like. They will want to know what will be the same as preschool and what will be different.
- If the children are going to a school that presents more diversity than they are familiar with, talk honestly with them about racial and ethnic differences and disabilities.

- If children are going to be taking the schoolbus for the first time, you will need to discuss schoolbus safety rules.
- Reassure children that they will be picked up from school every day just as they are in preschool.
- Check to make sure your pre-kindergarten children are capable of basic kindergarten “readiness” skills. (See sidebar below.)

Conclusion

The transition from preschool to kindergarten can be a stressful time for both children and parents. However, if preschool teachers can facilitate collaboration between parents and kindergarten and familiarize children with the workings of kindergarten, it will be a smoother process. Parents need to try to find a developmentally appropriate class for their child by observing different classrooms and talking to teachers about educational philosophies. Preschool teachers, with their knowledge of different learning styles and the temperaments of their students, can help everyone with this important transition.

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Kindergarten Readiness Is...*

A child who listens

- To directions without interrupting
- To stories and poems for five or ten minutes without restlessness

A child who hears

- Words that rhyme
- Words that begin with the same sound or different sounds

A child who sees

- Likenesses and differences in pictures and designs
- Letters and words that match

A child who understands

- The relationship inherent in such words as up and down, top and bottom, little and big
- The classifications of words that represent people, places, and things

A child who speaks and can

- Stay on the topic in class discussions
- Retell a story or poem in correct sequence
- Tell a story or relate an experience of her own

A child who thinks and can

- Give the main idea of a story
- Give unique ideas and important details
- Give reasons for his opinions

A child who adjusts

- To changes in routine and to new situations without becoming fearful
- To opposition or defeat without crying or sulking
- To necessity of asking for help when needed

A child who plays

- Cooperatively with other children
- And shares, takes turns and assumes his share of group responsibility
- And can run, jump, skip, and bounce a ball with comparative dexterity

A child who works

- Without being easily distracted
- And follows directions
- And completes each task
- And takes pride in her work

*Adapted from Howlett, M.P. (1970, February 18). Teacher's edition: *My Weekly Reader Surprise*, Vol.12, Issue 20.



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