

AGES & STAGES

Is Your Child Ready for School?

By law, children must be enrolled in school or an approved alternative program by a particular age. In most parts of the country, these age requirements are five years old for kindergarten and six years old for first grade. Even then, cutoff dates, after which children must wait until the next school year to enter class, vary greatly.

The idea that because of their birth date some children are "ready for school" and others are not has become controversial. Just as children begin to work or talk at different ages, they also develop the psychological and social aptitudes necessary for school at varying ages.



In addition, many parents and educators feel that schools need to be ready for children. This newer approach emphasizes how school programs can be designed so that all children of the chronological age to enter school can benefit from the program. Of course, the reality is that a match between your child's development and the school's resources and adaptability may not exist.

When you're deciding when your child should start school, consider your child's unique abilities and local circumstances. Gather accurate information about your child's development, especially communication skills, including language development and the ability to listen; social skills and the ability to get along with other children and adults; and physical skills from running and playing to using a crayon or pencil. Talking with your child's pediatrician, preschool teacher, and/or childcare provider can provide some useful, objective observations and information.

Some schools may conduct their own tests to evaluate your youngster's abilities. So-called readiness tests tend to concentrate on academic skills, but most usually evaluate other aspects of development. These tests are far from infallible; some children who do poorly on them still fare well in school. Even so, you can use them as one of the

yardsticks in determining how your child's development has progressed relative to other children of the same age. Often, your own parental intuition about your child's capabilities is an accurate measure of how well she is prepared to enter school, particularly if you have an older child with whom you have had experience.

When you or the school identify some areas of your child's development that seem to lag behind, use this information to help you and the school plan for the special attention that your child may need. By sharing information with your child's teacher and other school staff, you can help the school be ready for your child. At the same time, you are establishing a partnership for your child's education that can and should continue throughout her childhood.

Parents can encourage their children's cognitive, physical, and emotional development before they enter school. Kindergarten teachers appreciate having children who are enthusiastic and curious in approaching new activities, can follow directions, are sensitive to other children's feelings, and can take turns and share. Some specific skills that will make your child's first year at school go smoothly include her ability to:

- Play well with other children with minimal fighting or crying.
- Remain attentive and quiet when being read a story.
- Use the toilet on her own.
- Successfully use zippers and buttons.
- Say her name, address, and telephone number.

There are great benefits to reading to your child beginning in infancy. Help your child acquire some basic skills, like recognizing and remembering letters, numbers, and colors. Expose her to enriching and learning experiences like trips to the museum, or enroll her in community art or science programs. To promote social-skills development, encourage her to play with other children of both sexes in the neighborhood and to participate in organized community-sponsored activities.

Some parents consider purposefully delaying their child's entrance into kindergarten. They believe that their child may gain some advantage and be more likely to succeed in academics, athletics, or social settings if she is older than average for her grade. Delaying school entry in order to obtain some advantage is not necessarily a winning strategy. Although there is some evidence that being among the youngest in a class may cause some academic problems, most of these seem to disappear by the third or fourth grade. On the other hand, there is evidence that children who are old for their grade are at significantly greater risk of behavior problems when they reach adolescence.

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