

School Readiness: Foundations in Language, Literacy, Thinking, and Social-Emotional Skills

Babies are born learning. They are naturally curious and driven to make sense of their world from day one. In order to be ready for school, children need to develop a strong foundation in their communication and thinking skills. They also need the ability to exert self-control and to have the self-confidence that they can master challenges. The good news is that you don't have to engage in formal "teaching" to instill these skills and attributes in your child. Instead, it is through everyday interactions with you and other loving caregivers that your child learns the basic skills she will need to cooperate, get along with others, and be a confident, enthusiastic learner.

WHAT YOU CAN DO:

Language and Literacy Development

Talk with your child, a lot!

- ▶ Talk with your baby. Copy her sounds and encourage her to imitate you.
- ▶ Point out and name the things you see and do together.
- ▶ Engage in back-and-forth conversations. It is always important to give your child time to respond, with actions or words.
- ▶ As your child grows, tell each other stories.
- ▶ Sing with your child. This is a terrific way to teach children new words and ideas. Play games by trying new words in a familiar song, "The itsy bitsy doggie..."
- ▶ Remember, your child will actually understand more than she can say, and by 2 years old she'll be able to follow two-step instructions like, "Go to the kitchen and get your cup."

Share books

- ▶ Let your baby explore them in whatever way he likes. Offer chunky board, cloth, or soft bath books that are safe for babies. Good books for babies are simple ones with brightly colored designs and pictures of things and people that are familiar to them. Follow your baby's lead; this may sometimes mean staying on the same page the whole time or reading just a few pages.
- ▶ Let your toddler hold the book and turn the pages. Point to the pictures as you read together. Ask her to point to the baby, house, or dog. With toddlers, you can start to read stories that introduce concepts such as up/down or big/little, colors, and numbers.
- ▶ Encourage your toddler to tell you the story, based on what is happening in the illustrations.
- ▶ Most toddlers are also just beginning to learn to sing. Share books that can be sung, such as "Wheels on the Bus."

School Readiness: Foundations in Language, Literacy, Thinking, and Social-Emotional Skills (continued)

Thinking Skills

Make everyday activities “teachable moments.” For example, bath time is a perfect opportunity to learn basic math and science concepts. Filling and dumping helps children learn about *empty* and *full*, and *in* and *out*. When the duck stays on top of the water, children learn about *floating* and *sinking* and the difference between liquids and solids. At mealtime you can count the napkins on the table. On a walk in the neighborhood you can talk about the different colors of the houses.

Encourage your child to explore objects and toys in different ways. Touching, banging, shaking, and rolling help children learn about how things work. Talk with your child about what he is doing. “You got the truck to move by pulling the string!”

Allow for lots of repetition. Children need practice doing things over and over again to master a challenge. Repetition strengthens the connections in the brain that help children master new skills.

Let your child be the problem-solver. Be your child’s coach. Give her the support she needs to solve a problem, but don’t solve it for her. Suggest she try other holes where the triangle might fit into the shape sorter instead of putting it in for her. This makes her feel confident to take on challenges and learn new things.

Provide challenges. Watch to see what skills your child has learned and then help him take the next step. If he can easily push the buttons on the pop-up toy, offer him a new one that requires more complex ways to make the toys appear. If he is building towers with blocks, suggest that the blocks can also be a house for stuffed animals. This helps him learn about pretend play.

Encourage your child’s growing imagination. Follow his lead as you play together. Let him be the “director.” This helps him develop his own ideas. It also strengthens his thinking skills as he makes logical connections in his stories: “The dog has to go back in his house because it’s raining.” Offer him props to help him act out the stories he’s creating.

Self-Control

Establish and enforce clear, appropriate limits. Setting consistent, age-appropriate limits helps children learn right from wrong and to follow rules. A child who has crayons taken away when she writes on the wall learns that she can either write on paper or she can’t use crayons.

Label and validate your child’s feelings. Letting children know that their feelings are understood helps them calm down and regain control. This doesn’t mean you give in to their demand. It means you teach and model how to express strong feelings appropriately. Say, “I know you are mad that we have to leave the park, but kicking me is not okay. You can kick this tree instead.”

Give choices. Giving a child choices is important for helping him feel in control and can lead to greater cooperation. Let him make decisions about what to wear or what to eat, within reasonable limits. When it comes to setting a limit, present your child with two acceptable options and let him choose: “Would you like to brush your teeth or put on your pajamas first?” Be clear about directions, don’t offer a choice. Say, “It’s bedtime,” not “Are you ready to go to bed?”

School Readiness: Foundations in Language, Literacy, Thinking, and Social-Emotional Skills (continued)

Help your child learn to wait. Waiting helps children learn self-control and teaches them that others have needs, too. Make the wait short, and give your child something to do in the meantime. Also, playing with friends offers many opportunities to help your child learn to wait, to share, and to take turns. With your guidance and lots of practice, your child will be well-equipped to work out conflicts with friends later on.

Give your child responsibilities. Children love to help out. They feel great pride in making a contribution, like feeding pets or watering plants. Be specific about what you want them to do. "Please put your blocks in the basket," instead of, "Let's clean up the room."