



# GUIDE TO KINDERGARTEN READINESS

## PRACTICAL TIPS FOR SUCCESS



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**Starting kindergarten can be scary and exciting for both parents and children. Ensuring that children are ready for successful school experiences is one of the most important issues in early childhood. The responsibility for school readiness is not only about how well the child is prepared, but how the adults who care for them can be supportive in this process.**

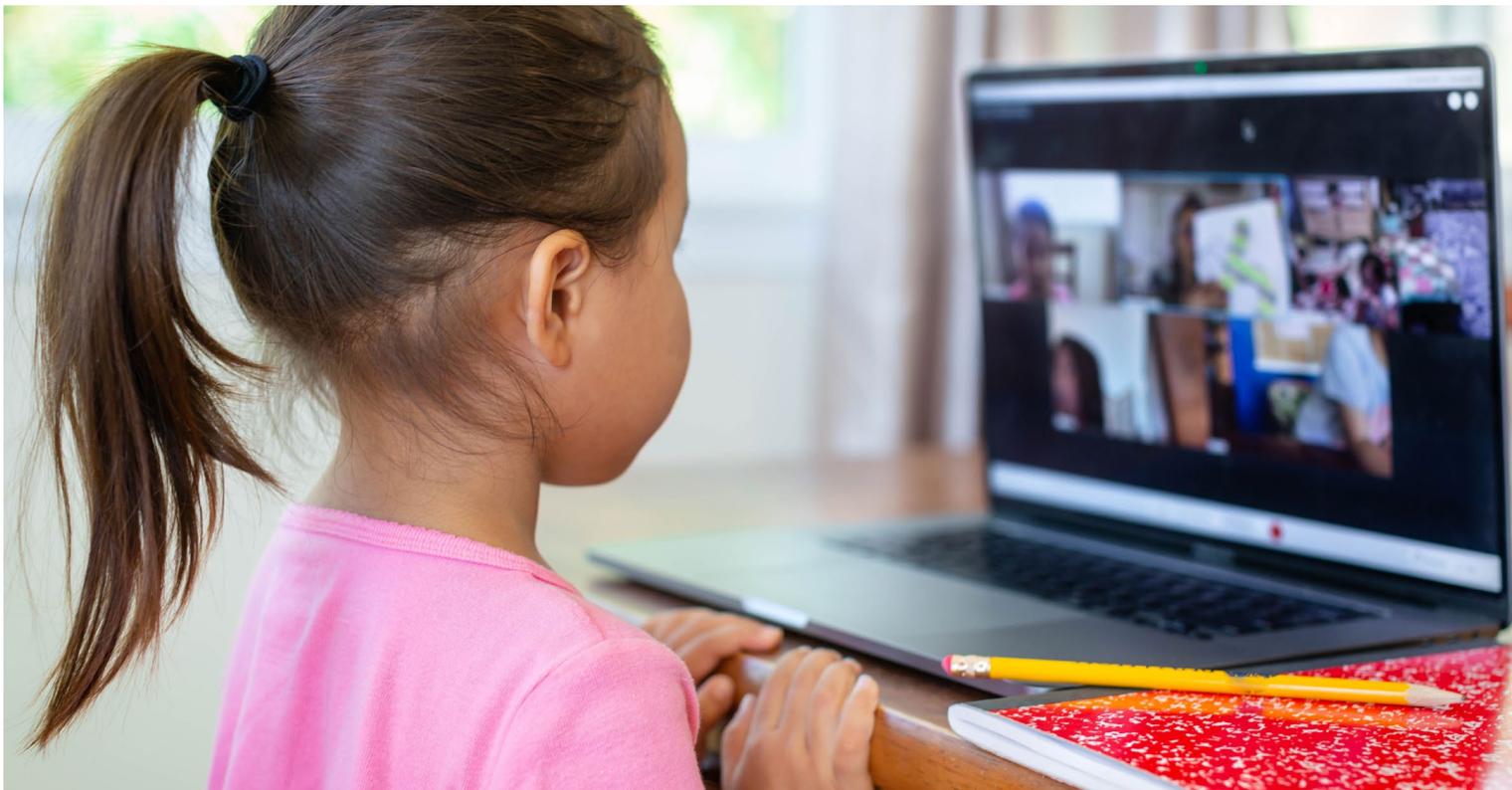
Research shows that the best thing we can do to support a child's transition to kindergarten is to form and keep positive relationships with them. Securely attached children are better able to make friends, work with others, solve problems creatively, learn and succeed.

Children who are ready for kindergarten show an eagerness to explore and discover new things. They demonstrate interest and abilities in all domains of early learning and development: social and emotional; language; cognitive, physical well-being and motor development; and approaches toward learning.

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## Promoting kindergarten readiness in a pre-K classroom requires:

- All children having access to opportunities that promote school success
- Educators and leaders recognizing and supporting children's individual differences
- Reasonable and appropriate expectations for what children should know and be able to do upon entering school



# 4 PILLARS FOR SUCCESS

School readiness goes beyond the skills and knowledge children have as they enter kindergarten. This is achieved through a combination of efforts involving children, families and schools. The four pillars of kindergarten readiness cover the many aspects of school readiness and are designed to be a helpful tool in your journey to help children succeed in school and in life.

“School readiness goes beyond skills and knowledge.”

These four critical pillars are covered in this guide:

- Addressing Developmental Domains
- Providing Differentiated Instruction and Intentional Teaching
- Assessing Progress
- Preparing for Transition

Ultimately, preschool teachers who partner with the families of their students and the school the child will attend will help make for a smooth and successful transition to kindergarten. When families and teachers work together, kids win!



# PILLAR 1: ADDRESSING DEVELOPMENTAL DOMAINS

Implementing a curriculum that addresses all domains of early learning is crucial for successful kindergarten readiness.

Neuroscience shows that brain wiring is specific to domains. Our affinity for particular disciplines, such as literacy, science or math, is dependent on our domain wiring. For example, without self-control (emotional development) one cannot optimize their ability in subjects that require concentration and focus. Without dexterity and coordination (physical development), one will lack the ability to control a writing instrument or pour liquids into test tubes or toss a ball into a hoop.

WINDOWS OF OPPORTUNITY		
WINDOW	WIRING OPPORTUNITY	OPPORTUNITY FOR ENHANCEMENT
<b>Emotional Intelligence</b> Trust Impulse Control	0-48 months 0-14 months 16-48 months	4 years to puberty
<b>Social Development</b> Attachment Independence Cooperation	0-60 months 0-12 months 18-36 months 36-60 months	4 years to puberty
<b>Thinking Skills</b> Cause and Effect Problem Solving	0-48 months 0-16 months 16-48 months	4 years to puberty
<b>Motor Development</b>	0-24 months	2 years to puberty
<b>Language</b> Early Sounds Vocabulary	0-24 months 4-8 months 0-24 months	2-7 years 8 months to puberty 2-5 years
<b>Second Language</b> Vocabulary Formal Instruction	0-60 months (sounds) 6-10 years (syntax)	

Pre-K educators prepare children for school by addressing these domains:

- Social and Emotional
- Language and Literacy
- Cognitive
- Physical

## Social and Emotional

*Children must learn to interact socially with others, have a positive self-perception and know how to self-regulate to be ready for kindergarten.*

Emotional development is the ability to recognize and manage one's emotions. Social development is the ability to manage oneself in the context of interactions with others. Both are skills that are at the heart of developing one's full potential. Emotional and social development are co-dependent. The formation of social skills is dependent on sound development of emotional skills. Social skills serve to enhance and refine emotional skills.

Pre-K children are developing a sense of self and learning to trust others, controlling impulses and developing an understanding for social interactions that are crucial for success in school. Examples of social and emotional skills needed before kindergarten include initiating problem-solving strategies, demonstrating an understanding and tolerance for the unique characteristics of others and following classroom rules and routines.

### **TIP:** Ensure children feel safe.

The brain will always pay attention to safety and well-being before anything else. Learning is inhibited when children feel threatened or when their well-being is impacted. For example, if a teacher uses a loud voice to reprimand behaviors, if the room temperature is too hot or too cold or if learners are tired or hungry, the ability to focus on instructional material is impaired.



## Cognitive

*Pre-K children should approach learning with enthusiasm and curiosity on top of developing cognition.*

### **TIP: Encourage children to think about information in complex ways.**

When topics are suitable for higher level processing, have learners apply (make personal applications), analyze (take information apart), evaluate (use critical judgement) and synthesize (put information back together in new and different ways) what they learn. Each of these processes enhances and strengthens learning. These processes help learners attach meaning and make connections to past learning, and in so doing, they increase retention.

The first cognitive function that is wired in the brain is the relationship between cause and effect. For the first year of life, little ones will diligently strive to understand what causes things to happen. What happens if they shake an item in their hand? What causes the lights to go on and off? It is important to continue helping children explore and expand their understanding of cause and effect. The brain uses patterns to make sense of the world. Cause and effect is one of the most frequently utilized patterns. The deeper a child's understanding of cause-and-effect relationships, the more easily information is processed.

### **TIP: Present information in ways that challenge learners to use multiple senses.**

The more senses that deliver information to the brain, the more likely the brain will attend to that specific information. Teach children using visual models, music, manipulatives and concrete examples. For instance, when discussing oranges, invite children to touch them, taste them, feel them and smell them.

By the middle of the second year of life, the cognitive focus will change from cause and effect to problem solving. For example, children as early as three years of age are capable of engaging in and exploring fundamental yet surprisingly complex mathematical ideas. Preschoolers enjoy looking through collections of materials, such as buttons, feathers and rocks, and making groups with these items based on noticeable similarities. This informal activity is a foundation to classification. Children learn to identify, extend, and create patterns and to break a pattern apart to identify its repeating core.

### **TIP: Nurture curiosity.**

Curiosity is the fuel of learning. Children are born curious. Bring unusual items into the learning environment, such as a boat motor part, a bird egg, or strips of plastic tubing. Invite children to question, explore, experiment and compare. Encourage imagination and thinking "outside of the box." Invite children to create alternative endings to stories. Ask "what if" questions, such as "What if there were only two colors?" Accept the non-traditional. Refrain from rote memorization.

## Language and Literacy

*A balanced learning approach is ideal for children to develop the required language and listening skills.*

Children in the pre-K classroom are in the midst of a great leap in their ability to understand and use language. If they have been immersed in a language-rich environment during their infant and toddler years, they will begin to use four- and five-word sentences. As they approach their fourth birthday, they will begin connecting two sentences. Their working vocabulary (expressive language) will grow from about 900 words to over 2,300 words between the ages of 36-48 months.

Pre-K children are also becoming active seekers of social interactions with their peers. They begin to use language as a complex tool for initiating taking turns in conversation and staying on topic during discussions. They begin to use language for different reasons, such as for obtaining information, expressing needs, role playing and negotiating. They are beginning to understand empathy and can respond appropriately. They speak without embarrassment as their confidence begins to increase. Children need to practice using social language: May I have a turn? Can I play? Thank you. Please. I have an idea. May I help? They will need many examples and adult modeling.

## TIP: Encourage a love of language.

Children learn skills through playful, child-centered activities that ensure they maintain their love of language as they develop their ability to decipher it. Children will become aware of how sounds in words work. They will identify and manipulate parts of spoken language – words, syllables, beginning sounds, rhymes, onsets (the sound in a word preceding the first vowel) and rimes (the rest of the word beginning with the vowel) as well as individual phonemes. Children will participate in reciting rhymes, chants and finger plays; clapping syllables in words; and singing songs intentionally selected to develop and refine their listening ability.

## Physical

*Children learn best when they are active and engaged.*

The foundation for motor development is wired during the first two years of life. During this time, children need experiences that support the wiring of both small muscles (fingers, toes, face and eyes) and large muscles (arms, legs, abdomen, back, and neck) of their bodies. They need plenty of space, plenty of things to touch and explore and plenty of freedom to move. There is a direct correlation between freedom to move during the first two years of life and the agility and dexterity that children will possess as an adult.

Between the ages of two and five, children need plenty of space because this is the greatest opportunity for children to perfect their fine and gross motor skills. The vestibular system, which in concert with the cochlea in the inner ear, provides balance and coordination but is not yet fully wired. Children need to perform activities, such as swinging, spinning and balancing, to support the wiring of this part of the inner ear. The vestibular system not only provides balance and coordination, but also allows us to track print on a page.

## **TIP: Provide time for practicing fine and gross motor skills.**

Children develop complex fine and gross motor skills through engagement in a wide variety of hands-on play experiences and participation in activities of daily living (for instance, self-feeding, dressing, performing hygiene tasks). This physical activity releases endorphins (memory fixatives) so children stay engaged and remember what they learn.



Physical activity keeps children more alert and able to remember the lessons being taught. During physical activity, deeper breathing delivers more oxygen to the brain and releases endorphins that make us feel good and boosts attention and memory. This helps children stay engaged and achieve successful learning.

When incorporating physical activity to keep children engaged, consider adding music. Music and movement activities can be used to pull children together as a group, engage them during a waiting time or offer a break between lessons. It's also a great way to transition from one activity to another.



## **TIP: Make sure learners are properly hydrated and have opportunities to exercise.**

Thirsty brains can't think! Sitting for long periods of time decreases oxygen and therefore inhibits alertness. Get up, wiggle and dance!

# PILLAR 2: PROVIDING DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION AND INTENTIONAL TEACHING

## **TIP: Keep lessons short.**

If children don't have an opportunity to process information (make sense of it and establish meaning for it) before additional information is introduced, it is likely that information will be lost. Quick learners have no trouble separating the important part of a lesson from the less important parts and then quickly moving forward to process it. Slower learners, however, can get easily bogged down. When they are overloaded with too many details, they get stuck.

Differentiation is the framework for teaching that offers children different avenues for learning. To differentiate instruction, a teacher must be able to anticipate and respond to children's needs to modify what is being taught (content), how it is taught (process) and how children can demonstrate their learning (product). Understanding each child's abilities, areas of interest, and learning styles lays important groundwork for tailoring your teaching to best meet the needs of all children in your classroom.



## **TIP: Keep the learning environment free of clutter.**

An intentional teacher is careful not to overly decorate spaces and rooms. Cluttered spaces overload the brain and interfere with its ability to narrow information down to what is relevant. Make sure that the learning environment includes places that allow the eyes to rest—places void of stimuli. Position important information in front of learners and eliminate what is not relevant. Rotate materials to help reduce clutter.

An intentional parent, teacher, or caregiver differentiates instruction by focusing on specific outcomes or goals for children's development and learning. In the case of school readiness, this means meeting the needs of each individual child.

## Intentional teachers:

- Focus on developmental domains.
- Understand the sequence of development and use these continuums as the framework for curriculum.
- Possess a wide range of knowledge; they know and follow the “windows of opportunity” from early brain development research.
- Understand how to accommodate individual differences among children with different temperaments, personality styles and talents.
- Provide a balance of teacher-directed and child-initiated classroom experiences.
- Select everything from instructional materials to activities and songs with a purpose in mind.

### **TIP:** Teach to both the left and right hemispheres.

Comprehension is increased when the two hemispheres of the brain work in tandem. Use activities and assessments that appeal to both hemispheres. Reading, writing, and computing address the needs of the left hemisphere. Creating and analyzing appeal to the right hemisphere.



# PILLAR 3: ASSESSING PROGRESS

Assessment in pre-K classrooms takes many forms. Teachers observe children and gather work samples, anecdotal records, videos, voice-recorded interviews, photographs and checklists to document learning.

Assessment checklists should identify key vocabulary, skills and concepts that may be observed and assessed. The skills observed should address social-emotional development, as well as literacy, math and science.

Use the assessment and program data to determine progress towards meeting kindergarten readiness goals and skills achieved. Assessment tools are important in determining whether children have absorbed what has been taught and if they are ready to move forward.

## Assessments

### Data Gathering Methods:

- Observation of individual children or groups of children
- Anecdotal records or interviews with children or parents
- Documented conversations with open-ended questions or problems
- Work sample or portfolio (drawings, photos, artwork, writing samples, computer-based work)
- Photographs or audio/video recordings of children learning

### Components of Assessment:

- Documentation (data collection)
- Learning outcomes
- Communication with family (sharing both progress and performance)



Assessment observations and data should be included in a portfolio or transition folder to share with the child's kindergarten teacher so the transition can be more seamless.

# PILLAR 4: PREPARING FOR TRANSITION

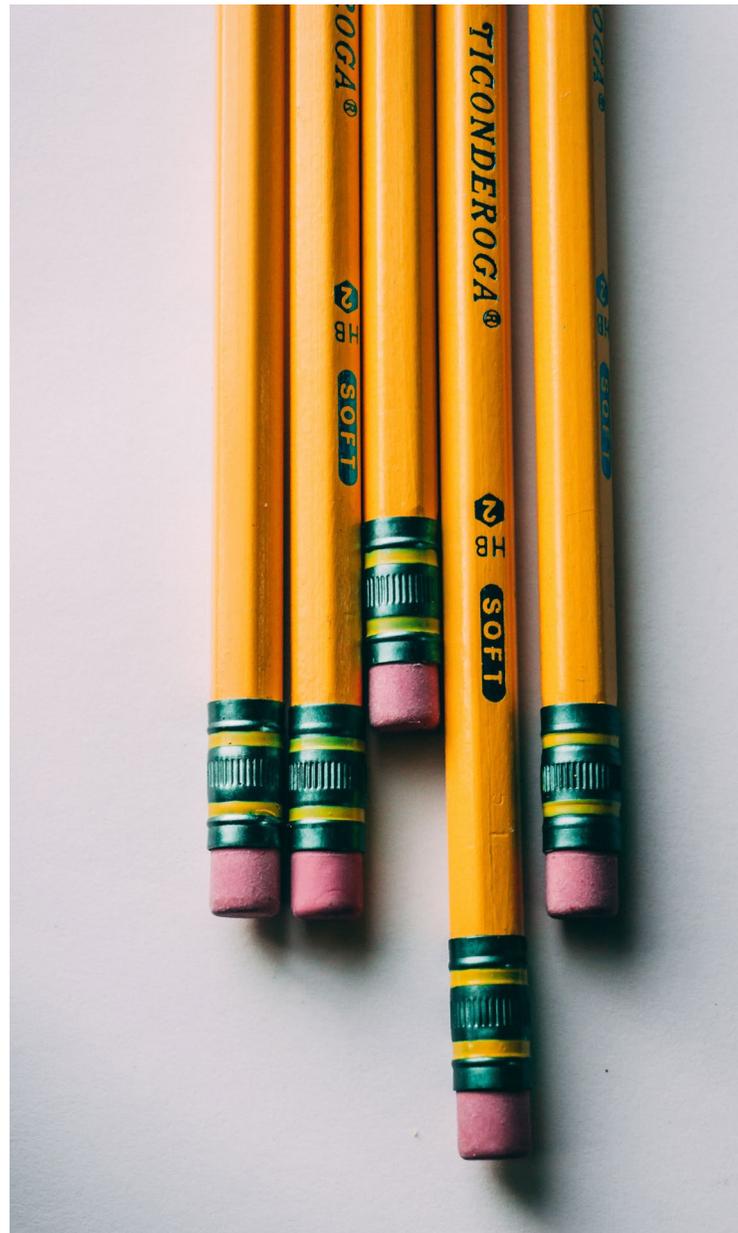
Ensuring that children are ready for successful school experiences is one of the most important issues in early childhood. Kindergarten transition is a process – not just a set of activities. It prepares children and families to develop knowledge, skills and relationships that help children move from one educational setting to another.

Pre-K teachers should provide resources for children and families that facilitate a successful kindergarten transition. Resources may include distributing information to parents or providing anticipatory socialization experiences related to kindergarten transition.

Kindergarten transition planning should begin several months prior to kindergarten entry. When children are part of a quality transition process, they have an easier time, enjoy improved academic achievement, have more positive social and emotional competencies and experience fewer behavior problems in kindergarten.

## CHECKLIST FOR A SMOOTH KINDERGARTEN TRANSITION:

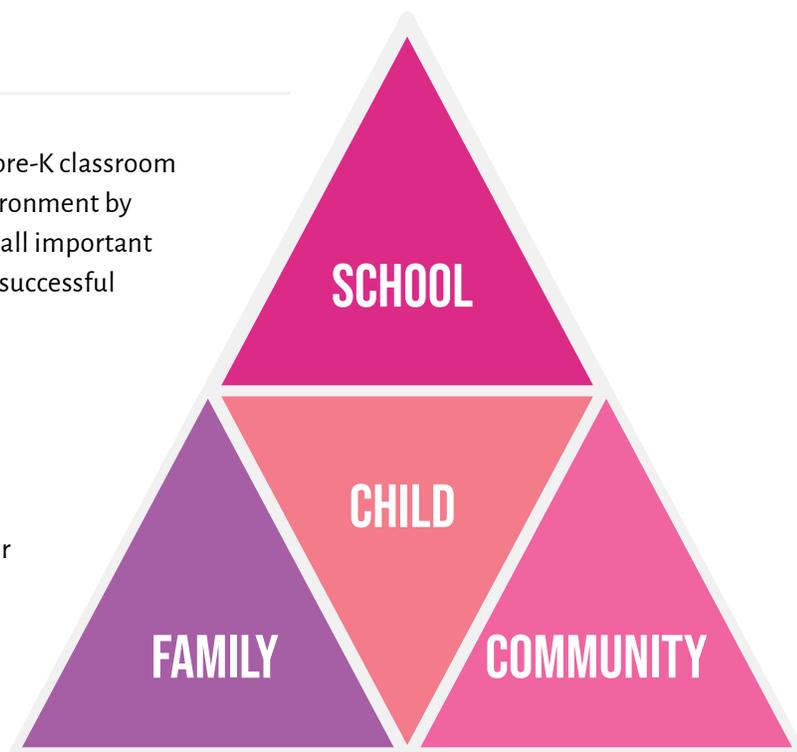
- Increase children’s familiarity with the kindergarten setting.
- Provide experiences for children to build positive relationships with kindergarten staff and classmates who are transitioning into kindergarten.
- Facilitate collaboration between families and kindergarten staff.
- Promote parent involvement within the kindergarten school.
- Ensure effective communication between the pre-K program and the school they are transitioning to.
- Provide parents/guardians with books, activities and other resources to help them prepare their children for kindergarten transition.



# CONCLUSION

Kindergarten readiness is not solely addressed in the pre-K classroom – children are supported outside of their learning environment by their family, community and school system. These are all important parts of the environmental framework necessary for a successful transition to kindergarten.

This guide covers the four pillars for success in the pre-K classroom: addressing developmental domains, differentiated and intentional teaching, assessing progress and preparing for transition. A high-quality pre-K program must incorporate all four pillars in order to prepare children for kindergarten – and beyond.



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