
Helping Your Preschooler Be Ready for School

Going to kindergarten is an important step in young children's lives. As a grandparent raising your young grandchildren, you may wonder how to help your 4- or 5-year-old get ready for kindergarten. What do they need to be able to do? How can you help them learn the skills they need to succeed in school? The following information will help you prepare them for that important transition into elementary school.

What is "School Readiness" Anyway?

Children need to be ready to learn reading, math, science, and many other topics when they start kindergarten. They also need to be ready to listen, take turns, follow the teacher's directions, and ask questions. But how can you tell whether a child is ready? Remember that preschoolers learn best through play and exploration. They don't need long hours of drilling in spelling, writing, or math to prepare for kindergarten. Don't try to rush children through their early years by expecting 6-year-old behavior from children who are only 4 or 5.

What do children need to be ready for kindergarten? Here are a few of the basics:

A Healthy Start

Children need to be well nourished, immunized, physically active, and safe. Make sure your grandchildren start off every day with a healthy breakfast and a good night's rest. Immunizations help children stay healthy and prevent many diseases that might keep them out of school. Give your grandchildren plenty of time to run, jump, climb, skip, write, draw, and practice other motor skills. Help them feel safe by providing a home with consistent rules and love. When these basic needs are met, children will be more ready to concentrate on reading, writing, and arithmetic when they get to school.

Empowered Grandparents

You are your grandchildren's first and most important teacher. Learning doesn't happen only in the classroom; children are learning long before school starts. Talk to your grandchildren regularly, beginning when they are babies. Read books together every day, and spend time singing, dancing, and playing together.

Quality Media in Limited Amounts

For many families, digital media (such as television, movies, and online entertainment) is second only to parents or grandparents as the child's most influential teacher. Pay attention to what your grandchildren watch. Keep television, movies, and digital games to a minimum, and choose a few good-quality shows for children. When possible, watch or play with them and talk about what they are seeing.

Quality Early Care and Education

Children who attend early care and education (ECE) programs, including private preschools, should be in high-quality settings. High-quality ECE programs encourage thinking skills, social skills, and motor skills, all of which are needed for school success. Children who stay at home also need opportunities to play, sing, hear stories, and interact with other children. For more information on choosing a high-quality ECE program, see *Grandparents Raising Grandchildren: Out-of-Home Care for Young Children* (C 1284-13).

Bridges Between Home and School

When your children get to kindergarten, find out what is happening in their classrooms. Go to conferences and open houses. Volunteer to read a story once a week or help with a cooking activity. Being involved with the class shows your grandchildren that you value their education, which encourages them to value it too.

Basic School-Readiness Skills: A Checklist

Being ready to learn isn't just about understanding reading and math. Here are some of the other skills that will help your grandchildren succeed in school. Children should be able to:

- sit quietly for short periods of time.
- follow two- and three-step directions ("Go get your coat, put it on, and stand by the door.").
- cooperate, take turns, and occasionally solve disagreements with other children.
- eat their own lunch, use the bathroom alone, and dress themselves independently.
- explore their environment safely.
- feel confident of their abilities.

All of these skills can be practiced at home and in ECE programs. Look for ways to practice these skills during day-to-day routines. Don't get discouraged if your grandchildren can't do all of these things—learning takes time and practice! Here are some practical ways to help children get ready for school:

Practice Self-Help Skills

Help your grandchildren practice things like putting on shoes, getting dressed, and cleaning up after meals and playtime. When children can handle these basic skills themselves, the teacher has more time to focus on teaching.

Give Children Simple Directions

Ask your grandchildren to do things like set the table or lay out their clothes for the next day. Following these simple directions at home will help children get used to following directions at school.

Include Simple Math Concepts

Young children need to know how to compare, sort, classify, measure, and put things in order. Cooking together can help children practice measurement. Play games that require children to

count out spaces or match colors or shapes. Again, don't push children too hard; make math a fun part of playtime.

Help Children Develop Confidence

One of the most important things you can give your grandchildren is the confidence to try new things. Children who feel good about themselves are less afraid to ask questions in school or try a math problem that looks really hard. Encourage your grandchildren to try new things. Congratulate them when they accomplish a new skill and encourage their effort even when they don't succeed. Don't compare your grandchildren to each other or to other children. Instead, focus on their individual efforts and abilities.

Talk Positively About School

Let your grandchildren know that being old enough to go to school is exciting. Take them to visit their new school before the first day. Let them help pick out school supplies and clothes. Talking positively can help children be enthusiastic about school and learning.

Learning to Read and Write

One important skill children will learn in the first few years of elementary school is reading. Children have a natural desire to communicate with others by talking, reading, and writing. Language allows children to learn about their world and share their thoughts with others. Long before children can actually read, they are learning skills they will need for reading and writing.



What kinds of skills do children need to know before they read and write? They need to understand that spoken words can be written down. They need to know that English writing goes from left to right and that letters stand for different sounds. They need to learn basic book-handling skills: which way to hold a book and how to turn the pages one at a time. And they need to understand how stories are organized, how to predict what happens next in a story, and how to tell or retell a story.

Most of these skills can be learned at home. Talk with your grandchildren, beginning in infancy. Do things together and talk about them later. Make up stories with your grandchildren. Make books, draw pictures, or make puppets. Set up a special place equipped with writing materials (pencils, paper, etc.) and plenty of books. Take your grandchildren to the library. Let your grandchildren see you read and write out grocery lists, recipes, and to-do lists. Let them practice writing thank-you notes, lists, and stories. Most importantly, read with your grandchildren every day. This is the most important thing you can do to help them learn to love reading. Reread books when children want you to, and talk about the stories after you read.

How does reading help children? Good readers become good writers. Children who are read to, and who read by themselves, learn story ideas and creative ways to use language. Reading develops concentration skills. Children's vocabulary expands as they learn the meaning of different words. Most importantly, children learn that reading is fun!

Getting Off to a Good Start: The First Day of School

The first day of kindergarten is exciting for you and your grandchildren. But the first day also can be scary. You can help calm their fears with a little preparation.

- **Talk about what school will be like.** There will be a new classroom, new children, and a new teacher. It may help to tell stories about your first day of school. Check out library books or watch movies about the first day of school. Knowing what to expect helps children feel more comfortable.
- **Knowing other children in the class may make school feel more familiar.** Find out who else is in your grandchild's class and introduce them. Talk about children your grandchild knows who will be in their class. If possible, visit the classroom and meet the teacher before school starts so your grandchildren can become familiar with the new setting. Show your grandchildren where they will sit and eat lunch every day. These little steps can help children feel less nervous about starting school.
- **A few days before school begins, start practicing the morning routine of going to school.** Take your grandchildren through the steps of going to bed earlier, waking up earlier, eating breakfast, washing and dressing, and getting to school or to the bus stop. Practice for several days if possible, because this will help create a familiar routine.

In Summary

Helping preschoolers be ready for kindergarten doesn't have to be difficult. Expose them to new things, read aloud every day, and make sure they have plenty of time to play and explore. Above all, relax and enjoy your grandchildren's new school experiences. If you seem happy and excited about school, your grandchildren will pick up your enthusiasm.

References

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