

# What skills do kids actually need for kindergarten readiness?

by Susie Allison, B.A. Elementary Education  
creator of BusyToddler.com  
Former Kindergarten and First Grade teacher

## What skills do kids actually need for kindergarten readiness?

*Inside: Kindergarten readiness is a big buzzword these days - but what does it mean? What makes a child ready for kindergarten?*

**I know why you're here.**

You're looking for a magical, unicorn type answer to today's hottest question: **"How do I make my child ready for kindergarten?"**

I get it.

It's a big deal sending our kids off into the world and we wonder if we've set them up for a good time or if this is going to be a total bust. We want our kids to be successful. We want our kids to be confident. We want our kids to THRIVE in kindergarten.

## What is kindergarten readiness?

Kindergarten readiness is a hot buzzword right now in the United States. It's a product of the overwhelming urge to help kids be academically advanced in school and the notion that "earlier is better."

The logic being imposed on parents is flawed: the notion that the earlier a child learns a skill, the better the child will be at that skill (Carlsson-Page et al., 2015).

As kindergarten standards became increasingly more academic in the United States, the push to have children "learning more" was shoved in preschools. Despite how developmentally inappropriate these standards are, parents (and educators without choice) have bought in to the idea that the goal of preschool should be to prepare a child academically for kindergarten.

**This is a really sad way to look at early childhood education.**

A shift happened when the standards in kindergarten changed pulling focus away from early childhood as a time to develop thinking skills, life skills, and social-emotional skills to a time when children should be focused on academics (Akaba et al., 2020).

And while kids are entering kindergarten knowing much more “academic skills” than they did 30 years ago, they lack in so many other areas.

**The truth is: kindergarten readiness isn't as *academic* as you might think....**

## **Why we shouldn't look to basic academics as the answer**

There seems to be a fixation with kindergarten readiness, and sadly, mostly focusing on getting kids ready with only one set of skills in mind (Brown & Lan, 2015). Academic skills.

We want to make sure our children are set up for success but we often OVER-value skills we can quantify and measure (like counting and knowing letter names) and UNDER-value the truly important skills which are much more abstract (like executive function skills, self-regulation, reasoning skills and social skills).

**When we talk about a child heading into kindergarten, the first questions we often hear are:**

- How high can they count?
- Do they know their letters?

Quickly, let's take the bloom off these roses: the academic skills that are often revered in early childhood (knowing letters, counting, shapes, colors, etc) are very basic memorization skills.

Parents have been fed a lie that how quickly a child memorizes a set of symbols (like letters) or can regurgitate a pattern of words (that's all counting is), the better prepared they'll be for kindergarten.

In the grand scheme of life and learning, memorizing is the lowest form of education (Armstrong, 2020). We have literally hung our education hats of valuing the *lowest level of learning* in childhood.

**LET'S CHANGE THAT.**

Let's go back to remembering that "kindergarten readiness" is about school and life readiness. This is about the *whole child* and their *whole self* being ready to take on a life outside their parent(s) and to become great learners, thinkers, and doers.

## **Let's look at kindergarten readiness from a new lens**

**Remember, there's more to early childhood than the ABCs and 123s - no matter how much social media disagrees.**

Instead, let's shift the focus back to the most important part of early childhood: cognitive thinking skills, learning life skills, and developing social skills.

Without these skills, school academics will be a mountain to climb, being away from home will be a struggle, and learning to live an independent life will be so complicated.

Their development as a **person** before kindergarten is much more important than their development as a rigorous student.

## **But how can we help kids be ready for kindergarten?**

As your child grows in early childhood and gets ready for kindergarten, there are some skills that can really help them navigate kindergarten. These are REAL skills for them to begin developing - not necessarily master, but develop.

Remember, kindergarten and school beyond are not just about academics (and definitely not just about memorized academics).

The goal is for kids to learn actual skills that will make life in kindergarten *away from home* so much easier and more successful. As fun as academics are in these early years, they don't do much for helping a child successfully navigate life independently.

Shift your focus from kindergarten readiness being a set of low-level academics to high-level skills that will help our kids be successful in life. We must look beyond just kindergarten: let's help our kids be life-ready.

## **The Busy Toddler Kindergarten Readiness "Check List"**

*I am a former kindergarten teacher with a BA in Elementary Education. In May 2022, I will graduate with a Master's in Early Childhood Education. There is nothing like the magical time in kindergarten and I want nothing more than to help your child have a smooth transition into it.*

### **FOLLOW A MULTI-STEP DIRECTION**

“Take off your coat, put it in the closet, and join me at the table.”

School is full of multi-step tasks and so is life. Being able to remember a set of instructions - and finish a task fully - is huge. So is being able to take direction from another person. We need to make sure our kids have follow-through, have the ability to listen to a set of directions, and to complete a job.

This is part of your child's working memory and growing their ability to remember.

### **ASK AN ADULT FOR HELP (ideally that isn't a relative)**

There are lots of adults in school and being able to ask for help, talk to, and listen to them is a big deal.

Problems arise at school and often times *outside of the classroom*. Your child being comfortable with going up to a volunteer or recess teacher (whom they might only vaguely know) is going to be critical.

Encourage your child to talk to adults. Give them chances to order at restaurants, talk to the cashier at Target, or ask a question to doctor/dentist/pastor/neighbor.

### **TRY 2-3 STRATEGIES TO SOLVE A PEER PROBLEM**

It's easy when Mom is around to walk right up to her whenever there's an issue, have her swoop in with solution ideas, and magically fix it.

But that's not how school or the real-world works.

Our kids need to have a **tool box of ideas** for how to solve a problem with a peer BEFORE they need adult intervention.

Have you taught your child to do this? Have you let them solve peer arguments? How do they handle disagreements with friends?

This starts with you, the parent: Pause before you get involved. Give a second to let kids try before you come in to help.

### **ASK QUESTIONS WHEN THEY NEED MORE INFORMATION**

I always tell my kids (and I used to tell my students) that smart people are smart because **they ask questions**.

They don't sit there. They don't hang their head when they don't get it. They aren't silent, sitting in their questions.

Instead, smart people ASK. They seek information. "I'm smart enough to say 'I don't know'" is a great phrase to teach your kids (and model this by using it when you don't know something).

Make sure your child is asking questions, especially for clarification if they don't understand something. Normalize not knowing and how to seek information.

### **SHARE AND TAKE TURNS ON COMMUNAL TOYS**

There's a lot out there in the parenting world about not forcing kids to share, and I get that. You won't see me sharing my iPhone or car with someone else. Some items are just *yours*.

But at school, most toys and equipment are communal. It doesn't belong to any one child. It's different than it is at home where toys may have a clear "owner."

For the school setting, ponder this:  
Does your child know how to share?  
Do they know how to take turns?  
Do they know how to ask for a turn and not grab or steal a toy?  
Do they recognize when someone is waiting for a turn?

## **WIN AND LOSE GRACIOUSLY**

This is a big one.

Kids have to learn how to both win and lose respectfully.

Please let your child lose. Don't let them win at Go Fish every. single. time. They will not win at everything in school and that is a hard lesson to learn with 20 other kids staring back at you.

### **In life, we don't always win.**

This is a lesson we learn in childhood, but what happens to the kids who don't learn this lesson? How is their self-esteem later in life? Have they accidentally made a connection to self-worth and winning?

Conversely, we need to teach children to WIN graciously and respectfully. They need to understand that winning is part of the game, but the fun was in the playing.

## **LISTEN TO A STORY WITHOUT INTERRUPTING**

This is a tough one, but one that is asked of kindergarteners all day long, especially in today's world of direct instruction (something I vehemently oppose and wish to everything I could change). Five- and six-year-olds are asked to sit and listen A LOT (Miller & Almon, 2009).

### **Help your child develop these skills.**

Read picture books at home and ask them to wait until the end for questions.

Try reading a chapter book without pictures to get them really in the "sit and listen" mode.

Limit screen time to help children grow a longer attention span.

It's a hard skill to learn (and hard for me to advocate for when children that age should be running and playing, but thus is sadly the reality of American Kindergarten).

## **BE ABLE TO SELF-ENTERTAIN**

School isn't the most exciting place all the time.

The playground is awesome. Playing with toys is super fun. Sitting at a desk learning to write letters? Not so fun sometimes.

Kids need to have an ability to self-entertain, to be able to keep themselves occupied when the going gets slow. This means limiting screens (TV, iPads) that do the work for the child and take the child away from play as much as possible.

Does this mean no screen time, ever?! No. But it means finding a routine in your family's day where screen time isn't excessively replacing playtime.

It also means cultivating your child's independent play skills.

Remember, a child who is bored at school is not necessarily an unchallenged child or a gifted child. All children get bored at school regardless of their academic skill level. Even gifted children get bored in school while learning academically rigorous and challenging material (think Advanced Trig... no matter who you are, that gets boring).

Life is inherently boring at times, but we can mitigate this boredom by helping children develop self-entertaining and independent play skills.

## **KNOW HOW TO FAIL AND TRY AGAIN**

This has far reaching implications into adulthood and it is so important: let's have resilient kids.

Let's raise kids who know that failing happens, that failing isn't the end of the world, and that failing means you get to try again. **It's OK to fail.**

Help your child learn strategies to handle the disappointment.

Help your child understand that failure isn't a reflection of who they are as a person.

Help your child see the chance and beauty in hard work and trying. Learning happens while we

## **BE ABLE TO MAKE A DECISION**

Our kindergarteners need to be independent. They need to have skills to navigate life without parents hovering over them. Help your child develop their own *life skills*.

Let them make their own decisions - even if this means they fail. They'll learn from that.

Give them a few (2-3) options to choose from - let them decide simple parts of their day (like which shoes to wear).

Stand back a little and let them navigate a new area - you're still watching and supervising, but maybe doing it from the park bench instead of standing right beside them. (You need to choose how best to safely supervise your child).

Kindergarteners have a lot of independence. Help your child learn to feel comfortable in the roll of *leading their own life*.

## **BE ABLE TO SELF-REGULATE**

Did you know that self-control skills in a kindergartener are one of the biggest indicators of future success in academics and in life (Robson, Allen, & Howard, 2020)?

Children need to learn how to navigate big feelings, big emotions, impulses, and their own desires. This is a big part of life, not just kindergarten. Is your child in control (most of the time) of their emotions? Do they have some skills for calming their body? Do they understand and (often) exhibit self-control?

Learning self-regulation skills is a big deal in the early year. Being a model of these skills and coaching our children through them is huge part of our parenting job.

## **Here are some other awesome and simple skills that are fantastic to have before entering Kindergarten:**

*As a former Kindergarten teacher, here are a few other SIMPLE and more BASIC skills that would be awesome for a child to know before starting school. Some of these are requirements (like toileting) and some are just helpful in the name of having independent kids.*

- Put on a coat. Bonus: zip it up without adult help.
- Be able to put on shoes correctly (tying shoes is tough, no worries there).
- Be fully toileted which means knowing how to wipe...
- Know their first and last name. Bonus: know YOUR first and last name.
- Be able to recognize their name in print.
- Be able to write their first name (all capitals and backwards letters is fine).
- Know how to use scissors.
- Know how to use a glue stick.

## **What's the best way to introduce and hone all of these skills?**

### **Play.**

You can't drill and kill a child to learn to handle losses.

There's no worksheet that explains sharing.

YouTube videos are not going to empower your kids to be resilient.

Focusing solely on academics robs our kids of the real learning that needs to take place in early childhood. Those play-based skills and values that end up carrying them throughout their life.

Play builds their social-emotional skills. Play builds their self-regulation. Play builds their executive function.

## **As you get your child ready for kindergarten, focus on the person they are rather than the academics they know (or don't know).**

There are lots of things kids will learn in kindergarten and so many skills to master. Kindergarten will be a year of great growth in your child.

Remember: this isn't just about today, tomorrow, or the year they'll have in kindergarten. There is so much life in front of our kids. Let's help them be ready for all of it.

---

### **References:**

Akaba, S., Peters, L. E., Liang, E., & Graves, S. B. (2020). “That’s the whole idea of college readiness”: A critical examination of universal Pre-K teachers’ understandings around kindergarten readiness. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, *96*, 103172. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2020.103172>

Armstrong, P. (2022, June 10). *Bloom’s taxonomy*. Vanderbilt University. <https://cft.vanderbilt.edu/guides-sub-pages/blooms-taxonomy/>

Brown, C. P., & Lan, Y. C. (2015). A qualitative metasynthesis comparing U.S. teachers’ conceptions of school readiness prior to and after the implementation of NCLB. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, *45*, 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2014.08.012>

Carlsson-Page, N., McLaughlin, G. B., & Almon, J. W. (2015). *Reading instruction in kindergarten: Little to gain and much to Lose*. Defending the Early Years. [https://dey.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/readinginkindergarten\\_online-1\\_\\_1\\_.pdf](https://dey.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/readinginkindergarten_online-1__1_.pdf)

Miller, E., & Almon, J. (2009). *Crisis in the Kindergarten: Why Children Need to Play in School*. College Park, MD: Alliance for Childhood.

Robson, D. A., Allen, M. S., & Howard, S. J. (2020). Self-regulation in childhood as a predictor of future outcomes: A meta-analytic review. *Psychological Bulletin*, *146*(4), 324–354. <https://doi.org/10.1037/bul0000227>