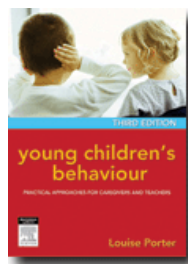


SCHOOL READINESS

an extract from Porter, L. (2008). *Young children's behaviour*. (3rd ed.) Sydney: Elsevier.



School readiness is not just an attribute of children but, as listed in Box 1, also comprises the educational, social, family and personal resources that support their success at school.ⁱ

BOX 1 RESOURCES SUPPORTING CHILDREN'S SCHOOL READINESSⁱⁱ

Child attributes

- Good physical health, including being well nourished and having the physical stamina to last a school day
- General cognitive skills such as literacy and numeracy
- Effective communication skills, both to comprehend instructions and to communicate personal needs
- An enthusiastic and curious learning style, reflected in interest and engagement in the world, attention to directions, persistence, working independently
- Learning-related skills: listening to and following instructions, working independently and staying on task
- Social and emotional competencies: spanning the ability to regulate emotion and behaviour, interpersonal skills to participate cooperatively and interact prosocially with peers and teachers, and ability to separate from parents

Family resources

- Responsive parenting
- Exposure to literacy-based activities e.g. shared reading
- Support for attention skills

Educational resources

- Affordable, high-quality child care and preschool programs
- Public libraries
- School transition programs
- Warm relationships with teachers
- Explicit instruction

Neighbourhood resources

- Safe playgrounds and streets
 - Social support for parents
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Child attributes

Combined with children's learning styles, their intellectual maturity in general and metacognitive skills in particular play a central role in their readiness for and success at school,ⁱⁱⁱ accounting for 25 per cent of their adjustment and success in the early years of school.^{iv} Their learning processes are more

important than specific literacy and numeracy skills such as knowing the alphabet or being able to count.^v In my experience, a key cognitive indicator is children's ability to alternate or divide their attention – that is, to carry out one task while listening to further instructions as in, 'Once you've finished your drawing, put your book away and come sit on the mat'. In typically developing children, this skill starts to appear at 4½ to 5 years of age and, being the last attention skill to be achieved, signals that the children have also mastered the earlier abilities to control their arousal, focus, concentration, and distractability.

Success at making the transition to school also depends on children's social and behavioural competencies^{vi} as listed in Box 1. These account for around 10 per cent of children's reading and maths progress in the early school years.^{vii} Children with poor learning-related skills begin school performing below their peers and continue to lag three years later.^{viii}

Children's ability to regulate their emotions within the context of group activities directly affects their success and productivity at school.^{ix} This ability may be particularly crucial for navigating school entry, because the new learning environment and challenging academic tasks can arouse anxiety and frustration, which must be managed. In turn, teachers view well-regulated children more positively, which contributes to an improved teacher-child relationship that, in turn, also supports children's educational engagement and attainment.^x

Family resources

The resources that families can provide in the form of activities and responsive parenting help children to regulate both their emotions and learning processes. Parents can teach arousal regulation by soothing children when they are distressed, practise maintaining joint attention during conversation and play, redirect children's focus, and provide direct but responsive teaching that helps children sustain their attention.^{xi}

The children who are least well equipped to adjust to school are those with stressful lives with insufficient resources to support their learning.^{xii} In the face of family, neighbourhood and social stressors, these are the children and families who most need support from their schools and for whom transition practices are most effective at enhancing both student engagement and parent involvement.^{xiii} Yet they are the students least likely to be provided with support for the transition, thus entrenching the social inequities that disadvantage them at school entry.^{xiv}

Educational resources

According to an extensive survey in the US, teachers reported that only half of school entrants navigate a successful entry to school, with over 30 per cent experiencing some problems and 16 per cent having serious difficulties making the transition.^{xv} These statistics have three implications. First, the fact that *half* of all school entrants are experiencing difficulties raises the question whether our expectations of children are appropriate. Many early childhood teachers report that the system requires of young children skills that are unattainable at that age.^{xvi} This not only stresses them at school, but places

downward pressure on early childhood education to enforce content and learning processes that are inappropriate at young ages.

The quality of instruction and level of emotional support provided to children are powerful predictors of children's adaptation to the school context. Even when the children seem developmentally unready for school, their skilfulness improves in response to high-quality instruction and social support made available to them once in school.^{xvii} Thus, perhaps the question should be not whether individual children are ready for school, but whether schools are appropriately adjusting to the needs of the young children they serve.^{xviii}

CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES

For children with disabilities and their families, the transition to school can be a particular challenge. Parents might revisit their earlier grief at their child's disability and a renewed despair at the fact that the next placement will not meet his or her needs perfectly.^{xix} Because of their extra vulnerability, they might have developed more than the usual reliance on their caregivers and are reluctant to lose your support. To assist them to move on to the next service, you can plan with them well in advance for a move, and gradually introduce both them and their child to the new setting, as long as this does not go on for so long that the children seem for prolonged periods not to belong either in the former or the new setting.

TRANSITION TO SCHOOL

Almost inevitably, transition programs will be initiated by early childhood staff, as school personnel are constrained by a lack of information about intending enrollees, large class sizes and a lack of administrative support for transition programs.^{xx} Although many of these same working constraints apply in early childhood centres, staff there can be instrumental in easing children's transition to school by arranging school visits during the final weeks of preschool, so that children and their parents can meet their new teacher and receive information from the school about its expectations.

CONCLUSION

If we continue to define school readiness as a quality of the children only, we will unnecessarily hold some children back from starting school, a strategy often recommended for boys. However, age of entry affects school adjustment only when combined with specific disadvantaging circumstances such as poverty.^{xxi} When considering delaying a child's school entry, parents and educators must query if another year at home or in an early childhood centre would be more productive for the child than attending school.^{xxii}

FURTHER READING

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NOTES

- i Piotrkowski et al. 2000.
- ii McClelland & Morrison 2003; McClelland et al. 2000; McWayne et al. 2004; NICHD Early Child Care Research Network 2003a, 2003b; Piotrkowski et al. 2000; Wesley & Buysse 2003.
- iii McWayne et al. 2004.
- iv La Paro & Pianta 2000.
- v Piotrkowski et al. 2000.
- vi NICHD Early Child Care Research Network 2003a.
- vii La Paro & Pianta 2000; McClelland & Morrison 2003; McClelland et al. 2000; Miles & Stipek 2006.
- viii McClelland et al. 2000.
- ix Graziano et al. 2007.
- x Graziano et al. 2007; Ladd et al. 1999.
- xi NICHD Early Child Care Research Network 2003b, 2005.
- xii Rimm-Kaufman et al. 2000; Schulting et al. 2005.
- xiii Schulting et al. 2005.
- xiv Schulting et al. 2005.
- xv Rimm-Kaufman et al. 2000.
- xvi Wesley & Buysse 2003.
- xvii Hamre & Pianta 2005.
- xviii La Paro & Pianta 2000.
- xix Bentley-Williams & Butterfield 1996; Fowler et al. 1991.
- xx Nelson 2004; Pianta et al. 2001.
- xxi DeMeis & Stearns 1992.
- xxii Wesley & Buysse 2003.