

KINDERGARTEN READINESS

Spring is almost here, which means that parents everywhere are thinking about kindergarten registration. There are the medical forms to complete and the immunization records to turn in, but for many parents the biggest concern is not where to enroll their child, but whether to enroll their child this year or next year.

It would be nice if the only consideration was the child's date of birth, but life is never as simple as that. Every aspect of childhood development follows a spectrum. Children learn to walk at different rates, learn to talk at different rates, learn to care for themselves at different rates, and reach the point of kindergarten "readiness" at different rates. The cutoff date, August 31, may be an absolute cutoff for the youngest child, but it should not be seen as an absolute cutoff for who must go on to kindergarten.

Of course, we all want our kids to be ready. We all want our kids to excel. Let's face it, we all think our kids are exceptional in every way, and it is only natural to become a little defensive when someone suggests otherwise. Then there are the financial aspects of life that everyone secretly worries about; who wants to pay for another year of preschool?

So what does it mean to be "ready" for kindergarten? If you ask around, you are likely to hear people say it means that a child should have reached a certain arbitrary level of academic proficiency, like being able to recite the alphabet or count to twenty. However, true readiness has just as much to do with non-academic factors as with academic factors.

In order to think about who is ready for kindergarten, we must first think about the whole purpose of preschool. Academics? Not at all. To be honest, most preschools assume that parents will work on academics at home. Preschool is a place for children to learn how to interact with other children and to refine the social interactions that are necessary for kindergarten. In other words, it is a place for kids to learn how to be a part of a group, sit still, follow instructions, and most importantly, get along with others.

Parents cannot (or do not) really teach these things at home. Most of the time, rules are just for show at home, and nine times out of ten parents back off when challenged by their kids, either because they don't want to be the bad guy or because the punishment might keep them from doing something that they secretly want to do as well. I can't tell you how many times I hear a parent threaten to punish a child for bad behavior, only to give them "just one more chance" when the bluff has been called. Well, that doesn't work in kindergarten. The result would be mass chaos. So, we need to have a place for kids to learn that school has rules and structure: preschool.

Kindergarten teachers really want kids who are ready to learn and are ready to cooperate with their peers in a structured social setting. They want kids to have the skills necessary to learn, not the actual knowledge. The alphabet can be taught in a few short days, but

Edward M. Pickens, M.D.

social readiness has to be practiced, and some kids require more practice than others. They also want kids who have to self-help and fine motor skills necessary to function in that often chaotic environment. If you look at a group of four and five year old children, you will see some who can use scissors, draw, use glue-sticks, and assemble puzzles without a second thought. There are also kids who look frustrated and confused – these are the kids who will be behind on day one and feel like they are behind the whole year.

What about the kids whose parents think they are ready to start early? Needless to say, I rarely think that is a good idea. In order to start kindergarten early, a child must score an impossibly high score on a very expensive test – a score that is so high that one could say that the test is designed for most kids to fail. Yes, the measuring stick is mostly about academics, but I know very few 4 year olds who are socially ready for kindergarten. Parents often worry that their child will be bored if they have to wait another year, but most “exceptional” kids will not be bored; they will find interests to keep them busy. The few who are truly ready to advance faster than their peers will be identified when they come to school, based on the combination of their social success and academic progress.

When I started kindergarten in 1972, it was a half-day spent in my church basement. Essentially, it was preschool for 5 year-olds. Now, kindergarten is the new first grade. There is so much to be taught that we need 13 grades instead of 12 to get it all in, so 5 year-old kindergarteners are now expected to learn what 6 year-old first graders used to learn. That means that 5 year-olds in 2011 have to be able to act like 6 year-olds in 1972. For many, that is simply unrealistic!

Don't be afraid to let your kids be ready when they are ready. Talk about your child's readiness with your preschool teacher, and think about all of your options before making your decision. Some kids simply need more time. One more year can mean the difference between shyness and confidence, between following and leading, and between struggling and excelling. A C-student in one grade could easily become an A-student after waiting a year, and the confidence that comes from excelling will stay with them all the way through their academic career.