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Is Your Preschooler Ready for School?

Is your preschooler ready for kindergarten? If not, there's a lot parents can do to help prepare a child.

In spite of our best efforts, sometimes children just aren't ready to take the big step of heading off to kindergarten. For example, children born in November or December may be close to a full year younger than some of their future classmates, and that can mean a huge gap in school readiness. For this reason, many school districts offer a grace period for those with late birthdays - that way parents can determine whether or not their child is ready to handle the stresses and strains of formal education.

How do you tell if your child is school ready? Start by asking yourself some questions about your child's behavior, suggests education professor Margie Mayfield. "What you're looking for with children is if they listen, follow simple directions, are they willing to try things, do they have a developmentally appropriate idea of persistence at a task, are their attention spans reasonable for their age, can they use language to express their needs and solve social problems?"

Mayfield adds that usually there's no cause for alarm if your child hasn't reached some of those milestones. "I think it's very important to realize that although there are certain milestones that all children go through, they have their own timetable. It's important to remember that when you're reading child development books, when they say a child will do something at 36 months, that's an average. It means some children will do it at 30 months, some at 40 months. Neither is inappropriate. So what I think one needs to do is examine their own child. Parents know their own child better than anyone else."

As parents there's a lot we can do to help preschoolers become ready for formal education. We can read to them and use paint, crayons and playdough with them. We can help them prepare for the social aspect of school by getting them together with little friends. And we can build their self esteem by letting them know they are good and capable learners explains author of "Emotion; The On Off Switch for Learning", Priscilla Vale. "Children decide whether or not they're good learners from their earliest experience with their parents. (For example) a parent could show a child how to break an egg when making a cake. The first time (the child attempts it) it goes all over the floor, and the parent says "it's a good beginning - look, you cracked the shell". The kid says to himself "I'm a great shell cracker". They're internalizing the fact that they know how to learn and are capable of doing things."