

School! Is your child ready to learn?

In Australia once a child turns 5 they are considered to be “able to learn”. They are “ready” for school!

But are they?

Nowadays all the research, and there is a lot, indicates the answer is not clear-cut. School readiness is much more than age. It's about being ready and able to learn. It is not an event that automatically happens when a child turns 5. Children develop differently. Some children will be well and truly ready for school at 5 others will not.

This question and answer sheet aims to assist parents who are considering sending their child to school.

How can you tell when a child is ready?

Sometimes it is not immediately obvious whether a child is ready. However there are indicators of a child's readiness to learn. Research consistently identifies the most important indicators as being:

□ **Social knowledge and competence [Hartup 1992; Katz & McLellan 2001]**

At school your child needs to be able to handle transitions, conform to school rules and regulations, follow instructions, sit still for periods of time, talk to adults, request information from adults, as well as respond to adult inquiries. The sheer size of the school and its cohort of older, bigger, confident children can be intimidating for some children

□ **Physical Well Being and Motor Development**

The physical skill level of a child reflects their readiness to learn (cognition), social competence and stamina. [Dean, Ashton & Elliott, 1994; Dockett et al 2000] Normal developmental milestones of the five year old child will ensure:

- they have the body strength and balance to sit still on the floor for short periods of time,
- their listening skills are mature enough to process instructions and respond appropriately,
- their 'eye-body' coordination is such that they can perform appropriate motor tasks
- they have a sense of their own body in space.

These skills tell us about the level of sensory integration (maturity) the child has reached.

□ **Emotional maturity**

Your child needs to be able to separate from you, to get on with other kids, take turns, enter discussions, cope with rebufs, empathise, negotiate compromises, express frustration and anger without escalating disagreements or harming others.

□ **Language, thinking skills & general knowledge [Carnegie Task Force 1994, Docker et al, 2000].**

Verbal communication is the main medium for teaching and although visual reinforcement is present to some degree, language acquired through exposure to stories, books, conversations, TV etc. is the way your child will learn at school. There are some pre academic skills, which make starting school easier for your child. These include skills such as problem solving, visual discrimination, the ability to draw a person, to name basic colours and common shapes, number concepts such as more/less, empty /full, large /small, many/few, number recognition rote counting and ordered counting to 5 or 10.

Your child may be at different stages in different areas so it is the overall picture that counts.

Why does it matter so much? Children started school at 5 in years gone by and turned out OK!

We know now school readiness is important. Longitudinal studies show that children who make a smooth transition to school and experience early school success tend to maintain higher levels of social competence and academic achievements [Pianta & Cox 1999]. Children who start school and are not ready are more likely to experience difficulties later on. McLellan & Katz [2005] argue that there is persuasive evidence that children need some minimal level of social competence before they start school to ensure their later social and emotional development is not compromised.

My child is a boy. Of course he won't be ready at 5

Research suggests boys are more likely not to be ready for school as girls [Renwick 1984]. Studies have found they express themselves less clearly, have more difficulty writing their names, recognizing numbers and letters and tying their shoelaces.

What if my child can read?

Your child may have some well-developed reading, writing or problem solving skills but you need to be mindful of their skill levels in other areas. Some researchers suggest that the single best predictor of adult adaptation is not academic results and classroom behaviour but rather the adequacy with which the child gets along with other children. In other words reading is not the be all and end all.

My child is tall and big and will stick out like a sore thumb if s/he waits another year.

Size is noticeable and can be a concern. It needs to be balanced against other considerations. How ready is your child overall? If they are not ready and you send them to school will this be more detrimental than waiting? There are no clear-cut answers. We suggest you talk to others who can assist.

What if my child has spent a year in 4 year old kindergarten and I'm still not sure whether s/he is ready?

If, after your child has been at 4 year old kindergarten for a year, you are still concerned about whether or not your child is ready for school, discuss these concerns with the kindergarten teacher.

With your consent and in consultation with you and perhaps other early childhood professionals such as a Pre School Field Officer, the teacher will assess your child. The teacher will assess your child to determine if he or she would benefit from a second year of kindergarten and then your child may be eligible for a second year of kindergarten. The areas assessed include self-care, the ability to speak and/or understand language, cognitive (intellectual) development, social and emotional development. Other factors may also be considered.

What happens if the kindergarten teacher assesses my child would benefit from another year at kindergarten?

The teacher will send a "declaration of eligibility" to the Department of Human Services (DHS). This declaration means your child can complete a second year of kindergarten and receive a DHS subsidy. It does not guarantee automatic re-enrolment in a kindergarten program of your choice. This will need to be further discussed with the teacher. Further information is provided in the second year information kit available on the website www.dhs.vic.gov.au/earlychildhood. Information on the website is available in other languages.

What if my child is assessed as ready for school and I still want him / her to wait a year

Ultimately it is your decision as to whether your child spends a second year in 4 year old kindergarten. Even if your teacher assesses your child as being ready you may still want them to wait a year. However in this situation whether or not your child will be offered a place depends on the number enrolled in the following year. Further more if a place is available you will be required to pay full kindergarten fees (subsidy from the DHS will not be available).

Even if my child is not quite ready, won't they catch up at school?

This is a difficult question. All children will develop at school and it may be that school is a more enriching environment for your child than another year at home. However don't assume that school can accelerate your child's development to the point they "Catch up". If you are unsure of your child's readiness we suggest you discuss your child's readiness with the appropriate people.

What if my child is not ready for school and I'm unable to keep him/her at home?

The decision about when your child starts school has to be made in an overall context. If your circumstances are such that you cannot keep your child home for another year and must send them to school discuss details with the teachers at the school and monitor their first year very closely. There may be special strategies that can be put into place to support your child.

I don't want my child to be stigmatized by 'staying back' or "starting late"?

Today there is no stigma associated with starting school later. In fact, it shows you have prioritised the child's long-term well being. While there is much evidence of the potential negative effects of starting too early, there is absolutely no evidence that starting later has any negative effects on a child's development.

What if parents disagree?

Sometimes one parent feels a child is ready for school while another is less certain. Remember to act on behalf of your child. Ask yourself if your keenness about starting school is about what's best for them - or is it about you? Remember, there is no harm in going later, only in going too soon. If one parent has significant reservations, they are probably right!

Sources & Suggested Reading

What's the Hurry by Kathy Walker - A guide for parents, teachers and the community on the importance of giving children a childhood. Practical information, ideas and guidance on a range of topics including school readiness, transition, the importance of play, self esteem, resilience and behaviour, as children move from preschool to school. See her website for more information.

School readiness. Dr Joanna Watson. An initiative of the NSW Department of Community Services : NSW Centre for Parenting & Research

This is an excellent paper for those wanting more information. It investigates children's transition to school from an individual and community perspective and examines what can be done at home and school to make it easier for children starting out. It also looks at explanations as to why some children and communities are more ready for school than others.