

Wonder Years

Helping parents and caregivers make the most of a child's early years.



YOUR CHILD 54-60 MONTHS

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Is your child ready for kindergarten?

By Lindy Buch

Getting a child ready to go to kindergarten is a big step in the life of a family. With all of the emphasis on school success, parents want to know their children have all the tools, skills, and experiences they need to help them do well. There's no simple list of skills that will guarantee kindergarten success. However, there are some things that families can do to help their children make an easier transition to the "big school."

Social skills

Kindergarten teachers around the nation say that children tend to be more successful in school when they:

- Are comfortable being away from their parents in a group of children.
- Know how to play cooperatively, take turns, follow directions, and share the teacher's attention.
- Are enthusiastic about learning new things.

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WAYNE **RESA**
Leading... Learning for All

Is your child ready for kindergarten?

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- Can pay attention and sit at least long enough to hear a story.
- Are used to asking and answering questions.
- Can express their own needs, thoughts, and ideas.

Parents can help by:

- Making sure their children have formal and informal opportunities to play and share with other children.
- Reading and talking to their kids about everyday activities and special outings.
- Taking part in formal group experiences like preschool programs, child care centers, or public library story hours where they can practice group skills.

Self-care

Kindergarten teachers have 20 or even 30 children to care for, often without help. So it makes life easier when students can:

- Be independent when using the toilet, washing hands and blowing their noses.



- Put on their own jackets and zip them, and manage shoes up to the point of tying them.
- Use a fork and spoon on their own.

Parents can help by:

- Encouraging even very young children to begin to take care of themselves, and by being patient when children

are doing so, because it usually takes longer at first.

Fine-motor skills

Children find it easier to learn to write when they:

- Have experience with writing and drawing materials, scissors, play dough and other art activities.
- Are able to recognize at least their own first names and are able to write their names legibly, though not all five-year-olds will be able to do so.

Parents can help by:

- Encouraging children to draw and experiment with many materials.
- Using writing themselves to show how useful writing can be—even if you just write a grocery list!

Safety skills

Children who will walk to school with other children or ride a big yellow school bus should:

- Be able to tell someone their entire name, address and phone number.
- Be able to tell someone their parents' names and where they work.

Parents can help by:

- Working on helping their children learn and practice these items.

Academic skills

Teachers are prepared to teach your child academic skills. However, different schools (and parents) expect different levels of knowledge from children who are getting started. Although there is no common list of what children should know



Wonder Kids

Drew Marshall lives in St. Ignace with his mom, dad and two brothers. At the age of 4, Drew is a huge Blues Clues and Little Bill fan. He loves to be outside, playing with friends and helping his parents with yard work.

Drew also loves to read books every night before bed. His favorite book is the *Alphabet Book*, by Usbourne Books. Drew attends Head Start and his parents say he counts down the minutes until it's time for school. He loves the other children and really enjoys learning.

All the things Drew loves to do are working together in wonderful ways. Playing outdoors helps him exercise his

body and develops critical areas of his brain. Helping his parents teaches him to follow directions and feel self-confident. Reading books and learning the alphabet boosts important skills he'll need to read and write.

Finally, preschool gives him the chance to practice playing and sharing with friends; it's also showing him how rewarding learning can be. All these things are building in Drew the skills he needs to be successful in school, and later in life. For now, though, Drew is just having fun.

and be able to do to enter kindergarten, teachers say that children will be more successful learners when they:

- Can verbally express themselves.
- Are enthusiastic about learning.
- Know the names of colors and shapes.
- Know the names of at least some letters and their sounds.
- Know numbers and can count.
- Can rhyme.
- Can tell a story.
- Have knowledge about the world.

(You should know, experts disagree about how many colors or letters a child should know, or how high he needs to be able to count, etc. Check with local schools to find out what teachers will expect from your child.)



Parents can help by:

- Using a variety of concepts in their daily discussions, pointing them out and making them part of the daily routine. For example, ask “Would you rather wear your red shirt or your green shirt today?” Starting school is a big adventure. Your curious, active, and confident five-year-old deserves a wonderful kindergarten year. With your help, your kindergartner will enter school ready and able to meet the challenges of learning in a group setting.

Lindy Buch, Ph.D., is the Director of the Office of Early Childhood Education and Family Services at the Michigan Department of Education.

The Michigan Department of Education, has define some of the learning they expect children to be working on before they enter kindergarten. It will also define some of the characteristics of preschool programs and settings that help children to learn. Call **517-373-8483** and ask for *Early Childhood Standards of Quality*. Or download from www.michigan.gov/mde. Click on “Educators” then “Early Childhood.”

MYTH BUSTERS

Parenting Myth #19:

The best kind of kindergarten for my child is one that will focus mostly on academics and high achievement.

Fact: It’s true that people are demanding more from schools these days. Parents and lawmakers are watching to see that all children—even those with special learning needs—are making progress and learning.

However, young children need more than just brain-power in order to learn and grow. They need teachers and schools who will pay attention to all their needs: social, emotional, physical and more. They also need schools that can adapt their lessons to meet the needs of all children, not just those who are old enough or “ready” enough to learn easily.

While checking out schools in your area, look for these **11 signs of a good kindergarten classroom:**

1. **Children are playing and working with materials and other children.** They are not aimlessly wandering or forced to sit quietly for long periods of time.
2. **Children have a chance to try various activities throughout the day,** such as block building, pretend play, picture books, paints and other art materials, and table toys such as Legos,TM pegboards and puzzles. Children are not all doing the same things at the same time.
3. **Teachers work with individual children, small groups and the whole group** at different times during the day. They do not spend time only with the entire group.
4. **The classroom is decorated with children’s original work:** artwork, writing with child’s own spelling, and dictated stories.
5. **Children learn numbers and the alphabet in the context of their everyday experiences.** Exploring the natural world of plants and animals, cooking, taking attendance and serving snack are all meaningful activities to children.
6. **Children work on projects and have long periods of time (at least one hour) to play and explore.** Filling out worksheets should not be their primary activity.
7. **Children have an opportunity to play outside every day that weather permits.** This play is never sacrificed for more teaching time or to punish poor behavior.
8. **Teachers read books to children throughout the day,** not just at group story time. Books are always available.
9. **Lessons are adapted for those who are ahead as well as those who need additional help.** Because children differ in experiences and background, they do not learn the same things at the same time in the same way.
10. **Children and their parents look forward to school.** Parents feel safe sending their child to kindergarten. Children are happy; they are not crying or regularly sick.
11. **Teachers focus on the development of the child as a whole, not just on academics.** Classrooms and curriculum will vary according to the interests and backgrounds of the children. But good kindergartens pay attention to all parts of a child’s development: social, emotional, physical, and intellectual.

Source: The National Association for the Education of Young Children, www.naeyc.org.

Almost all of us fall victim to “Parenting Myths” of one kind or another. If life with a child isn’t quite what you expected, this column is for you. Look for it each time you receive Wonder Years.

Preparing your child to learn math

by Irene Helen Zundel

Children learn math concepts long before they begin kindergarten, even though they can't always talk about them. Toddlers, for example, often sort objects as a form of play. They can understand that one pile of blocks has more than another, or that Mommy is big and they are small. They know these concepts even before they can say the words. Older children can grasp the ideas of size, weight, number and order.

You can help your child become ready to learn math in school by introducing math activities and words into their daily lives. Here are some suggestions:

Talk the talk. Regularly use terms like empty and full, big and small, light and heavy, tall and short, first and last, more and less, all or none. Also talk about groups, sets and the names of various coins.

Count by rote. Sing counting songs, do finger plays, or count objects around your house just for fun. This will help your child learn the names and sequence of numbers. Don't worry for now if your child talks about numbers without understanding their value.

Teach meaningful counting (understanding, for example, that the number "two" goes with two objects). Begin with small sets of two and three objects, and work your way up to larger numbers. In the beginning, have your child touch each object as it is counted. Later he will be able to count alone. Try putting clothespins into a large jar, counting as you drop them in. Count

plates as you set the table or toys you are putting into the toy box.

Introduce rational counting (knowing that when you count all the blue marbles for instance, the final number represents how many marbles are in the set). Place objects in a line, and have your child touch and count each one. Then add another object to the row and have the child count again.

Add and subtract items in a set. Use simple stories to introduce word problems. For example, "A mother bunny and her baby were eating carrots in a garden. How many bunnies are there? Soon another bunny came to join them. How many bunnies are eating carrots now?"

Show how to classify objects. Have your child group things that are alike in all ways except for one. For example, have your child sort through the box of crayons and put the red ones into one pile and the green ones into another pile.

Compare objects. Have your child tell which things in a group are bigger, smaller, darker, lighter, softer or louder. Use common objects like two pairs of shoes of differing size, or three blocks—one small, one medium, and one large.

Show the order of objects. Start with two things, and gradually increase the number. Put objects in order by size, weight, brightness, etc.

Model estimating. Put ten buttons in a jar, and ask your child to guess how many there are. At the grocery store, ask your child to predict how much the bag of onions weighs before you place it on the scale.



Teach patterning and sequencing. Get some large plastic beads in various colors. Have your child string the beads in various ways—first all the red beads, followed by all the blue ones; or one green bead, two pink beads, one green bead, two pink beads, and so on.

Practice measuring. Let your child help you measure baking ingredients, pour a capful of bubble bath, or measure small objects with a ruler.

Help your child learn to recognize and write numbers. Cut out numbers made of felt or construction paper, and let him make number pictures. Have him play bingo. Have him trace and write the numbers and illustrate them by drawing the correct number of objects. Make or buy number flashcards.

Get some good books that teach counting, measuring and simple arithmetic. (See resources on page 7 for some good books to try.)

Irene Zundel is mom and a freelance writer specializing in education topics.



Ready schools

So far, we've looked at the many ways your child can get ready for school. But it's just as important to find a school that is ready for your child. **What should a "ready school" offer?**

Look for schools that:

- **Welcome all children who are old enough to attend.**

Expect teachers to eagerly find out about your child's interests and capabilities.

- **Support your home and culture.**

Expect your child's school to welcome your family.

Your child deserves all the grown-ups at school to know and respect her culture, learning style and family needs.

- **Communicate between all the adults in your child's life.**

School experiences are best when early childhood educators, kindergarten teachers, school staff, parents and family members work together to help your child learn.

Schools need to let families know what is happening at school, what children are learning and what they are expected to know.

Used with permission from the *Getting School Ready Project* (Seattle/King County, Washington)
www.gettingschoolready.org.

Additional Source: *Ready To Go: What Parents Should Know About School Readiness*, NAEYC, 1999.

You can find a checklist of things to look for in each area at www.WonderYears.org.

Getting School Ready

What do children need to be ready for school?

SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL SKILLS	You CAN...
I need to feel excited and comfortable about starting kindergarten.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Let me know you're excited about me starting kindergarten. • Give me a chance to visit my school before I start. Let me play on the playground. • Listen to my thoughts and ideas about school. • Play a game with me to pretend I'm in school already.
I need to know what kindergarten will be like.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teach me to follow directions by giving me simple steps. • Help me learn how to take turns with other children, stand in line, wait my turn, and sit in a circle.
LEARNING SKILLS	You CAN...
I need to feel good about my family and culture, and to learn about other cultures.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Show me books and pictures of people who look like me. • Show me books and pictures of people from other cultures. • Sing songs and tell me stories from my culture and from other cultures. • Use the language(s) I know to help me understand and learn. • Take me to places that teach me about my culture and other cultures.
USING WORDS AND NUMBERS	You CAN...
I need to be familiar with words and books.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teach me new words. • Show me words and symbols in my language and the sounds they make. • Read to me. Take me to the library. Bring me books and magazines. • Ask me questions about stories to help me understand their meaning. • Sing songs and teach me rhymes.
KEEPING SAFE AND HEALTHY	You CAN...
I need to be able to use my arms, legs and body to make big movements.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage me to run, jump, climb, dance and move to music, as I am able. • Give me time each day to play outdoors.
I need to have my basic needs met before I come to school each day.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make sure I am fed, rested and dressed for the weather.

Used with permission from the *Getting School Ready Project* (Seattle/King County, Washington). Find more ways to help your child become "school ready" at www.gettingschoolready.org.

Fun ways to learn the

A B C_s

By Andrea L. Mack

“A, B, C, D, E, F, G...” Singing the alphabet song over and over again can get boring. So can reading alphabet books. Yet reading experts have shown that knowing the names of alphabet letters is an early step towards learning to read. So how can you make learning letters fun for you and your child?

Preschoolers are fascinated by the world around them. Instead of thinking about “teaching” letters, build learning into play. Here are four ways to start.

- 1. Hide and Seek Letters:** Take five or six plastic magnetic letters and hide them around the room or yard. When your child finds a letter, put it in a cup or bucket and say the letter name. For example, “Look, you found the ‘P.’ ‘P’ says [p-p-p].”
- 2. Letter Match:** Cut eight or ten equal-sized cards from thin cardboard (a cereal box side will work). Write a letter on each card, making pairs of two “A” cards, two “B” cards, etc. Play matching games by placing the cards face up in front of your child and helping him find the card that matches. As his skill improves, you can put the cards face down and play letter “memory.” Try to match pairs by choosing a card, then trying to remember where you saw the match.
- 3. ABC, Zoom:** Set plastic letters, letter cards or blocks printed with letters at different distances from a start line. Take turns trying to zoom small cars to reach them. (You can also use marbles, if you have no babies or toddlers nearby.) When a car reaches a letter, say the letter name and sound. For example, say, “Wow, you got all the way to the ‘F.’ ‘F’ says [f-f-f].”
- 4. Shopping for letters:** Play shopping, including some plastic letters or letter cards as store items along with cans from the cupboard or play food. Make a list of three or four letters you might need to make alphabet soup, and help your child “buy” them.



Tips for letter play

- Be patient. You couldn't learn 26 names and sounds overnight, and your child won't either. Focus on one or two letters at a time.
- Order isn't important when you're first learning. Start with letters that mean something to your child—the first letter of her name, “D” for Daddy, or “G” for Grandma.
- Look for letters in the world around you: on signs, on toys, in restaurant names, and in books. Point them out to your child, just as you'd point out a big truck or a squirrel.
- Praise your child when she remembers a letter name or sound correctly. Don't worry if she doesn't get it right every time.
- Include toys with letters, like wooden letter blocks, in the toy box. Use them as cargo for trucks, boats or trains. Or build letter towers. Playing with letters gives you chances to talk about them—and more chances for your child to learn.
- Put magnetic letters on your refrigerator or a metal cookie sheet. Let your child create words or letter patterns while you work in the kitchen.

X Y Z

Special Attention

COLOR ME BLIND

By Jennifer Nelson

Justin works in his reading workbook. The directions say to draw lines to the red balls. Too bad all the balls look green to Justin. He guesses and gets many of the answers wrong.

Haley's teacher writes spelling words in orange on a green chalk board. Haley can't see most of the letters against the background. Embarrassed, she doesn't copy the words and gets an F on the spelling test.

Andy usually loves to read aloud in class. Today, however, he balks when the teacher calls on him, and he claims he can't read. The story in the reader is printed in purple letters on a blue background.

For these children, red, orange, yellow and green are simply different names for the same color. About 10 percent of boys are color blind, while only half of one percent of girls lack full color vision. This genetic condition usually passes from mother to son, every other generation.

You might think someone who is color blind sees only black or white—like watching an old black-and-white movie on TV. But that's not true. It's very rare to be completely color blind. Most kids who are color blind can see color; they just don't see the same colors as the rest of us. Where most children can tell the difference between more than 100 hues, colorblind children deal with a different palette. Most see only a handful of colors, and some see less than that.

Parents and teachers should be especially aware of children with color blindness. "Colors are used as tools of communication to teach reading and math," says Scott Steidl, M.D., of Maryland School of Medicine. Books and worksheets come in a rainbow of colors. Counting beads, chalk, maps and other learning tools all include color. There's no way that children who can't see all the colors will learn in the same way. In fact, some children who are color blind have been misdiagnosed with learning disabilities, inattentiveness or laziness in school.

If you or a teacher suspects your child might be color blind or suspects a learning disability, Dr. Steidl recommends an eye exam by a pediatric ophthalmologist (children's eye doctor). Tests for color blindness consist of displays made up of different colored dots with numbers hidden inside. A test for younger children contains simple objects hidden in the dots—objects that young children recognize like circles, stars, and squares. A child who is color blind can't see the numbers or objects hidden inside the dots.

If the tests show your child is color blind, don't despair. There is a whole palette of careers that don't demand a perfect mark on the color test. And some very successful folks were thought to be color blind, including artists Renoir and Van Gogh.

Resources

800-942-HELP—This Parent Helpline offers 24-hour answers to your parenting questions, with referrals to services that can help.

Project Find—All children develop at different rates. But if you are concerned about your child's development, **Project Find** can refer your child for a free evaluation and, if needed, help you locate educational services. Call **800-252-0052** or visit www.earlyonmichigan.org/PF.htm

Countdown to Kindergarten

National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) Offers resources for school readiness and success, including *Ready to GO*, *A Good Kindergarten for Your Child* and *Off to School: A Parent's-Eye View of the Kindergarten Year*. Visit www.naeyc.org or call **800-424-2460**.

Ready Web

<http://readyweb.crc.uiuc.edu/index.html>
Links to dozens of tips and articles on topics related to school readiness. Click on "Virtual Library," and find a whole set of parent tips.

Getting School Ready

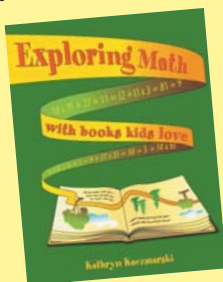
www.gettingschoolready.org
Offers the *Getting School Ready Guide* and Resource Kit, along with links to resources for parents, child care providers and teachers.

54-60 MONTHS

Get Ready to Read—The "Get Ready to Read" screening tool will help you identify your preschooler's strengths or weaknesses and provide suitable activities to strengthen pre-reading skills.

www.familyeducation.com (Type "Get Ready to Read" into the Search box.)

Math Resources



Exploring Math with Books Kids Love by Kathryn Kaczmarzski, Fulcrum, 1998.

Anno's Counting Book by Mitsumasa Anno, Harpercollins Juvenile Books, 1992. Every page features a rural scene undergoing changes through the seasons and years.

The book demonstrates counting, groups and sets, one-to-one correspondence, and observing changes over time.

Domino Addition by Lynette Long, Charlesbridge Publishing, 1996. Uses dominos to practice counting and adding the number of dots. Numbers 1 through 12 are included.

Inch by Inch by Leo Lionni, Scott Foresman, 1995. Introduces the concept of measuring using an inchworm who measures for birds.

Games for Math: Playful Ways to Help Your Child Learn Math by Peggy Kaye, Pantheon Books, 1987.

FunBrain.com

www.funbrain.com
At this site, your child can play math games that practice math skills right at the computer. Look for games for ages 6 and under.



Easing separation anxiety

Here is a list of classic tales involving separations and joyous reunions.

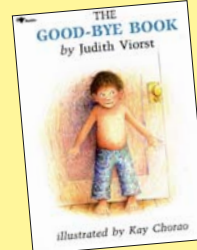
The Kissing Hand by Audrey Penn, Child & Family Press, 1993.

Goodnight Moon by M.W. Brown, Harper and Row, 1947.

You Go Away by D. Corey, Albert Whitman, 1976.

The Goodbye Book by Judith Viorst, Antheneum, 1988.

Hello, Goodbye by David Lloyd, 1988.



You can find all the resources mentioned in this publication at www.WonderYears.info.

Helping parents make a difference, right from the start.

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Tricks of the trade

Easing first-day-of-school jitters

By Dawn Barhyte

Leaving the comforts of home and parents can be scary for some children. Here are some tips I've learned to take the sting out of separations and turn school-day partings into another way to grow:

- Talk about the change in routine long before the first day.
- Visit the school with your child before the first day. Get to know one or two classmates if possible. This will make the first day of school a little more "friendly."

Help us reach more families.

If you receive more than one copy of *Wonder Years*, pass one on to a friend.

Wonder Years

AGES 0 - 5

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- Express enthusiasm for all the fun things your child will be doing. Don't put too much emphasis on fun and games, however. School is about learning and is serious work.
 - Paint a positive picture of school by talking to your child about the other children, toys and activities.
 - Encourage your child to talk about concerns, and let her know it's OK to be sad, angry and excited at the same time.
 - Read stories about animals and children who have successfully coped with separations (see resources on page 7).
 - Remind your child of other fears she may have mastered, like being afraid of going to the doctor or riding a bike. This can boost her self-confidence.
 - Talk about things you feared when you were a child, and share the skills you used to overcome the fear.
 - Take a family snapshot so your child can take it along with her.
 - Make sure your child knows her full name, address and phone number. This helps her feel secure, because she can use the information to get home.
 - Arrange your schedule so you have extra time to spend with your child during the first few days of school.
 - Don't sneak away—although it seems tempting. Instead, try to develop your very own goodbye ritual.
- You can find more tips for easing anxiety separation at www.WonderYears.info.

Do you have a parenting tip or trick that helped you:

- help your child learn,
- helped your child grow, or
- made your life easier as a parent?

Send tips or tricks to *Wonder Years*, Tricks of the Trade, 321 N. Pine, Lansing, MI 48933. We'll post the best tips to the *Wonder Years* Web site at www.WonderYears.info for other parents to read and try with their own children. Each person who sends a tip will receive a free gift.

