



SCHOOL READINESS: Implications for Policy

The first goal set by the National Education Goals Panel in 1990, was “by the year 2000, all children would start school ready to learn”. To prepare children for success in school, policies must provide support for all the contexts that influence child development starting from birth, and must seek to optimize children’s functioning across all domains of development.

policy brief

How Ready Are Our Children?

In general, kindergarten teachers have reported that a significant number of children entering their classrooms lack the skills and an approach to learning necessary for school success:

- In a recent Missouri report, kindergarten teachers rated ¼ of entering kindergartners as being unprepared for school. This is consistent with other national and state level studies in which teachers report that ¼ to ½ of entering kindergartners are inadequately prepared for school.
- Teachers also report that ¼ of entering kindergartners are never or only sometimes eager to learn.
- Nationally, approximately ½ of children have difficulty transitioning to kindergarten.
- Ten percent of children entering school exhibit problem behaviors that are predictive of later retention or learning difficulties. In urban schools, this figure increases to 27%.

Five Dimensions of Readiness in Children

The Goals Panel has identified five dimensions that current research indicates children must be developing in optimally to start school ready to learn:

- **Physical well-being and motor development**
Children must be physically healthy, immunized, growing well, and have developmentally appropriate gross and fine motor abilities.
- **Social and emotional development**
Children must be developing emotional self-control and self-regulatory abilities necessary to interact positively with others. They need to be developing social skills necessary for working and cooperating with others.
- **Approaches to learning**
Children need to be curious and enthusiastic about learning, be flexible in their approach to problems, be able to rely upon a variety of problem solving strategies, and be able to persist at tasks.
- **Language development**
Children must be able to carry on conversations, listen and understand others, and use language to express themselves. Children need well-developed vocabularies, experience with written text, and emergent pre-literacy skills.
- **Cognition and general knowledge**
Children need to have experiences that provide them with knowledge of the objects, people, concepts and conventions of their world.

Children’s development in these areas is affected by many factors in their families, educational environments and communities.

Family Factors that Affect Readiness

- **Family Income:** Growing up in poverty is one of the greatest risk factors for school failure. Poverty is related to multiple risk factors known to negatively impact development such as poor nutrition and medical care, abuse, neglect, stress, low parental education and parental mental illness or substance abuse.
- **Family Stability:** Children are more likely to develop the emotional self-control and well-being necessary for school success if they have mentally healthy parents and nurturing, stable early relationships.
- **Language/Literacy Experiences:** Children who are read to more often in the home and where reading is modeled in the home are more likely to become better readers and succeed in school. In addition, children whose families engage them frequently in meaningful conversations are more likely to develop larger vocabularies and stronger language and reading skills.

Educational Factors Affecting Children's Readiness

- **High Quality Early Childhood Programs:** Children who have attended developmentally appropriate early childhood programs are rated as more prepared for school and perform better on a range of cognitive and achievement tests than children who have not.
- **Early Intervention:** Children with developmental delays or at risk for delays are more likely to succeed in school if their delays are identified early and they receive high quality early intervention services individually and in developmentally appropriate environments.
- **Transition to Kindergarten:** Children are more likely to succeed in school when they go to schools that provide supportive transition activities, especially low and middle SES children. Characteristics of supportive transition activities include visiting the classroom and meeting the teacher before school begins and parent orientations. Parental involvement in transition to school is invaluable.

Community Factors Affecting School Readiness

- **Neighborhood Poverty:** Living in a neighborhood with at least a 10% poverty rate increases children's risk for school failure. Poor neighborhoods are more likely to provide unsafe and unstable environments.
- **Availability of Health, Nutrition, Medical and Family Support Services:** These services must be available and accessible to families to include: hours available supportive of family work schedules and willingness to assist families in understanding their paperwork and policies. Effective referral systems should be in place.
- **Availability of Safe and Enriching Environments:** Families need access to affordable enrichment activities for their children. Libraries, parks, museums, and community recreation centers all provide important enhancement opportunities for children.

Policy Recommendations

1. **Policies must support families.**
 - Increase funding to improve participation rates in Parents as Teachers program, especially for children who live in poverty.
 - Raise income eligibility levels for child care subsidies so more families qualify for assistance.
2. **Policies must support early education programs and schools.**
 - Use a Quality Rating System and supports to improve the quality of early education programs.
 - Increase funding for Head Start and Early Head Start so more children can attend.
3. **Policies must support communities.**
 - Provide family services agencies with flexible hours to support working parents.
 - Ensure neighborhoods are safe places to live to include maintaining community parks and gardens and reducing crime.

Selected References

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(Compiled by Kathy Thornburg and Amy Watson, 2002, Updated May 2008)

For a complete list of references or more information about this topic, contact the Center for Family Policy & Research

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