



LESSONS IN LEARNING

Ready to Learn? A look at school readiness in young children

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More than 600,000 Canadian children began their school careers earlier this month. The first day of school is a milestone for children and their parents, one to which most look with anticipation and excitement. For some, the first day of school brings anxiety about whether children beginning school are ready to learn.

The meaning of “ready to learn” is not as clear cut as it might first appear. The diversity of meanings associated with the term in research literature makes clear the differences of professional opinion among scholars in the field. Parents typically want to know whether their children have the academic knowledge to succeed at school tasks. Teachers often want to know if children have the social and emotional maturity needed to succeed in school.¹

Several skills and abilities have been correlated with successful learning in school. A review of studies examining various dimensions of learning revealed that both the academic/cognitive and social/behavioural skills that children bring into the classroom affect learning outcomes subsequently assessed during the early years of schooling.² Academic/cognitive skills include general knowledge, intellectual development, language development and skills, literacy, numeracy, perceptual motor skills, attention and work habits, social/behavioural skills include assertiveness, leadership, independence, problem behaviour, peer relations and social competence.

Analyses of data that track students’ progress over time reveal that school-entry math, reading and attention skills are associated with later achievement. In the mathematics domain, early math concepts such as knowledge of numbers and the ability to sequence predicts later learning. Early language and reading skills such as vocabulary and knowing letters, words and beginning and ending word sounds predicts later learning. Attention skills predict later learning.³

Concern about children’s preparation for schooling is not confined solely to parents and teachers. Determining children’s readiness for school is also of considerable importance to decision-makers in education.

With support from the Canadian Council on Learning, researchers at Statistics Canada have been working on the development of a school-readiness index for Canadian pre-schoolers.⁴ The development of such an index would help parents, teachers and decision-makers to better understand the factors that affect subsequent school success.

To date, the work indicates that two factors—social/emotional development and verbal ability and attitude toward learning—have a direct effect on school outcomes. A third factor, health, had an indirect effect on school outcomes through its influence on social/emotional development and verbal ability and attitude toward learning. Further work is planned to test these preliminary results with further analyses in the coming year.⁵

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The research on school readiness carries important implications for those responsible for pre-school children.

Develop children's verbal abilities

Early family-literacy experiences provide important pre-literacy lessons, stimulating an interest in and orientation toward literacy,⁶ introducing children to narrative structures and literary conventions,^{7,8,9} and exposing children to the syntax and complexity of written language.¹⁰

Nursery rhymes and songs can also be effective learning tools: children learn to break words down into their component sounds by playing with rhymes.^{11,12} Children like rhymes for their cadence and the repetition of sounds. After they have heard a rhyme or story, the adult reader can pause, allowing the child to complete the line or thought.

While it can be a luxury in a busy household, mealtime conversation helps young children to develop their vocabulary and ability to express themselves orally. Adults who actively listen to what pre-schoolers say are encouraging children to express themselves. Asking children questions about their experience communicates to children that their experiences are important and their descriptions of those experiences are of interest to others. Inviting children to talk about their drawings or paintings provides the opportunity for children to speak about something they have produced. It is advantageous to make the invitation to speak open-ended—"Tell me about ..."—rather than asking a specific question—"What's that?" or "Is that a dog?"¹³

Develop positive attitudes toward learning

Adults can encourage curiosity and effort. The desire to find out is a great motivator and, when curiosity is satisfied, it reinforces a positive attitude toward learning. Learners will inevitably face challenges. Having a positive attitude toward learning goes a long way to sustaining effort in the face of those challenges. Thus, caregivers who communicate that, with effort, tasks—even difficult tasks—can be accomplished are contributing to a child's positive attitude toward learning. Acknowledging a learning challenge in a supportive atmosphere help develop an "I can do it" outlook and a willingness to continue to apply effort.

Develop positive social and emotional responses

Caregivers are very influential in a pre-schooler's social and emotional development. Most important is the example set by the caregiver's own behaviour. Responding to situations in an emotionally controlled fashion sets a positive example for young children from which they learn self control. Treating others respectfully also sets an example for young children. Encouraging children to help others, to apologize when they have caused someone else distress, and to use the polite forms in making requests of others develops positive social traits.

Letting children know that anger and frustration are as legitimate as happiness and feelings of success helps them develop a repertoire of emotional responses—especially when the boundaries for expressing both positive and negative emotions are set. It is appropriate to be frustrated and stamp one’s foot, but not on one’s sibling. Jumping for joy is great, but not on the furniture.

Maintain attention, provide choice and seek explanations

Being able to maintain attention for a reasonable period of time is as important in social development as it is in cognitive development. The opportunity to make choices among opportunities encourages children to pay attention to features that make the opportunities attractive to them. When adults ask children what they find appealing about an opportunity or a character, they are encouraging the child to be attentive to details as well as to develop their verbal ability.

Conclusion

Developing children who have a positive social and emotional outlook, good verbal abilities and positive attitudes toward learning can be accomplished without significant expenditures of money, but it does take time—an increasingly scarce commodity. Adults need time to think about how they relate to the children in their care and time to spend with the children. The investment of time will pay dividends immediately and when the children enter school prepared to learn.

References

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- ¹³ Zadeh, Z., Farnia, F. and C. Ungerleider. (2008) Low Maternal Education and Children's Academic Achievement: The Mediating Role of Home Enrichment. Canadian Council on Learning. Unpublished Research Paper.