

# SCHOOL-READINESS

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## 1. WHAT IS MEANT BY 'READY'?

Before we discuss the term 'ready', let's discuss the term 'my child'. No mother or father can talk about their child without being emotional – not because they are silly, but because they care; because you are supposed to have intense feeling about your child. Elizabeth Stone once said that “being a parent is to decide to have your heart go walking around outside your body”.

School readiness is a sticky topic – especially since it involves more than one readiness: a readiness to learn and a readiness for school.

**Readiness to learn** means that your child is ready for experiences, tasks and skills that match his/her age. Unlike school-readiness, a readiness to learn does not match a specific age: a baby is ready to learn to suck; a two-year-old is ready to be potty-trained and to give up his/her bottles and dummies; a three-year-old is ready to learn in a group; a five-year-old is ready to learn the difference between reality and fantasy; an 18-year-old is ready to learn for his/her driver's licence; a 65-year-old is ready for retirement, etc.

**School-readiness**, in a nutshell, means that your child is able to:

- concentrate on a task for at least 11 minutes, even if he does not want to or like the activity (e.g. building a 36-piece puzzle, clipping on coloured pegs in a specific order, or drawing patterns along the edges of an A4 sheet of paper using ○□+)
- listen the first time
- speak the language used in the grade one classroom fluently **and**
- most importantly, has played outside enough to be able to sit still **and**
- is ready to master abstract and symbolic learning activities (to write and read the alphabet and numbers).

School-readiness starts with the readiness to learn, which actually occurs before birth when the baby is “ready” to be born, to breathe and suck. Being school-ready is a goal for which you prepare, much like a December holiday at the coast – you work at it and every now and then you make sure that you are on the **right road** (reaching milestones), and that progress has been made. Readiness to learn is continuous, while school-readiness is not. School-readiness is associated with a fixed age – the time between the fifth and seventh birthday.

## THE LEAP BETWEEN NURSERY SCHOOL AND “BIG SCHOOL”

At nursery school, a child learns to discover and experience through playing. At nursery school the child does not only sit still to read and write. At nursery school actual objects are touched and handled (concrete activities); this is followed by periods of drawing on paper,

painting, cutting and pasting, and time in the reading corner where books are 'read' (semi-concrete learning activities); and there are times when experiences are discussed and reasoned out, without the aid of concrete objects or examples on paper or on screen (abstract learning activities). *Learning at the abstract level* is easy, but only if it is preceded by *concrete and semi-concrete experiences*.

### **STEP ONE**

**The concrete level of learning** involves actual objects that can be touched and handled, smelt and even tasted. It is three-dimensional, like hanging washing on the line, or fetching a cup for every member of the family.

### **STEP TWO**

**The semi-concrete (representational) level of learning** involves pictures of things rather than actual objects; it is flat, two-dimensional – paper on which to draw or paint, to cut or paste; storybooks to “read” in the reading corner, and TV or computer screens. It is a more complex form of learning, because the child has to remember, associate, compare, etc.

### **STEP THREE**

**Learning at the abstract level** involves concepts, for example the days of the week, plus and minus, numbers, in front, in-between, rough and smooth, float and sink, sounds, shapes, colours, and so much more. These concepts are not some “thing”, they are not “real”; hence, this kind of learning is difficult. This is the kind of learning that is found in the primary school.

The best way to prepare a child to learn at an abstract level is to spend years practising concrete understanding (nought to four-year-olds); then to combine concrete and semi-concrete understanding (four- to five-year-olds) with concepts that can be experienced as themes; and then, between ages five and six, to start thinking more abstractly about things that they have already experienced concretely or semi-concretely as weekly themes.

Reading and writing are not part of the pre-schooler's world, playing is. Even though a toddler or preschool child is aware of letters and numbers, he has no time for reading or writing because he is too busy learning, at a concrete level, how to divide, think, analyse and reason, and fine-tuning his ears to tell the difference between “far” and “four” . Playing without talking is as inconceivable as breathing without oxygen. The sounds of a language must be heard for many years, before a child's ear can distinguish between sounds and his mouth can pronounce them correctly. Speaking a language is important before words can be correctly spelt, read, or written.

The dilemma is that many children start Grade 1 without having had years to practise this jumble of skills or to hear **and** distinguish between the sounds of the language used in the Grade 1 class. They are thrown in at the deep end and, to top it all, have to cope with only the **pictures** of language (letters and numbers) without knowing the **sounds** of the language.

It is, therefore, no wonder that many high school learners still cannot read or write properly; they were never school-ready.

## **2. SCHOOL-READINESS**

School-readiness is not a means to discriminate against some children. On the contrary, it is a way of giving all children an equal opportunity in life ... However, they should:

- have heads and hearts brimful with concrete and semi-concrete experiences
- have been exposed to abstract concepts in concrete ways for years
- use the language spoken in the Grade 1 classroom spontaneously to converse, learn and reason
- have had ample opportunity to play outside so that they are now ready for and eager to experience the primary school adventure.

## **3. WHO IS RESPONSIBLE FOR SCHOOL-READINESS?**

Responsibility is a 'big word', because it is a weighty task. According to the dictionary, "responsibility" means: an obligation/duty to be accountable for, to be held liable/accountable for; it is something that involves serious obligations. Involuntarily you might wonder: *Who* is responsible for your child's readiness to learn and for his being school-ready by the age of six?

When it comes to a child, the full responsibility can only be that of the father and mother. They may very well share the responsibility with others, but the burden of the child's development rests squarely on the shoulders of the parents.

Mom and Dad pay the crèche or playschool heaps of money – is the child the responsibility of the crèche or playschool? In other words, what can parents expect of a crèche or playschool? Absolutely nothing, because a school is a building that cannot give hugs, cannot think or act. What can parents expect of the staff of a crèche or playschool? That the staff act as surrogate-parents who accept responsibility for the child for part of the day, and for more than merely looking after and caring for the child. They also accept responsibility for developing the whole child – physically, emotionally, socially and cognitively.

School-readiness means that the parents do their homework and ensure that the playschool of their choice joins forces with them in order to prepare the child, using appropriate methods, for the more abstract and symbolic world of learning of the primary school.

And what about my stay-at-home-child? Can I, as stay-at-home-mom, equip my child to be school-ready? Of course a mom can help her child to blossom and be ready for school, but only if she has received the necessary training or guidance and is knowledgeable regarding the skills that are required as well as the order in which they must be developed to correspond with the child's age and the wiring of the brain, and plans things accordingly.

<b>Factors that help the child to be ready</b>	<b>Factors that impede readiness</b>
Full-term baby	Premature birth
Milestones reached in the right order and within the broad time-limit of each milestone	Milestones reached early or very late; milestones skipped
A happy family with sufficient food and clothing, and decent housing	A disorganised family with members who come and go, and where food, clothing and housing are barely sufficient
A home environment where conflict is resolved and family members cooperate and play together	Constant tension between mother and father or between family members, or tension in the home environment
Healthy food	Normally only starch and sugar, little protein, fruit and vegetables
Good health	Frequent illnesses that force the child to lie down more often than he/she walks about
Healthy ears without fluid	Ears that are often filled with fluid or infected, grommets are needed to help drain the fluid
Healthy skin and no circles under the eyes	Eczema, dry and/or itchy skin, allergies, dark circles under the eyes
Breathes well and effortlessly through the nose	Regular blocked nose or sinusitis, and breathing chiefly through the mouth
Eyes move together as a team	Eyes do not move in the same direction
Eyes see clearly and are able to focus on something held at an elbow's length from the eyes	Squinting to see or nose almost touching something in order to see clearly
Good muscular strength and muscle-tone – i.e. he sits and stands without support	Weak muscles and low muscle-tone – i.e. he seldom sits or stands upright without having to lean against/on something
A home where family members talk to each other	A home where the child is not really spoken to
An abundance of books in the home environment	No books in the home environment
Stories are regularly read and told	Stories are not read or told
Speaks the language of the Gr. 1-class fluently	Mixes languages or only familiar with a few words in the language used in the Gr. 1-class
Frequent and sincere acknowledgement: That's really clever thinking! Well done, I'm proud of you!	Abuse is more familiar than acknowledgement: What have you done now? You'll amount to nothing! Idiot!
Good age gap between siblings allows each child in turn some self-centred me-time	Siblings born close together and where everything, including time and attention, has to be shared.
Senses work well together and the brain processes the impulses easily – good sensory integration/processing	Messages from the senses pile up and cause a 'traffic jam' in the brain – weak sensory integration/processing
Listens the first time	Does not listen the first time, or only when told the fourth time
Hears and follows instructions in the right order – the number of consecutive commands matches his/her age	Instructions have to be repeated and only some are followed, or tasks are completed haphazardly
Enjoys touching, handling and investigating	Does not like touching and handling
Likes jungle-gyms, swings and slide games	Avoids equipment or moving surfaces such as escalators, suspension bridges, rope ladders



***First develop,  
then assess.***

#### **4. WHO ASSESSES THE CHILD?**

An educational psychologist is trained to conduct standardised school-readiness tests which have been developed specifically for South Africa's rainbow nation. They may also conduct school-readiness tests of other countries if they have undergone the necessary training, but if a child is being enrolled in Gr. 1 in South Africa, a South African test is more appropriate.

Teachers, physiotherapists, occupational therapists, speech therapist, social workers, etc. are also trained to compile supporting material and reports, but an educational psychologist is generally the most qualified person to make recommendations regarding a child's readiness for school to the Department of Education.

#### **5. WHEN IS THE RIGHT TIME?**

School-readiness is determined when a preschool child has already turned six. November is the best month to test a child's school-readiness, because any experienced Gr.0 teacher will tell you that pre-schoolers develop by leaps and bounds between September and December. However, it is not that simple, especially when the child's readiness to learn has not been continuously assessed, because November is too late to determine which areas are ready and which areas require further development in order to ensure that the child can progress to Gr.1 in the year that he/she turns seven.

The fact that many primary schools insist on school-readiness assessments in March, in order to enable them to pick the cream of the crop and do their planning for the following year, is a major obstacle. The question is whether or not this approach to school-readiness is in the best interest of the child, since March is six months prior to September when the child's development **begins** to make major leaps. What is more, early assessment places unnatural pressure on pre-schoolers and Gr.0 teachers because it implies that children should be school-ready in March of their Gr.0 year in order to 'get in' or be enrolled.

Bearing in mind the costs involved in the assessment, a thorough screening between May and July of the child's Gr.0 year, considering the child in totality, is recommended. The results are by no means the be-all and end-all; the early identification of developmental problems is the goal. Should there be a clear indication that the child is lagging behind or of any developmental problems, it would be best to consult a professional person to provide a more thorough evaluation based on his/her area of expertise.

#### **6. LANGUAGE**

Being school-ready does not imply that the child is 'ready' to attend any school and ready in any language. A preschool child must be fluent in the language spoken in Gr. 1 in order to learn to read and write successfully in grade 1. For this reason, school-readiness is always tested in the language that will be spoken in Gr. 1.

## 7. WHAT HAPPENS IF A PRE-SCHOOLER IS NOT SCHOOL-READY?

If a child is not ready, he/she is simply not ready. Readiness cannot be forced upon the child, nor should the child be coerced, because pressure bruises. Readiness is a spontaneous yet slow process that evolves when the child is given the opportunity and is exposed to stimuli that encourage development. Consult an expert for guidance.

## 8. COACHING FOR EXAM

The fact that playschool teachers and parents use school-readiness test material to ‘coach’ children for their school-readiness evaluation renders one speechless. How utterly short-sighted!

The school-readiness test does not evaluate the parent, the teacher, or the school; these tests assess the child’s readiness to learn at a symbolic level. Learning at a **symbolic level** is the complete opposite of learning at a **concrete level**, which involves playing, touching, handling, climbing, discovering, sitting upright and tying shoes; skipping rope, counting apples to give each friend one, and learning to talk to someone. At a symbolic level, one talks using paper (writes) and listens to paper (reads) rather than talking to or listening to a person.

Learning at a symbolic level involves an entirely new language for which children must be prepared, and this is only possible when their minds are teeming with concrete learning experiences. How does one know whether a pre-schooler’s mind is ‘teeming with concrete learning experiences’? When their little **bodies** are so completely filled with playing that they can sit upright and still, ready to listen the first time; when their **hearts** are ready to burst with joy because they know “I CAN” rather than hang onto mom, the bottle or a blanky or suck their hands, hair or clothes; when their minds are brimming with thoughts while they handle and explore and take apart and put back together, and they are able to reason in the language of Grade 1 without wavering. When pre-schoolers are this brimful, they are mouth-wateringly ready for a new language – symbolic language. To expose little ones to symbolic language before they are ready to cope with it borders on child abuse.

Children are vulnerable. We must look after them carefully if we want them to go to school all bright-eyed and bushy-tailed.

