As each new school year begins, adults who work with children in the year before kindergarten have much to think about. Research in recent years highlights the importance of early education, and we all want to give children educational and social experiences throughout the pre-kindergarten years that will give them the best possible start. What you might not realize, however, is that the start of the pre-kindergarten year is also the perfect time to begin thinking about kindergarten.

Too often, preparation for kindergarten does not begin until a month or two just before kindergarten begins. However, transition to kindergarten is a process that is most successful when it is carefully planned out over the entire pre-kindergarten year. Whether a child is in preschool, child care or spending time with parents or caregivers at home, the transition to kindergarten can be a stressful time for parents, educators and children.

Schools and the early childhood education community are increasingly taking notice in a formal way of the importance of this process in the lives of children and families. According to Ramey & Ramey (1994), “One of the few universals of childhood in our society is the transition to school.” In their article, “The Transition to School: Why the First Few Years Matter for a Lifetime,” they explained that the signs of a successful transition to school include:

1. **Children like school and look forward to going.**
2. **Children show steady growth in academic skills.** Teachers must understand each child’s strengths and weaknesses upon entry to school so that the progress of each child can be monitored to ensure that each child has acquired new academic and social skills relative to when they entered school.
3. **Parents maintain involvement in their children’s education.** This includes involvement at home, in school and in the community.
Teachers know the parents of most of the children, as well as other important family members. Teachers feel that they are partners with families in promoting children’s learning and adjustment to school.

Parents trust teachers to understand their children’s needs and they value their efforts to promote their children’s education.

There are collaborative efforts between schools, parents, community groups and social service organizations.

Starting early to prepare for kindergarten does not mean learning “kindergarten skills” in preschool. Rather, it involves making sure children have important skills such as the ability to retell a simple story and to recognize the letters in their names when they enter kindergarten. The year before kindergarten is the time to learn skills such as tracing the shapes of letters and numbers on paper, following simple instructions, recognizing the title of a book, and matching rhyming sounds.

All of these skills are important for future school success, because together they form a foundation of strong prereading and prewriting skills necessary for future work with letters and sounds in kindergarten. If young children are ready with these skills, they are more likely to have a strong start in kindergarten. On the other hand, if a child is having difficulty with these skills, relaying that information to the kindergarten teacher will help the teacher give that child the extra attention and support necessary to be successful right from the start.
The year before kindergarten is also the time for parents and teachers to think about a child’s strengths, talents, weaknesses, and personality as well as how that information will be passed on to the child’s new school. Social skills such as feeling comfortable in a group, asking for help when it’s needed and knowing personal information (name, age, gender) are important skills for young children to develop as they get ready for school.

Helping young children and their families prepare for the transition to school requires planning and sensitivity. Nationally known experts on kindergarten transition, Robert Pianta and Marcia Kraft-Sayer (Kraft-Sayre & Pianta, 2000), suggest a 5-step process to ease transition planning. These steps should occur on both the community and school levels, and include:

- forming a collaborative team,
- identifying a transition coordinator,
- developing a timeline,
- implementing specific transition strategies, and
- evaluating and revising.

This toolkit includes tools and materials that will help you implement strategies to facilitate this process and enhance children’s transition to kindergarten. Whether you are a school administrator, early childhood professional, child care provider or kindergarten teacher, you will find practical and easy-to-use tools, materials to pass along to parents, and resources and guides to steer you through the process. You can use everything in this toolkit, or just pick a few pieces that will be most helpful for your particular situation.

Recognizing a child’s strengths and early signs of difficulties with learning, responding with appropriate activities and learning experiences, and passing that information on to the child’s parents and future teachers are all necessary steps for a child’s success in school.


