

# SKILLS

## FOR SCHOOL READINESS AND LIFE

### Quiz

Yes No

- |                          |                          |   |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | 1. Children are ready for school when they know the letters of the alphabet and can sound out words.    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | 2. Children entering kindergarten must know how to count to 20.   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | 3. Children who are curious and creative will have lots of problems in school.                          |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | 4. Children cannot be responsible for their own clothes, work, and lunch money in kindergarten.         |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | 5. Knowing how to make friends is less important in school success than knowing how to write your name. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | 6. Children cannot develop compassion until they reach high school.                                     |

If you answered yes to any of these questions, you may need to re-think your ideas about school readiness.

Too often early care and education teachers feel pushed to focus on academics. They may decide to drill letters and numbers. They may make flash cards and worksheets. They may order videos and computer programs that promise school readiness.

Let's take a step back and consider the skills children really need to succeed in school. Will 5-year-old Timmy succeed if he can count to 20 by rote on the first day of kindergarten? Or will he stand a better chance of success if he comes with a sense of self-confidence and trust? If he feels curious and creative? If he gets along well with others? If he has self-control and can finish what he starts? If he loves learning?

The truth is that if Timmy has the attitudes and behaviors that foster learning, he will likely learn what he needs to learn in every grade level. More than that, he will likely learn how to succeed in life.

The attitudes and behaviors children most need for

school readiness are independence, compassion, trust, creativity, self-control, and perseverance. Our role as teachers is to create an environment where children can develop these traits.

### Independence

Children begin learning independence as toddlers. They insist on doing things themselves one minute and wail in frustration the next. They say "no" and "mine" and resist taking a nap even when they can barely hold their eyes open.

Ideally by kindergarten, children are able to take some responsibility for their own success and failure. They discover that their actions have consequences and that they can influence those consequences by their actions. They learn to internalize motivation and don't have to rely on rewards and praise to feel success. They want to practice self-reliance and show that they don't want or need the constant protection and supervision of adults.

### Encourage independence in the following ways:

- Give toddlers reasonable choices. "Do you want to read this book or that one?"

- Allow 18-month-old Jennie to use a spoon at mealtime but stand ready to help if she gets frustrated.

- Provide 3- and 4-year-olds with peanut butter, crackers, and plastic knives and let them prepare their own snack.

- Set up learning centers and let children choose activities within them. In the math center, for example, they might sort items by size, fit geometric shapes into a puzzle, or string beads in a pattern.

### Compassion

Infants and toddlers regard themselves as the center of the universe. They are unable to understand the needs of others and can express only their own.

Ideally by kindergarten, children begin to empathize—



to put themselves in another's place. Children begin to recognize the strengths and weaknesses of other people—and to share their sorrow or pride.

Encourage the development of compassion in the following ways:

- Talk about feelings. Give a name to pain, fear, anger, and joy, for example.
- Identify and encourage kindnesses, such as when Abby tries to console Abbot when he scrapes his knee.
- Make pet care more than routine by talking about feeling hungry, thirsty, or dirty.
- Encourage cooperative rather than competitive activities. Instead of challenging children to a foot race, plan an obstacle course that requires children to help each other squeeze through a cardboard box, for example.

### Trust

When infants and toddlers have consistent, loving care, they develop basic trust. They feel they are important members of the family or group and learn they can rely on adults for help in unfamiliar situations. Coupled with a desire for independence, trust enables children to feel the protection and support of adults as they explore, discover,

## Readiness for Life

Traits children need for school readiness extend throughout life.

**Independence.** We act independently when we make informed, competent decisions based on experience, information, and balanced judgment. We are willing to take reasonable risks, and look beyond “how we always do it” to improve a public or personal situation.

**Compassion.** Compassion enables us to recognize the humanity—and dignity—of all people. It is the characteristic that drives charity, volunteer work, tolerance, and mutual respect.

**Trust.** Trust allows us to accept our own worth, feel secure with friends, and have a positive, open outlook. We trust when we know the rules, want to abide by them, and expect consequences to certain behaviors.

**Creativity.** Creativity enables us to think through mental challenges and use negotiation techniques to solve social conflicts. It involves flexibility—not being locked into a routine for its own sake—and an eagerness to search for new answers and solutions.

**Self-control.** Self-control refers to the ability to think about a behavior and decide whether to act or not. Self-control enables us to be patient with ourselves and others.

**Perseverance and resilience.** We persevere by overcoming obstacles and solving problems. These qualities help us get to the bottom of the list—getting reports written, sweaters knit, cars manufactured, kitchens cleaned, and grass cut.

and interpret the environment.

Ideally by kindergarten, children can understand the give-and-take of social situations. They are comfortable with the rules or “ways of doing” that keep them safe. They rely on our consistency to know what is expected of them and are eager to do things the right way.

Encourage the development of trust in the following ways:

- When a baby cries, respond as soon as possible.
- Follow daily routines for eating, play, and naps.
- Establish simple rules and enforce them consistently.
- Treat children fairly, with respect and consideration.
- Provide supervision to prevent biting, bullying, cruel teasing, and other violent behavior.

### Creativity

Babies are born curious. They reach for objects and explore them with their mouths and hands. As toddlers, they get into everything and climb into interesting spaces.

Ideally by kindergarten, children are eager to work on and solve their own problems—in art and construction projects, computations, and social interactions. They approach ideas and tasks with initiative, playfulness, and inventive thinking. They ask lots of questions.

Encourage creativity in the following ways:

- Provide clay, paints, blocks, and other unstructured materials. Allow children time to explore the material without the need to make an object or paint a picture.
- Focus on the process, not the product. Avoid asking “What is it?” Rather say things like “Looks like you really enjoyed doing that” or “You worked hard on that.”
- Ask open-ended questions. Instead of “Did you like the story?” ask “What did you like best about the story?”
- Notice and appreciate children's ideas. “Yes, Juan. We could take apart that old clock and see if we could make it work.”
- Avoid rote learning and modeled projects that minimize individuality.

### Self-Control

Toddlers have little self-control. Ricky, for example, sees a truck and wants it. However, he does not have the intellectual or social skills to consider that Heddy is already playing with it and that he needs to wait for his turn.

Ideally by kindergarten, children understand and accept the need for rules—for their own sake and the sake of others in community. They are learning the art of compromise and negotiation and can often see an event from someone else's point of view. Kindergarten children are usually able to identify their own property and respect the belongings of their peers. They are also able to take responsibility for simple tasks, having the self-control to stay focused, and follow through on a commitment.

Encourage self-control in the following ways:

- Model self-restraint. “I feel like eating a big bowl of

ice cream right now, but I know I would feel too stuffed to move.”

- Offer children choices.
- Consistently enforce simple rules.
- Offer to help children identify and deal with their frustrations. “Your face looks really angry, Jacob. Shall we take some deep breaths before we talk about the problem?”
- Be clear about appropriate and inappropriate ways to express anger. “You can stamp your feet, Hannah, but I can’t let you use your feet to kick Hank.”

### Perseverance and Resilience

Toddlers learn to walk only after lots of trials and tumbles. Determination to succeed helps them ignore bumps and falls, and find success. When preschoolers dig canals in the sand, they learn cause and effect—what works and doesn’t work.

Ideally by kindergarten, children have experience with problem-solving, brainstorming, and evaluating decisions. They can often use these skills to evaluate what went wrong with a project—and find the courage and determi-

nation to try again.

Encourage perseverance and resilience in the following ways:

- Encourage children to finish projects they begin—work a puzzle, build a structure, paint a picture, or play a game before quitting.
- Let children extend their projects over time—a block construction or multi-piece puzzle, for example, could take several days.
- Provide storage space for unfinished art projects.
- Avoid the temptation to do something for, rather than with, a child.
- Teach negotiation skills. “Cole and Bryan, how can you both play with the trike without fighting?”

Independence, compassion, trust, creativity, self-control, and perseverance—these attitudes are the real signs of school readiness. These are also the attitudes children need to grow into successful, competent adults. With these qualities, they will find satisfying jobs, form loving families, and be respected in society. /

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