

3. School Readiness Is More Than What Children Know (It Is Multidimensional)

School readiness is multidimensional—it’s not just what children know. Being ready to learn includes expressing curiosity, playing and working well with others, following directions, and handling feelings effectively, as well as having language and numeracy skills.

Currently, there is a great deal of attention being paid to language and literacy development in young children. The No Child Left Behind Act enacted by Congress in 2002 has strong accountability standards, with students reading at grade level by third grade a key measure. The standards are based on research indicating that third grade reading comprehension test scores can predict much of a child’s success in school. At the same time, however, research also shows that a child’s health affects how well he or she learns and that social and emotional development is key to learning.

Based on solid child development and early education research, the National Education Goals Panel developed a broad definition of a child’s readiness for school that includes five dimensions:

- **Physical well-being and motor development:** general health and growth; gross and fine motor skills; and the absence of unattended physical conditions or exposure to toxic substances
- **Social and emotional development:** ability to interact socially, take turns, and cooperate; positive sense of self worth and ability; and the ability to interpret and express feelings

- **Language development:** verbal language, including listening, speaking, and vocabulary; emerging literacy, including print awareness (assigning sounds to letter combinations), story sense (recognizing story elements), and writing process (representing ideas through drawing, letter-like shapes, or letters)
- **Approaches to learning:** enthusiasm, curiosity, and persistence in completing tasks
- **Cognition and general knowledge:** understanding of shapes and spatial relationships; knowledge of social conventions such as holidays; and knowledge derived from looking across objects, events, or people for similarities, differences, and associations

Each of these dimensions represents something that can be measured and used for diagnosis and early intervention, for instructional guidance and support, and for tracking trends in school readiness for the population as a whole (it is not recommended that assessments of young children be used to determine whether they should start school). These five dimensions all affect the future success of children, and the development of each should be supported in both the pre-school years and when a child starts school.

In addition to a child’s readiness for school, the National Education Goals Panel also has emphasized two other components of school readiness—a school’s readiness for children, and family and community supports and services that contribute to children’s readiness. Schools can and should take actions to improve children’s learning, at whatever developmental level they are when starting school. Schools can do much to address any gaps children face at the start of school—including supporting parents as the most important figures in children’s lives and their first and most important teachers.

Still, it is essential to recognize that what children know and can do at the time of school entry across the five

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dimensions of school readiness does impact their future learning and success. Improving the school readiness of children is one of the most effective ways to improve their overall success.

Sources for More Information

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