

Kindergarten readiness: Social and emotional development

Carrie Shrier, Michigan State University Extension - May 2, 2014

The National Education Goals Panel has identified five essential areas of school readiness. This is the first of five articles exploring these critical skills children need to be Kindergarten ready.



Children's emotional and behavioral adjustment is important for their chances of early school success.

Is my child ready for Kindergarten? What do they have to know to be successful? What can I do to help my child do well in school? Parents have a lot of questions and concerns about their child's school readiness. [Michigan State University \(MSU \(Michigan State University\)\)](#) [Extension](#) will be exploring the five essential areas of school readiness, as identified by the [National Education Goals Panel](#), in a series of articles.

The five essential areas of school readiness are: social and emotional development; approaches to learning; language and literacy; cognition and general knowledge; and physical development and health. This first article will focus on social and emotional development.

When "school readiness" is discussed, many people think of children learning their ABCs and 123s, colors, shapes and other traditional academic skills. However, as Dr. Barbara Smith from the University of Colorado- Denver stated in the article "[Linking Social Development and Behavior to School Readiness](#)," the last two decades of research have made it unequivocally clear that children's emotional and behavioral adjustment is also important for their chances of early school success.

What is social and emotional development? [Great Start](#) has defined social and emotional health as "a young child's growing capacity to form close personal relationships with other people, especially parents and caregivers; express and manage emotions; and to explore new environments." These skills include enjoying interactions with others, making and keeping friends, appropriately expressing a wide variety of emotions, calming down when upset without hurting others, being curious about the people and things around him or her, and liking to discover new things.

Research shows the link between social and emotional skills and school success is so strong, it is a greater predictor of childrens' academic performance in the first grade than their familial background and their cognitive abilities. Why is this link so strong? Simply put, we know that learning is a social process. Children cannot learn when they are struggling to follow directions, get along with their peers and control their emotions in a classroom setting. When children struggle with these skills, they are more likely to have social troubles at school, resorting to inappropriate expressions of frustrations such as hitting, biting and screaming. The study, "The scientific base linking social and emotional learning to school success" by Zins, Bloodworth, Weissberg and Walber, has proven the link not only between social and emotional competence and school success, but also between antisocial behavior and poor academic behavior.

The key social and emotional skills identified for school success, as outlined in Dr. Smith's [article](#), are:

- Getting along with others (parents, teachers and peers)
- Following directions
- Identifying and regulating one's emotions and behavior
- Thinking of appropriate solutions to conflict
- Persisting on task
- Engaging in social conversation and cooperative play
- Correctly interpreting other's behavior and emotions
- Feeling good about oneself and others.

Although many people think of school readiness as academic preparedness, [MSU \(Michigan State University\) Extension](#) recommends parents look differently at what it means to be ready. School readiness skills most directly associated with academic success are often referred to as

“social and emotional health” skills. Research shows high quality pre-school programs provide one the best opportunity to prepare your child for Kindergarten and their academic career.

It is important for parents to be aware that Michigan has only one requirement for Kindergarten entry: children must be five years old on or before the cut-off date of September 1. For many years in our state, all children with birthdays on or before December 1 of that year were eligible to attend Kindergarten. This cut-off date was historically later than most other states. Michigan law was changed, gradually phasing in an earlier cut-off date and bringing Michigan more in-line with other states. An “early entry” or waiver option remains available for children with birthdays between September 1st and December 1st.

For questions regarding your child’s enrollment in Kindergarten and their individual readiness, contact [your local school district](#). More information about early childhood education and the early learning framework can be found at the [National Head Start website](#).

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