

## When does school readiness start?

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If you have a 6 year old child - this is the time of the year when school readiness assessment and parent interviews start in earnest.

### What is school readiness?

It means that a child (between the age of 5 and 7) have developed a level of independence and a series of skills in readiness for formal schooling. Formal schooling means less play and more sitting still and doing work that requires a lot of abstract thinking. Abstract thinking? That means to be able to know stuff and learn new stuff that is not real. What is 'stuff'? That means that at somewhere between the age of 5 and 7 a child can tell left from right without hesitation; can move objects in space (next to, behind, under, in between etc), can recognise shapes and colours without missing a beat and can do play with numbers up to 6 without needing to touch count to know the answer. Abstract stuff also refers to knowing concepts like rough and smooth, big and small, more and less etc. It also means understanding time and use words like yesterday and tomorrow in context instead of saying: I am going to visit granny yesterday.

### Is school readiness important?

Oh yes it is, because a child who is entering grade 1 without the needed skills are set up to fail, because the wonderful world of letters and numbers, of literacy and numeracy of writing and reading his/her own writing is a world that is only accessible to those children with a whole series of pre-reading and writing skills. Ready children dig into letters and numbers and writing as if it is a huge adventure, but those who are not ready are scared, get sore tummies, get clingy and tearful and start doubting themselves.

A child that is not ready enters an arena where every day is a battle, where he/she feels he doesn't belong, where he cries, throws a tantrum or tries to clown or talk his way out of every situation. Such a child is sentenced to 12 years of hard labour and many extra lessons when other children are playing or having fun with their friends.

School readiness is brought about by many factors, such as:

- Health
- Age appropriate playful stimulation
- Good language role models
- Physical, emotional, social and cognitive development.

These factors help a child to become ready, while a child who cannot see or hear well, who is over-active, sick or who has not developed fully yet, may not be ready at the expected time and may need help to get ready for school.

### How would I know if my child is ready?

It is best to talk to the teacher and ask for feedback but also to have your child assessed by a person who is qualified to assess school readiness if you want to be sure. Here are a few quick pointers to screen a child's level of readiness:

A child needs to be ready on 4 levels: physically, emotionally, socially and intellectually.

## PHYSICAL READINESS

The child who is physically ready can skip and gallop, skip using a skipping rope (boys and girls), tie his or her own shoe laces, comfortably use a pencil or scissors to stay on or between the lines, and can sit still and upright for at least 10 minutes, while paying attention. A physically mature child is able to listen the first time and follow instructions. He can look after his own belongings, can dress himself, use the toilet without any help and make his own sandwich.

The child who is not ready physically still has a great need to play. He may seem clumsy, have low muscle tone, poor co-ordination, can't sit still and concentrate for at least 10 minutes, dislike physical games and sport, have problems with balance, crossing the midline, ball skills, pencil grip, cutting, drawing, task completion and often complain of a sore tummy before school.

## EMOTIONAL & SOCIAL READINESS

Emotional and social readiness develop simultaneously. As soon as the child can function independently, he starts developing a positive self-image, self-confidence and the ability to assert himself. These skills create a feeling of security, which fosters healthy risk taking, as well as an eagerness to learn and make friends

The child who is not ready emotionally tends to be overly emotional, clingy, is still sucking (thumb, dummy, bottle) beyond 3 years, bite nails, chew clothes or hair, wet the bed when older than 5, constantly need reassurance and instructions to be repeated before he can act, has poor impulse control (cannot wait), wants to play not work and does not accept NO without a fuss. A child that is not emotionally ready, finds making friends difficult and working in a group close to impossible.

The child who is not ready socially finds it difficult to share, to take turns and to play a game with rules or a dice. He may also battle to make friends his own age and would rather play with younger children or children a few years older than him. In an attempt to cover his discomfort when with other children he may behave like a bully, a 'poor me' or a clown and when he doesn't get his own way throw tantrums. When a child's feelings are overwhelming, this thinking is clouded. When a child's thinking is clouded, learning to read and write can be a huge battle.

## INTELLECTUAL READINESS

Intellectual readiness implies that the child has developed an adequate vocabulary to communicate his feelings and thoughts clearly to other people. A child who is school ready can distinguish between left and right, understands spatial concepts such as above/below/in front of/behind/in between, as well as mathematical concepts such as more/less/bigger/smaller and numbers. This child can make sense of what he sees and hears, can think about it, can make a plan and can react in a meaningful and appropriate manner. He or she can answer WHY questions, e.g. Why are wheels not made from glass? Why can't we touch the sun?

A child that is not ready intellectually is not a 'dumb child' or necessarily lacking in intelligence, he may just not have enough vocabulary to understand an instruction or have the vocabulary to ask questions or may just have been lacking opportunities to develop his or her thinking skills.

*If the six-year-old child does not have fundamental control over both general and discriminative movements, he will find it difficult, if not impossible, to move his eyes across the page, look up and down from the chalkboard to his paper, hold a pencil, or compete in play with his peers....If bodily movement is well under control, children can expend minimum energy on the physical movements of the task and maximum energy on the thinking related solution.*

Hans Furth & Harry Wachs

### **When does school readiness start?**

School readiness starts at the moment of conception, followed by a smooth birth and baby reaching each milestone in sequence within the suggested time frame. What does pregnancy, birth and milestones got to do with school readiness? Pregnancy, birth and milestones has the same correlation with school readiness as school readiness with grade 12 results – the one impacts on the other.

A baby's early development and milestones are important indicators for letting us if baby's brain and body is unfolding the way nature intended it to unfold. The unfolding process is orderly and structured and driven by a set of primitive reflexes. Each of these reflexes is responsible for building a part of the brain and sensory-motor system – this helps information to travel from the senses to the brain and then on to the muscles so baby can respond by suckling, rolling, sitting, crawling, walking, waving, clapping hands and blowing out his only candle on his first birthday. If these reflexes do not complete their pathways, a developmental crack appears, which delays baby's development. If it goes unchecked, a parent might just see it as : 'this is just Sam, he does things his own way'. But Sam will not grow out of it, Sam needs to complete the basic wiring before Sam can sit still, can develop emotionally, socially and intellectually.

Developmental cracks can be prevented. Developmental cracks can be fixed later too, but prevention is always better than cure.

De Jager, M. 2011. *Brain development MILESTONES & learning*. Johannesburg: BabyGym Institute.