

Is your child ready for Kindergarten?

BY KRISTEN DE DEYN KIRK



Deciding who is — and isn't — ready for school isn't easy

Wendy Kremer of Chesapeake is like most moms who are sending their first-born to kindergarten next month: She's feeling both excited and nervous.

She thinks her son is ready after attending a five-day pre-school last year and maturing and growing academically.

She created her own mini summer school to keep the academics fresh in his mind, with flash cards to learn new words and a calendar to write on to practice numbers. Her son was doing well mid-summer, but Wendy still had concerns:

"One of the things that worries me is that he'll be hungry. He is a big kid and definitely has a 'healthy' appetite," she says. "I'm also concerned about his ability to adapt to the new classroom, teachers, and classmates. It takes him a long time to get comfortable in new situations. If he does actually get on the bus, and stay on the bus to school, I have a feeling that I'll be getting calls from the secretary. I can only hope there will be a familiar face or an extra atten-

tive teacher or aide to help him adjust."

Sheryl Pinkston, who taught kindergarten for 10 years, says it's hard to tell if a child is or isn't ready for school. Fifteen years ago, being ready for kindergarten usually meant children knowing most of their letters and numbers and being able to write their names. Now, a kindergarten teacher could meet a similar group of students - or a group with children who don't know English, haven't been read to and don't know basic skills such as zipping a zipper or blowing their nose. It all depends on the school.

"More often than not we see children come in not ready," says Pinkston. "They don't have basic book knowledge and sometimes even the social skills are lacking. So many kids come from split families now, and parents are working more than they see the children."

Kremer is on the right track spending time with her son and working with him, according to Pinkston. She says the best thing a parent can do to prepare their child for school is to read to him or her.

"This interaction does so many things," she explains. "It opens up opportunities for parent/child discussions, which in turn leads to many, many learning experiences."

Pinkston notes that most educators don't use a checklist to decide if a child

is or isn't ready for school, because it's such a hard call. She finds they consider the child's skills, along with the child's birth date and size. Later birth dates and smaller size, along with other concerns, might be reason to wait a year - but not always. However, parents understandably sometimes feel better knowing what types of skills will help their child in the classroom. Virginia Beach Public Schools offers a checklist online. The introduction notes that the checklist is meant to be used as a communication tool between the parents and the teacher to understand each child's needs. That means this not a "test" where every question must be answered with a "yes."

- Tell first and last name
- Give address
- Give telephone number
- Hold a book and turn pages one at a time
- Use scissors to cut paper
- Draw and color pictures that are recognizable
- Listen and follow directions
- Concentrate quietly on an assigned task for at least 10 minutes (e.g., cleaning up room)
- Retell a story after listening to it
- Pay attention to a short story when it is read and answer simple question about it

- Speak in sentences of more than four words
- Make an effort to solve problems before seeking help from others
- Continue an activity without constant attention and encouragement
- Identify likenesses and differences in pictures, objects and forms
- Classify objects by groups, such as food or clothing
- Copy a circle, square or triangle so that it is recognizable
- Compare objects according to size
- Count objects up to five
- Count to 10 or beyond
- Take care of toilet needs
- Tell what simple words mean (tree, shoe, water, horse)
- Put together a puzzle of at least 10 pieces
- Dress, zip or button clothing
- Recognize basic colors
- Recognize some letters of the alphabet
- Attempt to read and write
- Attempt new tasks
- Play well with others
- Adjust well to new situations

Parents need to ask themselves that last question as well - and work on getting to a "yes" answer if that isn't the case at first. There's not much you can control about a 5- or 6-year-old, but you can control keeping your pre-kindergarten jitters to yourself. If you can't "adjust well" to the demands of school, at least fake it. Your child might not know his ABC's, but he definitely knows when you're nervous, and might follow your lead. Set a good example, and know that one day soon your child will say "yes" to all of these questions, and you'll stop crying when the bus pulls away.

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