

## **What Does School Readiness Mean to Programs Serving Infants, Toddlers and Families?**

The concept of "school readiness" commonly refers to the skills and competencies needed for children to succeed in school. Often, school readiness is used to describe such concrete and measurable skills as literacy and numeracy. In preschool programs, leaders and caregivers may establish school readiness goals to help prepare young children for their first structured academic experience, usually kindergarten.

Recently, the media, funding agencies, and policymakers have begun to apply the concept of school readiness to programs serving infants and toddlers. While developmentally appropriate infant/toddler care giving environments do support children's early literacy and numeracy skills, the field has not yet identified appropriate-or relevant-school readiness measures for children under the age of three. So what does the concept of "school readiness" mean to programs serving infants, toddlers and their families?

For children from birth to three years of age, the development of healthy social/emotional skills is the foundation that supports their emerging literacy and numeracy skills.

The same activities and interactions that foster healthy infant and toddler social/emotional development also support the development of the cognitive skills involved in numeracy and literacy. Thus, promoting infants' and toddlers' social/emotional skills is an appropriate school readiness goal. These skills develop within the context of a close, nurturing bond with a primary caregiver--a bond that helps very young children to develop trust, empathy, compassion, and a conscience. The safety of a responsive relationship supports very young children as they develop curiosity and confidence, learn to cooperate with others, and persist with challenging tasks. These skills, which can be thought of as a kind of social/emotional "literacy," allow children to approach learning with optimism.

Social/emotional literacy also ensures that children enter preschool programs and, later, the classroom with the skills they need to manage the complex social demands of an academic environment (listening to the teacher, communicating their needs and ideas, resolving conflicts with peers successfully, making friends, and working well in groups).

Children who lack basic social/emotional literacy are at a serious disadvantage both in the short-term, as well as (and often most noticeably) when they enter school.

## **Tips for Supporting the Development of Social/Emotional Skills in Infants and Toddlers**

1. Offer staff training in the social/emotional development of children aged birth to three. With this knowledge, direct service professionals can better understand how responsive, nurturing relationships lay the foundation for academic success.
2. Identify conflict resolution techniques for both older toddlers (e.g., two- and three-year olds), as well as younger babies (e.g., one- to two-year olds). While approaches will vary based upon children's maturity and development, conflict resolution techniques that focus on mutual respect, appropriate limit-setting, communication, and compromise are most successful in supporting healthy social/emotional development.
3. Use staff meetings to discuss children's social/emotional development. Leaders can do this by highlighting an issue, for example, cooperation, and discussing the children's competency in this area. Leaders may wish to begin these sessions with an explanation of how cooperative skills are defined for different age groups, and then solicit feedback and observations about each child from his/her caregiver.
4. Introduce reading and counting activities appropriate for infants and toddlers. Ensure that books are always available to children. Read to all children—even those too young to talk. Point out letters and words on signs while taking children out for a walk. Use numeracy concepts in daily routines; for example, hand out cookies saying: "Here is one cookie for Allen, and one cookie for Sam. How many cookies is that? Two cookies!" Count fingers and toes. Sing counting songs. Count steps as you walk up them.
5. Set up the care giving environment to support healthy social/emotional development. A balance of smaller areas (including nooks for reading or alone time) and open areas for more physical play promote children's good mental health.
6. Provide staff with appropriate opportunities to discuss the work, and its challenges and stresses. Leaders can offer staff a supportive environment for learning and sharing in several ways, including individual, group, and/or peer supervision. Critical, however, is creating a "safe place" where staff members' own social/emotional needs are recognized and supported. This experience helps staff to do the same with the infants and toddlers they serve.
7. Share with parents how children's earliest relationships (and most importantly, the parent/child relationship) contribute to school readiness. Emphasize the critical role parents play in helping their children develop healthy social/emotional skills, and explain how your program is supporting close, nurturing relationships between staff and children.

*Information from: What Does School Readiness Mean to Programs Serving Infants and Toddlers?". Zerotothree.org. July 2002. Zero to Three Center for Program Excellence. 19 December 2005*



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