

The Relationship Between Language and School Readiness

Many parents believe that “school readiness” is primarily academic and means that a child is ready for kindergarten once he or she knows his or her numbers and letters. Others think it is just a matter of the child’s maturity level and is related to the child’s chronological age. While these factors play a role in school success, they are only a small part. The skills a child needs to succeed in most kindergarten programs are being able to communicate, follow instructions, and interact cooperatively with others. A child’s readiness for school is made up of multiple components and shaped by many factors.

According to The National Education Goals Panel’s Technical Planning Group on School Readiness, the behaviors, skills, and knowledge that are necessary for school success can be grouped into five categories (Goal One technical Planning Group, 1993):

1. Physical Well-Being and Motor Development

This area includes such factors as health, growth, disabilities, gross motor skills (walking, running, jumping), and fine motor skills (grasping or holding crayon/pencil or cutting with scissors). This area is connected to availability and quality of health care, as children need to be screened for lead poisoning, hearing loss, and vision impairments, which can negatively affect cognitive, behavioral, physical, and language development.

2. Social and Emotional Development

Social development refers to a child’s ability to interact with others. Emotional development refers to a child’s ability to understand the feelings of other people and his or her ability to interpret and express his or her own feelings. The ability to recognize, understand, and express feelings affects how a child communicates and interacts with others.

3. Approaches to Learning

This area refers to a child’s motivation to use skills and knowledge. This includes the child’s enthusiasm, curiosity, and persistence. A child learns through the interactions, play, and activities in which he or she participates. Therefore, a child’s language will be enriched and stimulated when he or she is interested in the information presented.

4. Language Development

This area includes communication (listening and speaking) and early literacy skills. Communication includes a child’s understanding and production of oral language and vocabulary knowledge. Early literacy skills include print awareness, appreciation of stories and books, early writing, and the connection of letters to sounds.

5. Cognition and General Knowledge

This area refers to thinking, problem-solving, math/number skills (including quantity concepts, such as, some, more/less, all/none), abstract thought, and

imagination. A child uses abstract thought and imagination during play. These skills are used when a child pretends in thematic play and acts out scripts, such as grocery store, doctor, and school. A child might also play dress up or pretend that one object is something else (i.e., uses a stick as a spoon).

In looking at these five domains of school readiness, language proficiency is a key component of school success. Pre-literacy skills (such as recognizing letters and understanding letter-sound relationships) are good predictors of a child's reading abilities throughout school. Language and literacy skills enable a child to further develop cognitive abilities and knowledge to become an effective communicator and learner/student.

Language is a system of rules that we use to communicate ideas, wants, and needs. It can be divided into two categories: receptive language (listening, understanding, and reading) and expressive language (speaking, gesturing, and writing). Receptive language, or what a child understands, provides the foundation for all other school based achievements. The child's ability to understand and acquire concepts is crucial to school success. This skill enables the child to understand classroom rules, follow verbal instructions, and participate appropriately in social interactions. Children also need to be able to use language to describe past events, talk about experiences, and make predictions on what will happen in the future. Other important language concepts that a child should develop include colors, adjectives, shapes, categories (animals, foods), prepositions (on, under, behind), and quantities (more, most).

Along with oral language, literacy is an aspect of language that is crucial for school success. The first stage of reading, known as the pre-literacy stage, is composed of a number of characteristics (Chall, 1983; Stackhouse, 1997). One of these characteristics is that the child pretends to read. This includes turning pages, reciting familiar stories, and "reading" pictures. Some other skills of the pre-literacy stage include naming alphabet letters, recognizing some signs, playing with paper and pencil, printing his or her name, and rhyming. Segmentation is a skill in which the child learns to break down sentences to words, words to syllables, and syllables to sounds. A child in the pre-literacy stage will also learn to identify beginning and ending sounds in words.

In summary, the relationship between language and school readiness is a close one. The combination of thinking skills (cognition), language (ability to understand and express thoughts), and learning in school are tightly linked. By providing a rich language environment from the child's infancy, parents are giving the child a head start on school success. Early experiences with books, story-telling, and conversations will help to build the strong foundation of language, cognitive, and pre-literacy skills required for school achievement.

To learn how to make a language rich environment using books, go to [Children's Services: Reading and Writing: Early Literacy Skills](#).