

School Readiness

Welcome to Gingerbread's School Readiness parent meeting!

It's fair to say that there is huge professional debate surrounding this term, but to parents, the direct translation is something along the lines of "is my child ready to start school?"

If you go to your computer search engine and put this term in, you will most likely be given a list of cognitive skills such as "knows letter sounds" and "can count objects one to one up to twenty" or the like, performance indicators that we as parents can latch on to in our desire to "ready" our child for the demands of formal schooling.

While these academic skills may be important, they give an incomplete picture of your whole and unique child. If we could simply drop your child's head off at school this knowledge approach to readiness decisions might make sense (that is, if it were even possible!). However, we know that our energetic, sensitive, impulsive child must accompany that head!

The concept of school readiness refers to the child's attainment of a certain set of emotional, behavioral, and cognitive skills needed to learn, work, and function successfully in school. It includes the many skills that develop over time from a child's birth through school entrance age.

Gingerbread is a developmentally appropriate program and, as such, we believe that children develop in systematic ways, crawling before they walk and walking before they run. We also believe that each child is an individual and will develop in their own time. We consider it important to make sure that a child is not "over-placed" (being asked to engage with curriculum that they are not developmentally ready for). It would be harmful to put a baby in a running class when they are just taking their first steps. Is there anything wrong with that baby? Of course not! They will walk and then run in their own perfect time.

We all want our children to be ready to enter school, equipped with all the essential skills required to self-care, think like a responsible little person and behave like an angel! Reality can be very different.

All children are at risk of not being "school ready" by age five, for one reason or another through no fault of the child or parent:

- This may be age related. One child may have just turned five whereas his classmate is about to turn six. There is a wide gap in abilities in that fact alone. Your child will be ready in their own time, as all children develop at their own pace.
- The child could be a "late bloomer", attaining all the milestones but on a slower time table than his or her peers. We know that children walk from around 9 months old to 14 months old. The late walker is not at a disadvantage, but just on his or her own time table.
- Sometimes a child may have issues that need to be addressed, and time alone will not achieve readiness. A child may need some kind of intervention, by a health

practitioner or an occupational therapist who can prescribe activities to help children make the neural connections to achieve some of the skills necessary to thrive in school.

It is for many reasons that we don't use a child's birthdate alone to make placement decisions.

School readiness includes the areas of social-emotional, cognitive, language and literacy, and physical development. Another important part of school readiness includes a child's ability to maintain focus on a task and show interest and curiosity in learning. The interactions children have with caring adults inside and outside their families, each child's developmental history and each child's unique make up, all influence the development of school readiness skills.

Social and emotional development includes: developing self-control, building problem solving skills, forming relationships with others and identifying feelings in yourself and others.

Why it matters: When children develop strong social emotional skills, they are better able to form and maintain friendships and are better able to focus attention on learning.

How to support development:

- Notice and talk with children to support building positive relationships.
- Help children make connections with one another to support developing friendships.
- Talk about feelings and identify feeling throughout the day. Remember that we "read" feelings with our eyes.
- Model and support ways to help children calm down, identify a problem and talk about how to solve the problem calmly. "In our family, we are problem solvers!"

Cognitive development includes: Building thinking skills, reasoning skills, problem solving skills and memory skills.

Why it matters: Developing cognitive skills forms a foundation for all learning.

How to support development:

- Play games with children that support memory (matching pictures, letters or number cards).
- Provide games and materials that require children to problem solve: counting to figure out how many blocks fit in a toy truck, arranging items in a pattern during a game, or grouping items by color, size or shape.
- When children are playing, building and creating, ask children questions about why they think something happened, or what they think might happen.
- When reading aloud, stop and ask how they think the main character might solve their problem.

- Allow time for discovery activities (science experiments, cooking activities). Talk with children about their predictions. For example, before mixing cornstarch and water, ask children what they think will happen when the ingredients are mixed.

Language and literacy development: Building language skills, vocabulary skills, comprehension skills, and letter knowledge.

Why it matters: Building strong language and literacy skills supports growth in cognitive and social emotional development and is related to later school success.

How to support development:

- Read to children every day and have conversations about books, asking questions about how the characters are feeling, what might happen next, and how something might relate to a child's own experience.
- Have conversations with children throughout the day, for example, at mealtimes, playtimes, and during routine times. Any time of day is a great time to talk with children!
- Play games that support letter knowledge, like "I spy a letter" or letter matching games. Point out letters in everyday life throughout the day.
- Read rhyming poems and stories, sing rhyming songs and play rhyming games.

Physical development includes: Building large motor skills and fine motor skills.

Why it matters: Building large motor skills is important for physical growth and development. Developing fine motor skills is important for successful completion of small motor tasks.

How to support development:

- Allow children time for large motor activities. Provide toys and equipment that support large motor development like bikes, balls, climbing equipment and swings.
- Provide opportunities for individual and group games.
- Play games with children that promote running, skipping, jumping and crawling.
- Provide opportunities and materials for fine motor skill development like cutting with scissors, painting, gluing, writing, stringing beads, tracing, and doing puzzles. Encourage children to button and unbutton, zip and unzip, snap and unsnap, pull the spray nozzle trigger, use clothespins, pry apart legos, put on their own (or your!) bandaid.

An extensive survey of school teachers revealed that they would like to see children enter formal schooling with the following skills and abilities:

- The capacity to develop good relationships with others.
- Concentration and persistence in challenging tasks.
- Ability to effectively communicate about emotions.
- Ability to listen to instructions and be attentive.
- The ability to solve social problems.

Additionally, they would like to see children:

- Independent in toileting,
- Able to dress themselves,
- Understand expected levels of behavior,
- Confident and with healthy self esteem,
- Able to take turns and share,
- Able to sit still for a short period,
- Able to separate from parents,
- With communication and language skills needed to communicate needs and listen to others and
- Able to actively learn and creatively and critically think.

Some of these characteristics may be difficult for all children to achieve and this shouldn't leave parents concerned that a child isn't ready. The important thing is that we are aware of these characteristics and are putting steps in place to ensure that the child is developing the skills.

You have the right to enroll your child in Kindergarten if they turn 5 before September 2 of the school year. We believe, however, that children do best if they are older in their class, rather than younger, and for this reason (or others) may recommend that your child wait a year before entering school.

Many parents have concerns that if they allow their child a growth year in these early years that their child will be self-conscious about being older when they become teens. There is some data to support some negative outcomes, particularly with boys. I recommend with all our children that we involve them in their high school plan before they enter their freshman year, or whenever you feel is appropriate. This looks like:

- “You are becoming a young adult, and your Mom (Dad) and I believe that you should help make a high school plan. There are five ways that I know of to go through high school. One way is to graduate early. Another is to take AP (Advanced Placement) classes. Another is to be actively involved in extra-curricular activities (sports, debate, drama, etc). Another is to go to Tech school. Another is to participate in Early Entry (taking college courses while still in high school).” Partnering with your young adult is

the way to begin the transition from childhood to adulthood and will counteract some of the negatives of giving your child an extra year.

- Another thing to remember is that grade lines can become very blurred in middle school and beyond. It is possible for your seventh grader to be in Algebra in Math class and with their like-age peers in another class.

Other helpful tips:

- Please rid yourself of the notion that all learning takes place behind a desk in a formal school setting. Children are born learning (I would argue that all of us are lifelong learners), and letting them have a growth year will not stunt this.
- Readiness decisions are not about intelligence!
- Give your child the words to say when adults ask what grade they're in. Many times they will say something like "I am supposed to be in fourth grade, but I'm in third" but we may need to point out that while our current school model puts us in grades, really we are striving to be lifelong learners regardless of grade.
- It's important to wrestle with your feelings about this topic. Perhaps you were the youngest in your grade and loved it! Perhaps you were over-placed and struggled, and you don't want this to happen to your child. Whatever your decision, your child will pick up on your ambivalence, so do whatever you need to do to make the best decision for your family and don't look back. Please remember that none of this is carved in stone, and changes can be made later on if feedback warrants it!
- You may need words, too, when well meaning friends or family members question your decision. Statements such as "His mother and I researched our decision and feel this is the best overall," can be helpful.

At Gingerbread we will make a recommendation for placement based on our evaluation of what would be your child's "next best year." We look forward to discussing your child with you at your conference!