What does my child need to be "ready" for kindergarten?

Kindergarten has changed from when we were in school. Kindergarten previously lasted for two to three hours a day and focused primarily on the development of social skills. Today, many kindergartens last a full day (approximately 6 hours), have a major focus on reading and writing skills, and require significant amounts of seat work. This has implications for what skills our children need to have acquired prior to starting kindergarten.

- **Children need to be socially and emotionally ready for school.** This is one of the most important areas of readiness for children. Children need to be able to cooperate with their peers in group situations and activities. Children also need to be able to control their impulses and be able to relate to non-family authority figures.

- **Children need to have acquired motor skills.** Motor skills include large muscle activities necessary for walking in a straight line and throwing a ball. Motor skills also include small muscle skills such as drawing, coloring, cutting, and beginning handwriting.

- **Children need to be cognitively and intellectually ready for school.** Intellectual readiness is a term used to describe the learning skills a child needs to make a smooth transition into kindergarten. These skills include knowledge of colors, numbers through 10, at least some of the letters of the alphabet (e.g. particularly the letters in his/her name), and shapes. Other skills that children need are the ability to assemble simple puzzles, answer questions about his/her environment (e.g. how many legs does this spider have?), and understand similarities (e.g. how are an apple and an orange alike?), differences (e.g. how is an apple different from an orange?), and opposites (e.g. ice cream is cold, coffee is hot).

- **Children need to be curious and eager to learn.** Our children will be most successful if they learn to ask questions, think independently, and be creative. Our children need to be curious about the world, interested in how things work, and know how to creatively approach problems. So, if your child asks you a question like, "Do mosquitoes sleep?", resist the urge to answer (you may not know anyway!) or to give them the answer right away. Instead try asking them, "What do you think?" or "Where do you think we could find the answer to that question?". By doing this, you are encouraging them to think for themselves. This also helps build a child’s self-esteem!

What characteristics do I need to look for in my child's day care center or preschool to make sure my child will be exposed to what he or she needs?

There are two critical concepts for how a child learns:

1. Children learn best when they are developmentally ready, which is NOT necessarily predicted by a child’s chronological age, and
2. Children learn best in enjoyable environments that provide positive feedback.

So, look for an environment that:

- Follows your child's lead in terms of when they are ready to learn
- Focuses on learning in a positive, fun, play-filled environment
• Builds social-emotional skills, motor skills, and intellectual skills
• Encourages children to ask questions and be curious about the world
• Works with you around your child's individual characteristics and needs

**Why is it important to choose a high quality program?**

High quality early education supports healthy development and early learning for preschoolers, providing children with a foundation for school readiness and academic success. Early learning experiences outside the home also allow children to build trusting relationships with adults other than their parents, and with other children their own age. The preschool parents choose for their child to attend can have a strong impact on the child's future academic success. Recent research suggests that children who attend preschool are more likely to do well in school, perform better on tests, and have greater success getting into college. Generally, children who attend high quality preschool programs:

• Demonstrate greater social skills throughout their school years
• Have higher self-esteem and value achievement more than children who do not attend high quality programs
• Receive higher scores on tests of thinking ability and language, and maintain intellectual gains later on in school
• Excel in reading and math skills, and are better prepared for school
• Demonstrate better classroom behavior
• Are less frequently held back or assigned to special education classes
• Have better school attendance rates, and are more likely to graduate from high school and pursue higher learning

**What are the signs of a high quality program?**

• **Licensing and Accreditation.** Preschools that are licensed by the state must comply with the state's laws on health, sanitation, and safety. Accreditation by an organization like the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) operates as a kind of quality controller: the standards that must be met to obtain accreditation represent good quality programs.

• **A low teacher-to-child ratio.** For two and three-year-olds, NAEYC recommends at least two teachers for every 10 to 14 children. For four and five-year-olds, NAEYC recommends two teachers for every 15 to 20 children. Generally, the lower the ratio, the more individualized attention each student will receive.

• **Experienced and educated teachers.** At least one teacher in each classroom should have a degree in child development or early childhood education. Teachers should also be participating in continued education classes if possible. All staff workers must undergo a background clearance as well.

• **A healthy and safe environment.** The children should be under adult supervision at all times. The classrooms should be safe and contain only age-appropriate materials. There should be enough usable space indoors and outdoors so children are not crowded, and all areas should be kept reasonably clean. The school should also be secure and have fences or other barriers around the outdoor play area to prevent children from running out into the street.
• **Openness.** The school should have an open-door policy allowing parents to drop by, and parents should feel welcome to visit and observe classroom activity. A school that does not encourage openness with parents may have something to hide.

• **A good classroom structure.** High quality programs are structured enough so that the children cannot wander if they are not sure what to do, while also allowing enough freedom to let the children explore their learning environment.