

Taking the Big Step: School Readiness

By Sarah Russell

School readiness is important but what does it entail? How do you identify it in your child?

It's around this time of the year where parents are naturally thinking about the new school year. For many parents with children starting school for the first time, this is an exciting time, however, it can also be a time filled with uncertainty, such as "Is my child ready for school?"

As an Occupational Therapist, I find it fascinating that in Bangkok we are surrounded by so many different cultures; providing a diverse range of developmental differences, expectations and experiences. In the school setting, this means that expectations that might be appropriate for children in some cultures, may not be as relevant in others. I will always fondly remember my first year in South East Asia having moved to Singapore from Sydney in Australia where I was facilitating a school readiness program within a large children's hospital. It was appropriate for Australian children within my group to for example write their name, count to 10 and sit for a short 10-minute activity on the floor, the expectations for the children in Singapore was strikingly different.

Given this diversity, it is common for parents to have a certain level of worry and concern about how schools factor such differences into the curriculum. When speaking with parents and supporting them to find the right school fit for their children I coach them to understand and ask questions about the school's philosophy and teaching structures, realizing that the school-child fit is essential in supporting the child to have a successful and smooth start to their schooling.

However, it is also important for parents sending their children to an international school setting to note and understand that despite cultural diversity and past schooling experiences, schools generally adopt a shared perspective regarding the skills of importance for children when starting school.

What is school readiness?

Let's first begin with defining what school



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readiness means. School readiness in this article refers to whether a child is ready to make an easy and successful transition into school. Research suggests that optimal learning and academic development is made when a child enters school with exposure and competence in activities that develop specific skills. Some of these skills include:

- Writing their name
- Counting to 10
- Knowing colors
- Identifying common shapes (e.g. circle, triangle, square, rectangle)
- Being able to pronounce the alphabet
- Toilet skills (e.g. clothing management, wiping, flushing, washing hands)

While academic skills are an important consideration when determining a child's readiness for school, non-academic skills have been discussed in the research to be equally as important, given the profound effect they can have on children's academic development. These skills include:

- Attention and concentration
- Physical skills (e.g. endurance, strength)
- Emotion regulation skills
- Social skills
- Speech and language skills
- Play-related interaction

Why is it important that children are ready for school?

Children enter the schooling system once, so it's important that they are given the best opportunity to make this start as positive, smooth and as successful as possible. Ensuring children have a positive exposure to school is essential in developing a positive regard for their education and future learning. When children aren't ready to start school there is a risk that they will perceive educational activities and experiences as negative and may withdraw, react with unwanted behaviors and become emotionally distressed. Any or all of these factors can lead to:

- Difficulty accessing the curriculum (e.g. poor attention, unwillingness to learn)
- Poor academic outcomes as the child's emotional state may not be conducive to learning.
- Peer rejection and social isolation
- Social and emotional difficulties (e.g. poor sleep, bed wetting)

How can I tell if my child isn't ready to go to school?

It's really important to communicate any concerns about your child's readiness for school with their teacher or any other person providing an educational program,

as early as possible. This will allow you to attend to any areas of concern in a timely manner. Typically, when parents are questioning whether their child is ready to start school they report one or more of the following when comparing the child to their peers:

- Generally slower in one or more areas of development
- Is not yet toilet trained
- Has difficulty sitting at the table to complete academic activities (e.g. drawing, writing, colouring)
- Prefers to run around, move rather than sit and listen to an activity that is not of their choosing (e.g. to a book, at the table)
- Finds it difficult to follow other's instructions and expectations
- More often than not finds it difficult to share and wait for their turn
- Has difficulty playing with others, can be described as preferring to play alone or alongside others
- Finds it difficult to communicate in and/or understand English (depending on the language of operation in school)
- Finds it difficult to separate from the caregiver for the school day

What can I do if I don't think my child is ready for school?

If you find yourself unsure about your child's readiness for school the following activities may be helpful to try for a number of months. Following on from this you can then reflect on your child's readiness for school:

- **Parenting expectations:** Provide your child with more opportunities to develop their self-care skills such as teaching them how to dress/ undress, put on and off their shoes and socks. Provide opportunities for your child to practice in a natural way which might involve instructing the helper/caregiver to hold back from doing these tasks for the child, paving the way for the child to step up and take more ownership and accountability for their learning and development.
- **Read to your child at night time:** Exposing children to books helps children prepare for early literacy. It also helps develop their attention, fine motor skills (encourage the children to turn the pages of the book) and their speech and language skills (ask the child to locate certain objects on the page, ask your child questions about the book).
- **Social skills:** Organise regular play

dates with children of a similar age where your child can learn to share, wait for their turn, follow another's lead, negotiate etc.

- **Early preparation:** Start preparing the child for school by talking about expectations at school, appropriate behaviour, and regularly engaging in tabletop activities where your child is expected to sit down.
- **Collaboration:** Talk with your child's teacher to identify any areas of concern so that you have time to provide support/ engage support prior to your child starting school
- **Visual strategies:** Use visuals (such as picture schedules) to help the child understand the routine of their day both at home and at preschool (kindergarten). If needed your child might benefit from a personalised 'starting school' story which can help them identify who they might know in their class, who their teacher is and what the

- **Physical skills:** Support your child to practice sitting on the floor when reading books together along with sitting at the table to do pencil and paper activities. Developing sitting tolerance and stamina at both the table and when on the floor will help support your child's attention and concentration skills.

If I still require help what can I do?

If you have noted that your child requires some support to enable a successful and smooth transition to school, and you have tried to address your concerns at home and/or at school (if appropriate), with little developmental gains, then it might be time to reach out for further support.

There are a variety of different professionals who can help support you and your child in supporting them with their school readiness. To access profession-



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playground and their classroom looks like.

- **Transition visits:** Most schools offer a transition visit where the children are invited to see the school and spend some time familiarizing themselves with the surroundings. This is a good time for parents to ask the teacher any questions they might have about the school and the first few weeks ahead.
- **Fine motor skill development:** This is an area that will be a large part of the activities undertaken at school, so developing these skills will enable the child to participate in activities much more easily and willingly. Activities you can facilitate at home include: writing their name, cutting, colouring, basic drawing (e.g. person).

al support, it is recommended that you and/or your child's teacher consult with an appropriate professional. The appropriate professional will depend on the areas you are most concerned about. For example, if you're concerned about your child's play, speech and language skills then a speech and language therapist would be an appropriate person to seek advice from. Whereas if you're concerned about your child's fine and gross motor skills then an occupational therapist could assist.

Most therapists have a wait list so another advantage of understanding your child's readiness for school early is to be able to collate the necessary information, should this be needed.