

# *Off to a Good Start!*



*Ways Families Can Help Children  
Get Ready to Begin School*



## A big day is coming . . . and it's very exciting!

**C**an you believe it? Your little one is about to start kindergarten! It's an exciting time for everyone. What can you do to get your child ready to learn? This booklet is filled with lists of what your child should know and things to do at home to prepare.

In it, you'll find everything from tips on promoting reading readiness to brain-boosting math activities. You'll even discover ideas on how best to work with your child's school.

Remember: You're not only your child's first teacher, you're also a partner in education—both in the classroom and at home.



"Studies document that, regardless of the economic, ethnic, or cultural background, family and parent involvement in a child's education is a major factor in determining success in school."

— National PTA



## Is my child ready?

Not everything your youngster needs to know for school has to do with academics. In fact, kindergarten teachers say that a child's social skills and emotional development are the best predictors of success in the classroom.

But keep in mind that children will mature *throughout* kindergarten. They sharpen their social skills and become more emotionally mature.

## Build a love of learning

Spark your child's passion for discovery. From kindergarten on, eager learners make eager students!

### A child who is ready to learn:

- Shows curiosity and enthusiasm about exploring new things.
- Asks lots of questions.
- Is confident about speaking up.
- Is willing to take on challenging tasks.



### To boost your child's love of learning:

- Take a new route home. Talk about what you see.
- Play thinking games like "I Spy."
- Celebrate efforts. Sure, the block tower fell. But not before your child stacked all six blocks!
- Offer challenges. Go ahead, tackle that 20 piece puzzle together.
- Get excited yourself. "I learned the coolest thing today!"
- Ask your child to help you cook, garden or fix things around the house.
- Praise your child's efforts. "Your drawing is so colorful!"
- Together, find answers to your child's questions.

## Prepare your child for classroom success

**K**indergarten teachers must support a classroom full of children. The more students can do by themselves at school, the better. So help your child become independent—and watch that confidence soar!

### **Your child should be able to:**

- Get dressed without help.
- Use the bathroom independently.
- Handle nose-wiping and cover coughs and sneezes.
- Eat neatly (okay, sort of neatly).
- Follow two-step instructions.

### **To help your child become independent:**

- Have your child work on zipping, buttoning, tying shoes and opening food wrappers.
- Let your child practice using the bathroom (including lowering/raising pants, wiping and washing hands).
- Role-play. “I’m going to sneeze! What should I do?”
- Pretend your kitchen is a nice restaurant. Practice table manners.
- Give silly two-step directions. “First quack like a duck. Then hop like a bunny!”

## Teach your child to get along with others

**E**ven in kindergarten, your child will be part of a class. Your child will need to get along with others in order to focus on learning once the school bell rings!

### **Your child should be able to:**

- Take turns and share.
- Handle disappointment.
- Compromise.
- Understand that others have feelings, too.

### **To help your child build social skills:**

- Invite other children to spend time with your child.
- Practice give-and-take. Help your child think of what to say and do when another child wants a toy.
- Don’t always let your child win. From “Tic-Tac-Toe” to “Old Maid,” let your child lose sometimes.
- Talk about feelings. “I’m sad that my favorite bracelet broke. What makes you feel sad?”

## Build your child's motor skills

From cutting with scissors to tying their shoes, kindergartners are expected to master many tasks that involve both their large and small muscles. Teachers often refer to these abilities as a child's *motor skills*.

### Your child should be able to:

- Color and scribble.
- Hold safety scissors.
- Trace simple shapes.
- Glue.
- Bounce and throw a ball.
- Walk in a straight line.



### To help your child build motor skills:

- Color and draw together. Keep pencils, crayons and paper down low where your child can reach them.
- Demonstrate how to use safety scissors. Have your child clip coupons for you. It'll make your child feel grown up—and save you money!
- Let your child trace your hand.
- Play with modeling clay. Help your child roll it into snakes and other shapes.
- Fill a spray bottle with water. Have your child squirt the houseplants.
- Make pasta necklaces. Encourage your child to thread dry macaroni onto yarn.
- Play catch with everything from beanbags to beach balls.
- Be acrobats! See if your child can walk along the garden hose "tightrope."
- Have a balancing contest. Who can stand on one foot the longest?
- Practice tying shoes (even if your child usually wears Velcro®).
- Ask your child to tear lettuce for a salad, stir batter when you bake and spread jam on bread.
- Play "Follow the Leader," and skip, gallop and hop.
- Visit a playground and teach your child to swing on the swing set.



## Help your child develop language skills

**D**eveloping language skills will prepare your child for reading. Everything your child knows about language—from how it's spoken to how it sounds—comes into play during kindergarten.

### **Your child should be able to:**

- Carry on a conversation.
- Ask questions and listen to answers.
- Retell stories and talk about past experiences.
- Recognize rhymes.
- Listen to stories and songs.

### **Here's what you can do with your child:**

- Talk, talk, talk. Chat about your day. Share something funny.
- Make up stories. Act them out with puppets.
- Introduce new words. "This ice cream is *delicious!*"
- Sing the alphabet song. Sing the letters in your child's name.
- Recite familiar rhymes or invent your own.
- Play games like "Simon Says" or "Mother, May I?"

## Have fun with writing readiness, too!

**F**or little ones, writing starts with pencils, crayons, paper and lots of scribbles.

### **Your child should be able to:**

- Understand that words run left to right.
- Hold a pencil correctly.
- Color on paper.
- Print a few letters.

### **To develop your child's writing skills:**

- Provide lots of writing tools, from chunky crayons to markers.
- Let your child help you "write" the grocery list or a letter to grandparents.
- Play office. Have your child address envelopes and fold papers.
- Have your child write the ABCs with sidewalk chalk or shaving cream.
- Help your child use water to "paint" letters on dry pavement.

## It's important to read to and with your child

Reading is the foundational skill for all learning. Teach your child to love books and you'll build a lifelong reader. So plant the seed and watch it grow.

### **Your child should be able to:**

- Hold a book and turn its pages correctly.
- Understand that letters make sounds.
- Listen to stories without interrupting.
- Recognize most letters of the alphabet.
- Recognize own name in print.

### **To promote reading readiness:**

- Read to your child every day. Have the whole family join in.
- Keep books where your child can get to them.
- Label a few objects in your child's room, like "dresser" and "bed."
- Help your child explore magazines, comics and maps in addition to books.
- Make letter cards. Have your child match uppercase/lowercase pairs such as B/b.
- Skip the words. Have your child invent a tale to go along with a book's pictures.
- Read for pleasure yourself. Show your child that books matter.
- Attend library story time often. Get your child used to sitting quietly.

## Monitor TV, computer and video game time

The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that families limit screen time so that children have plenty of time for real-life activities. This includes time spent watching television, playing video games and using the computer.

### **To help your child use technology wisely:**

- Set limits on the amount of time your child spends watching TV and playing computer or video games, even if they're educational.
- Watch TV together. Choose appropriate shows. Don't let your child "channel surf." Talk about what you see.
- Make sure any video or computer games your child plays are age-appropriate.
- Supervise any Internet use.

## Open the door to new experiences for your child

Your child doesn't need any formal training in social studies before kindergarten. Just build your child's awareness of the world around us!

### **To expand your child's world:**

- Explore other cultures. Try foods from other countries. Attend a community festival. Listen to music in other languages.
- Take your child to visit some places in your town such as the airport, a farm, the police station, the post office, a bakery, the railroad station or even a car wash. Then talk with your child about what you saw.
- Learn about your own neighborhood. Is it hilly? Flat? Do you live in the country or in the city?
- Embrace your heritage. Whether through food, dress or music, help your child delight in where your family comes from.
- Learn together. Visit the library to find books about topics that spark your child's curiosity.

## Foster your child's creativity through the arts

Learning experiences in kindergarten go beyond the three R's. Your child doesn't need to become a Beethoven or a Picasso to reap countless rewards from the fine arts.

### **To introduce your child to the arts:**

- Fill your home and car with melodies. Expose your child to the brain-building power of music.
- Get messy. Finger paint. Squish clay. Glue sticky collages. What's a little dirty laundry in the name of creativity?
- Move to the music. Waltz around the room together. Feel the beat right down to your bones.
- Act out stories together. Be dramatic. Use funny voices and facial expressions.
- "Draw" songs. Play a lively tune. Have your child imagine what the song might "look" like.
- Introduce your child to the stage. See a kid-friendly theater production and be wowed by it together.



## Numbers + curiosity = math fun!

Understanding basic math concepts begins in kindergarten. This is the perfect time to gear your child up for all things mathematical!

### To get your child ready for math:

- Play with blocks. Help your child sort them, stack them and build a tower. Blocks are a great tool for hands-on math.
- Ponder patterns. Set down a fork, a spoon, another fork, then another spoon. Ask your child what should come next.
- Start counting. Whether it's the number of eggs in the carton or the stripes on the curtains, encourage your child to count!
- Be bankers. Teach your child about money. "One dime is the same as 10 pennies. Five nickels equal one quarter."
- Compare shapes. Help your child draw a square and a rectangle. How are they alike? How are they different?



## Help your child develop critical thinking skills

To help your child succeed in school, go beyond asking "yes" and "no" questions. Boost critical thinking—and prime your child's mind for a lifetime of learning!

### To develop your child's thinking skills:

- Embrace the *why*. Prompt your child with thought-provoking questions. "Why do you think we can't see the moon tonight?"
- Ask "What happens next?" When you finish reading a story, encourage your child to be creative and continue the tale.
- Play "sink or float." Fill a bucket with water and gather several small objects. Which might sink? Which will float? Find out!
- Introduce concepts like *more*, *less*, *empty* and *full*. All you need are plastic cups, some uncooked rice and a broom to clean up.

## A healthy child is ready to learn

**A** healthy body supports a healthy mind! So nurture your child's physical well-being:

### To teach your child about good nutrition:

- Offer a variety of foods each day. Include a mix of fresh fruits, vegetables, whole grains, lean protein and low-fat and fat-free dairy products.
- Limit sweets. Treats like candy and cake are just that—treats.
- Offer water. Limit 100% fruit juice, and avoid drinks with added sugar.
- Eat together. At mealtime, be a role model for healthy eating habits.
- Don't label foods as "good" or "bad." Instead, talk about healthy portions and making smart food choices.



### To promote exercise:

- Go out and play! Toss a ball. Take a walk. Experts recommend that kids get at least an hour of physical activity each day.
- Don't drive when you can walk. Is the store just around the corner? Skip the car and grab your sneakers.
- Limit screen time. Couch potatoes aren't born, they're made. So don't let your child "veg out" in front of screens.



### To preserve rest time:

- Be sure your child gets 9 to 11 hours of sleep each night. That's the amount experts recommend for school-age kids.
- Enforce a regular bedtime.
- Adopt a nightly routine that includes quiet activities (no screens).
- Beware of hidden caffeine in things like cocoa.



## Prepare your child to cooperate in the classroom

In preschool, your child probably had a “meltdown” once in a while. But in kindergarten, students need to take more responsibility for their behavior. The key? Self-discipline. And even though the emphasis is on “self,” you can do a lot to help.

### To teach your child self-discipline:

- **Offer choices.** Milk or water? Purple socks or striped? You'll give your child some control over everyday decisions.
- **Give responsibilities.** Have your child pick up toys or put books back on the shelf. Responsibility is part of self-discipline.
- **Provide practice in sitting still.** Remind your child to sit quietly during library story time or at a performance. It's an important kindergarten skill.
- **Teach your child not to interrupt** when others are speaking. Practice taking turns speaking and listening during dinner conversations.
- **Rely on routines.** Have your child follow predictable patterns throughout the day. It may improve impulse control.
- **Praise positive behavior.** Did your child do what you asked without fussing? Say, “I appreciate your big-kid behavior.”
- **Avoid tantrums.** Teachers use routines to maintain order in their classrooms. Regular routines will help you avoid meltdowns at home, too. Show your child that throwing a tantrum will *not* change the rules.
- **Talk about privacy.** Explain the idea of “keeping your hands to yourself” and respecting other people's belongings.



## Be ready to register your child for school

When you enroll your child in kindergarten, you'll need to bring a few things with you. Not all school systems have the same requirements, but here are some of the items you may need:

- Your child's birth certificate.
- Immunization records and medical forms.
- Your child's Social Security Number (SSN).
- Proof of residency (such as a utility bill).
- Proof of custody (if applicable).

## Review school bus safety rules before the first day

Each day, big yellow buses transport millions of kids to and from school. Although riding the bus is the safest way for children to get to school, it's still important to review school bus safety rules with your child.

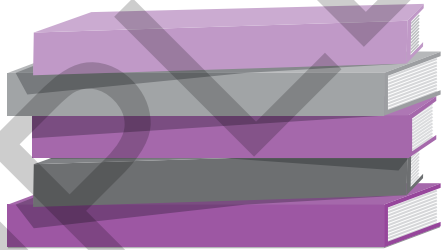
### **To help your child become a safe bus rider:**

- Walk to the bus stop together each morning. Meet your child's bus each afternoon (in many school systems, this is mandatory).
- Stand a safe distance from the street. Don't inch up to the curb.
- Remind your child to wait in line to board. Never push or shove.
- Tell your child to *never* walk behind the bus or run to catch it.
- Explain that on the bus, the driver is in charge.
- Have a "Plan B." Practice what to do if you aren't there to meet the bus (for example, go to a neighbor's house, etc.).

## Use books to ease your child into the first day of school

**G**et your little reader ready for class! Share these fantastic stories that all revolve around the first day of school.

- *Chrysanthemum* by Kevin Henkes (HarperCollins). When this little mouse starts school, she learns to embrace her unique name, despite teasing from her classmates. She also learns that she will always have the love and support of her family.
- *I Love You All Day Long* by Francesca Rusackas (HarperCollins). This sweet story reassures children that no matter what they're doing at school, their parents' thoughts are with them.
- *Look Out Kindergarten, Here I Come!* by Nancy L. Carlson (Penguin Group). Henry is a mouse who is excited—and nervous—about his first day of kindergarten. Read about how Henry gets over his nervousness and makes a new friend.
- *Miss Bindergarten Gets Ready for Kindergarten* by Joseph Slate (Penguin Group). It's a rocking, rhyming time as animals A to Z prepare for the first day of school.
- *Tucker's Four-Carrot School Day* by Susan Winget (HarperCollins). Tucker is a bunny who discovers that making mistakes is just part of learning.
- *The Twelve Days of Kindergarten* by Deborah Lee Rose (Harry N. Abrams, Inc.). From feeding fish to building with blocks, count (and sing!) all the neat things there are to do in kindergarten.
- *Wemberly Worried* by Kevin Henkes (HarperCollins). Tiny Wemberly worries about everything. But nothing makes her stomach flip-flop like the thought of starting school!



## Make the big day a happy one

The first day of school is nearly here! There's plenty you can do to make your child's first day in class a happy one:

- **Visit the classroom.** Check to see if your child's school has a "Meet the Teacher" event that you and your child could attend.
- **Ask about your child's concerns.** Find out if your child has a specific worry about school. If so, talk it out.
- **Focus on the positive.** Point out what a "big kid" your child is. Say, "I'm proud of you!"
- **Explain that you** (along with your child's room, stuffed animals and toys) will be waiting at the end of the day.
- **Get ready the night before.** Get your child into a routine of laying out clothes, arranging supplies and packing lunch.
- **Don't rush.** On the morning of the big day, leave enough time for a relaxed breakfast. Racing around stresses everybody.
- **Reassure your child that there's a bathroom at school.** Students can ask the teacher anytime they need to use it.
- **Don't linger when you drop your child off.** The teacher is trained to deal with first-day jitters. Give a quick hug and go.



## Be a partner in your child's education

All done preparing your child for kindergarten? Not quite. There's one simple—but critical—thing left to do: *Commit to staying involved in your child's education.* Don't forget: There will be dozens of terrific instructors over the years, but you'll always be your child's most important teacher.

### **To become a partner in your child's education:**

- Volunteer in class or from home. Chaperone field trips. Make muffins for the bake sale. Participate however—and whenever—you can.
- Attend back-to-school night and parent-teacher conferences.
- Read every handout and paper your child brings home.
- Make school a priority. Schedule appointments and vacations *outside* of school hours.
- Expect your child to succeed in school. Children try hard to meet their families' expectations.
- Talk to your child about what the class is learning. Ask to see assignments your child brings home.
- Speak up. If there's a problem at school, talk to your child's teacher immediately. Work together on finding a solution.
- Show and tell your child "I love you!" often.
- Celebrate! Your child is learning more every day!

SAMPLE

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