

Hello and welcome to our group's mini-course discussing parental involvement for children in preschool and just starting school. We decided that parent involvement is a huge factor in a child's inner drive, and as such it's crucial for parents to start taking ownership of their child's education. Whether it is choosing the right school, helping with homework, being involved within the school or simply checking in on their child's homework and grades. This routine should start at a young age and continue until the child is an adult.

Over the course of this brief discussion, we will touch on a number of techniques to help prepare your children for their education, including ways to promote their development and address any special needs. Also, we will show some ways that you as parents can get involved both at home and at school, all without overstepping your bounds. But before we jump into how to's we really need to discuss exactly why parent involvement is so important, particularly at these early ages.

One of the key factors to a child's success in their educational development is developing a strong intrinsic motivation to learn. Intrinsic motivation, or motivation that comes from within, can be heavily influenced by your choices as a parent whether they involve choosing the right school, helping with homework, being involved within the school or simply checking in on your child's interests and abilities. As a parent, you are the most important influence in your child's success in school and in life, and in this role you have a fresh opportunity to get involved with your child every day. They are far more likely to succeed not only academically, but also during many childhood challenges such as bullying.

But how can you as a parent evaluate how ready your child is for the educational journey they are about to take? The National Education Goals Panel actually convened on this very subject matter in 1995 and they found it best to break preparedness into 5 developmental domains.

The first domain focuses on your child's physical well being and motor development. Basically making sure your child stays healthy and active. Based on a number of studies, children with poor nutrition or low birthweight are more prone to long term struggles with preparedness for the learning environment. Further, many early childhood educators promote motor movements from those as simple as writing and drawing to the more complex actions involved in playground activities.

Some ways to tell how your child is doing in the realm of large motor development are to simply observe whether they can run smoothly, skip with direction and control, hop with direction and control, catch a ball thrown underhand, and whether the child can climb easily on playground equipment.

As for the fine motor skills, try to see if your child knows how to correctly hold a pencil or crayon, put several beads on a string without assistance, draw recognizable objects, use scissors to cut preformed simple shapes, and can put simple puzzles together without assistance.

The second domain focuses on social and emotional development, and deals with a child's ability to participate in classroom activities and socialize with other students. This sense of personal well-being can be perpetuated in the classroom, and really plays a large role as the child develops self-confidence and the ability to collaborate.

To evaluate your child's emotional skills, try to evaluate how they adjust to new situations, use words to resolve conflicts, whether they can sit and focus 5-10 minutes on a story or task, and whether they can complete those tasks. Try to see as well if they can cooperate with others and take turns, whether they use self control when frustrated, and whether they take pride in their achievements.

And as children develop in the educational system, they may take a varied number of approaches to get to where they need to be. Some may learn through traditional means, while others will become engaged in alternative methods, such as creative outlets. Either way, this curiosity, creativity, independence, cooperativeness and persistence all are very healthy approaches that help each child develop.

In order to get a quick idea of how your child is developing cognitively, try observing how they can match objects to examples, how they share ideas, use problem solving strategies, how well they understand the rules in games, how they use prepositions, how they identify numbers, and how well they can count to 50.

To present children with a foundation from which to learn, another extremely critical dimension to preparedness can be seen in a child's language development. The more literate the child is, the more comfortable they will be engaging with peers and will broaden their pool of educational resources.

You can evaluate your child's language and communication skills by listening to how they use appropriate words or gestures to relate feelings needs and suggestions. Also pay attention to whether they listen attentively to a conversation, story or song, whether they take turns as a speaker, whether they recall story events, and whether they enjoy listening to stories and rhymes.

Finally, a child should be comfortable learning from a variety of resources, and should be comfortable and aware of societal norms. This ability to interact with a variety of individuals and materials and environments impact how easily they will make the transition into formal schooling.

A child should establish a number of self help skills, and some such examples include their ability to complete bathroom activities independently, whether they cover their mouth with a tissue when coughing or sneezing, their ability to snap zip and button garments, whether they can put away toys and help with clean up, and how well they understand the roles of their parents and teachers.

A few final ideas to help prepare your children for school include:

- Reading with your child daily
- Developing a bedtime routine, as kindergartners need about 11 hours of sleep
- Letting them try new things around the house and help out
- Talking to them about how to be a friend, share and take turns
- Discussing their feelings
- Allowing them to play with other children their own age
- Providing creative outlets such as chalk, crayons and markers
- Asking them fun and creative questions

Under some circumstances, it can be determined that a child has special needs, but in order to ensure their successful development, it is critical that your child is screened for special needs as early as age 5. By law all children are entitled to a free appropriate public education, and are provided one at public expense to ensure that the students can meet certain state standards. The earlier children are started in programs catering to their disability the sooner they will start making significant gains.

Once your child is enrolled in school, your role as a parent carries a lot of weight at home, at school and in the overall community. At home some great ways to stay involved are to:

- Check your child's backpack for homework every night
- Limit TV viewing on school nights or the kinds of programs they watch
- Play with your child indoors and outdoors to increase learning
- and become an advocate for better education in your community and state.

Beyond the home, as a parent it is important to work to establish a community both between parents and between parents and teachers. To do so, it is important to make suggestions and work to see them through. Some options might include:

- A Family Fun Carnivals
- Father Daughter Dances
- FAmily Spaghetti Nights
- Scholastic Book Fairs
- Transportation Nights

One should also work to promote the use of community centers as a means to connect families and teachers, using community leaders to liaison between the groups when necessary.

However as a parent your responsibility does not end at home or in the community. To ensure your child's continued valuable education, it is important to get involved in their school. To do so, try to :

- Discuss your child's progress with teachers throughout the year and at conferences
- Vote in school board elections and attend parent teacher association meetings
- help your school to set challenging academic standards and reach them

- participate in fundraisers, field trips and attend special programs
- Attend kindergarden round-up
- make yourself available and flexible
- be open to having the teacher make a home visit
- read the communication daily and weekly that is sent home to you
- be on the same page with teachers and administration; know the school rules and help your children respect them
- encourage school officials to visit the homes and communities of the families they serve
- address concerns about stereotypes with your child's teacher if you have concerns
- avoid making calls that are only of a negative nature
- do not discuss your child's teacher in front of them in a disrespectful manner
- make major transitions such as changing schools or teachers only when absolutely necessary.

Again these are all just some recommendations, and there are plenty of other options, so be creative and try to find ways to get everyone involved.