

Promoting Healthy Transitions from Preschool to Kindergarten

Bweikia Foster Steen

One Monday morning as I was preparing for the school day, a mother frantically swung open the classroom door and said, “I’m so sorry. I put Kendall’s weekly homework in his backpack yesterday morning, but when I checked his backpack last night, I found the homework still there.”

“Oh,” I replied, “Don’t worry about it. I remind the children to turn in their homework, but it’s still the beginning of the year. It will take them a while to get used to the routines.”

“Well, this sure is different. I didn’t realize kindergartners had homework. Boy! What will second and third grade be like?”



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The transition from preschool to kindergarten can be an upsetting and confusing time for young children and their families. Every year during the first month of kindergarten, parents approach me with questions and concerns about the new and seemingly unrealistic academic expectations for kindergartners. Many children experience a full school day for the first time and face new classroom responsibilities, less time for play, and an increased focus on reading, writing, mathematics, and

other academic areas. I explain that we approach these academic subjects in developmentally appropriate ways.

Also, family members are becoming acquainted with the new routines and responsibilities. They may notice that their child is tired or developing a negative attitude toward school. Today’s educational climate is different from the one most parents recall from their childhood, which may lead to misunderstanding and confusion. They might remember their kindergarten experience as simply playing, eating snack and lunch, and taking naps. The transition from preschool to kindergarten may be jolting

for all and requires educators to be sensitive and understanding.

The foundation for academic success is laid during the early years, but this is also a time when some children may begin to express dislike

for school. Children may develop apathy toward school during first and second grades in particular (Davis 2005). Research shows that when children do not transition successfully to kindergarten, their academic and

social-emotional progress can be hindered, whereas children who transition successfully actively engage in learning and adapt to the new setting (Harbin et al. 2007).

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It is important for early childhood educators to consider the stress for children and families that is associated with entering a more structured environment. Kindergarten serves as an introduction to formal schooling, with new challenges for children's development in all domains. During this time of transition, teachers can look for best practices to engage children and ensure that they maintain the same enthusiasm toward school that they had during preschool. Best practices require educators to continuously reflect and consider how their teaching practices foster children's development and produce real and lasting learning (Epstein 2007). Best practices also include strategies that actively

involve and keep families informed about the new procedures, expectations, and routines of kindergarten.

Teachers can use the following strategies to ease the transition from preschool to kindergarten for both children and their families.

Acknowledge each child's talents, strengths, and learning styles

Teachers can look for best practices to engage children and ensure that they maintain the same enthusiasm toward school that they had during preschool.

Effective kindergarten teachers devote the first few weeks of the school year to getting to know each child, family, and community. They use what they learn to individualize their expectations and instructions as well as children's responsibilities, such as putting away toys

At the beginning of my career, before teaching my first day of kindergarten, I prepared all of the lessons for the day: journal writing, read-alouds, math, and so on. I began the morning with a read-aloud. Within the first few minutes of reading the story, a child raised his hand and asked, "Teacher, when are we going to play and paint?" What? I hadn't scheduled any time for playing or painting. Had he not seen the state early learning standards?

Young children—including kindergartners—need opportunities to play. Play enhances learning and the development of social, emotional, cognitive, physical, and language skills (Paley 2004). Play also allows teachers to get to know each child (NAEYC 2009). Play gives children opportunities to socialize, express and regulate emotions, and build their understanding of the world. Additionally, play allows the teacher to observe and interact, when appropriate, to enrich the experience of each child (for example, a teacher might introduce or reinforce vocabulary or suggest a way two children can play together). Such interactions can impact a child's confidence and motivation (Henniger 2009; Bodrova & Leong 2007).

Yes, ensuring that children meet state early learning standards is important, but getting to know each child and building a classroom community are equally important.

and supplies, storing lunch containers on the shelf in the corner, or hanging coats in the cubby area. Meeting children where they are cognitively, socially, and physically can help prevent frustration and disinterest in school. Being realistic does not mean lowering academic expectations for the child, but rather supporting young children's development and learning and stimulating their interest in school.



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The following activities can help kindergarten teachers develop a rapport with children. When choosing activities to try out, be aware of the unique life circumstances and structures of the families of children in your class. Consider whether all children and families can complete the activity without difficulty or embarrassment. Keep in mind that homework assignments for kindergartners, particularly at the beginning of the year, are likely to be completed with help from a family member.

Five in a bag. Assign this activity within the first two weeks of school. Give each child a brown paper lunch bag. Ask families to help their child think of five things that tell their classmates something about them. Children can use the bag to hold the five things or draw pictures of the five things and place them in the bag. Review the contents of the bags to make sure they are appropriate for sharing. Then, invite children to share their chosen items with the class.

Family photographs. Ask children to bring in family photos to share with the class. It is possible that some children will bring in entire photo albums. Have disposable cameras

on hand for children who do not have easy access to family photos. Whatever children bring, allow plenty of time for sharing during the school day. Ask parents if you can keep the photos for a few months so children can continue to look through the pictures and get to know their classmates.

Superstar poster. Randomly choose one child to be the superstar for a week. (Make sure every child has a turn being the superstar during the first few months of the school year.) Send home poster board and a note asking parents to help the child make a poster with photos or drawings of their family, holidays, hobbies, and so on. Use a pretend or real microphone to allow each superstar to share the poster. After the sharing, invite the other children to interview him or her.

Favorite book. Ask children to present their favorite book to the class. Some children may not have books at home, so tell everyone they can bring a book from the library (school, public, or classroom) or from home.

Special stuffed animal. Some kindergartners feel safer and more secure when they bring a special toy from home. Invite children to bring in

their favorite stuffed animal to share with the class.

Eat lunch with children. Once a week, choose one or two children to eat lunch with. (Make sure every child has an opportunity to eat lunch with the teacher during the first few months of the school year.) At lunch, ask questions such as, What is your favorite food? How many brothers and sisters do you have? What do you like to do outside of school—karate, drawing, playing with friends? This will help you incorporate individual children's strengths and interests into classroom routines and activities. Remember to share about yourself as well!

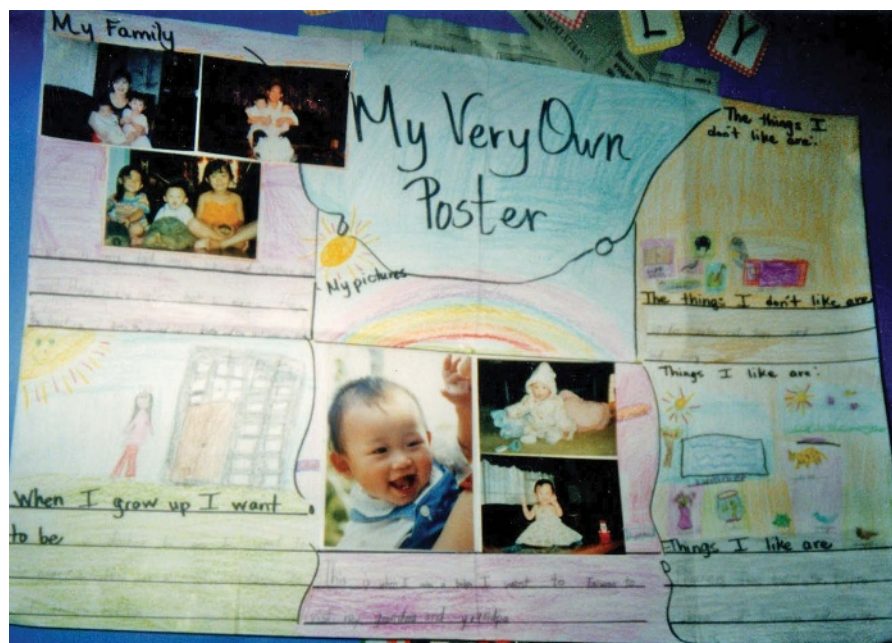
Be patient and listen to the needs of each child

Time is one of the most valuable things a teacher can give a child, and it is an important factor in promoting successful transitions (Harbin et al. 2007). Children don't all learn in the same way at the same time. Some children require more one-on-one interactions and attention from the teacher to get used to new classroom routines and expectations.


In many public school systems, kindergartners are expected to become independent and to keep up with academic work such as reading, writing, and math. Unfortunately, the new curriculum expectations in kindergarten can leave some children behind because they need more time to achieve learning goals. Teachers need to learn what works for each child.

Explain what is expected for behavior in the classroom and in the school. Be consistent and fair. Don't jump to conclusions or make assumptions about children, such as this child must need medicine because he cannot sit for very long or that child is ready for first grade because she writes so well.

During kindergarten, children learn to share, cooperate, discuss, and socialize, and for some children, these are new skills. Children bring to the



Courtesy of the author



Young children know when teachers are sincere about developing relationships with them.

or provide manipulatives to help children understand math concepts.

Create relationships

Children learn best in the context of positive relationships. Connect individually with all of the children, showing them that you are truly interested in them, their experiences, and their family. Young children know when teachers are sincere about developing relationships with them.

Establishing a caring, inclusive community in which all children develop and learn (NAEYC 2009) is a developmentally appropriate practice. Strong, reciprocal relationships between teachers and children lead children to build trust. This helps them adjust to kindergarten and become eager to learn math, reading, and other academic subjects.

To build relationships with young children, teachers can use the following methods:

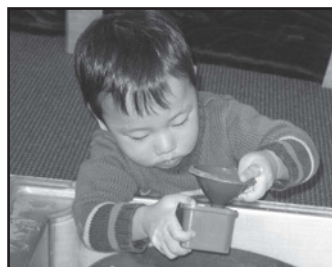
classroom different backgrounds, interests, experiences, learning styles, and needs, and they need time to understand how to respect and accept everyone in the group (NAEYC 2009). These ideas help teachers address children's unique characteristics.

- Post a daily schedule that has words and pictures. During the first couple of months, review the schedule with the children as part of the morning routine and periodically throughout the day. This helps children begin to understand the daily routine and expectations.
- Use picture cues to remind children about their responsibilities. For example, take photographs of children completing the various classroom jobs and post the photos on the jobs board. Or take photos of children quietly reading a book and post the photos in the classroom library.
- Be creative: engage as many senses as possible to capture children's interest. For example, incorporate cooking activities throughout the week, lead a movement activity because all children need to be up and moving,

- Go outside for recess and participate with the children.
- Interact with children when they play inside the classroom.
- Greet each child at the classroom door at drop-off time and say goodbye at pickup time.
- Ask children about their weekend. Keep a picture of each child and a weekend news chart. Write one sentence about children's weekends by their picture. This provides a model for sentence structure and helps you learn valuable information about each child and his or her interests outside of the classroom.
- Set up individual mailboxes. Write notes to children. Ask questions and invite them to respond by writing or drawing. Soon, they'll start writing notes or making drawings for their classmates.
- Invite children at the end of the day to share what they did and learned. Ask, "What was your favorite part of the day?"

Ensure smooth transitions for families

When preschoolers transition to kindergarten, families experience a transition as well (Harbin et al. 2007). Teachers can use these three approaches to help families make a successful transition to kindergarten.



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Develop partnerships

Parents trust their children to be well cared for by school personnel. They expect educators to protect their children and support their learning. Some families automatically trust the teacher at the beginning of the school year, while others may first need to get to know you and understand your teaching approach and practices. Children do better in school when their family and teacher work as a team. Teachers can try these ideas.

- Ask families to complete a questionnaire during the first week of school. Seek information about their child, goals for the child, and typical family routines and activities. It is important for teachers to understand that not all families will return the questionnaire, and that that is OK. Perhaps they speak another language, maybe they are too busy, or maybe they are hesitant to answer the questions because they do not feel comfortable. Respect their decision and do not judge them. Remember to try other methods to learn about a child and family: call home, send postcards, or ask a translator to help you.
- Make at least two positive phone calls to each family at the beginning of the school year. Call once during the first week of school and once during the third week. Document the phone calls to keep track of which families you have contacted and what you discussed. While e-mails are another way to contact families, let parents hear your voice at least twice before corresponding through e-mails.
- Begin corresponding with families after the first month of school by writing postcards, letters, or e-mails. Keep parents informed about school and classroom activities and provide positive feedback about their child's involvement and progress.
- Send home or post on the classroom website weekly newsletters that include a photograph of an activity the class did that week. Over time, include photos of every child in the



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class. (If you have a classroom website, keep in mind that not all families have immediate access to a computer. Share information about community access to computers, for example, at local libraries.) Mitchell and colleagues note, "It is best if your website is password-protected and accessible only to the families of children in the class" (Mitchell, Foulger, & Wetzel 47).

Foster ongoing communication

Whether or not this is a family's first time sending a child to kindergarten, it is appropriate to offer helpful suggestions. Provide a list of general ideas, such as how to talk with a kindergartner about his or her activities at school, and make sure that families have a clear understanding of how to use the strategies. Parents will appreciate your taking the time to speak with them about their goals and concerns for their child. Communicate openly and honestly about each child's progress and about possible issues to address jointly. It is easier for families to adapt when they understand how the day is structured, how the cur-

riculum addresses reading, math, and other areas, and how you will support their child's learning and meet his or her needs (Harbin et al. 2007). Here are a few ideas for teachers.

- Make the first contact to reassure parents about their child's progress during the transition.
- Keep a camera handy! Take photographs of children and families. Post them on the wall, include them on the classroom website, or make a class family book. Send home photographs of children actively involved in daily classroom experiences.
- Make a kindergarten photo album for each child. Take pictures throughout the school year, making sure to take the same number of pictures of each child. Have the children select and place their pictures in their photo albums. Invite them to label and write about their pictures. This is a great way to show parents what their child is doing in class. Share the photo albums with parents during parent-teacher conferences or Back to School Night. Send them home with the children on the last day of school to serve as a way to remember their kindergarten year!

Have an open door policy

Parents may want to volunteer in the beginning of the school year to learn about the classroom routines and environment. Encourage parents to observe in the classroom before becoming a volunteer; this familiarizes them with the class routine and shows them how you interact with the children. The following suggestions can be helpful.

- Prompt parents to write notes to their children when they observe. They can leave notes in the child's mailbox.
- Be flexible. Invite families to visit the classroom when they are available. For example, some parents cannot schedule a set time to volunteer. Keep all families involved in whatever way possible. Some may work or attend school full time. Discover families' interests and strengths and incorporate them into the curriculum.

Fairness means providing the individual support, help, care, and opportunities each child needs to have an equal chance at success.

Conclusion

Most preschoolers enter kindergarten ready, excited, and eager to learn. Some, however, are worried and confused about the unknown. When teachers have high expectations for each child, develop relationships with each child, discover the talents of every child, and account for varied learning styles, children are more likely to have a smooth transition to kindergarten and achieve academic success (Berns 2009). Fairness does not mean treating every child in exactly the same way; it means providing the individual support, help, care, and opportuni-

ties each child needs to have an equal chance at success (Rief 2005).

During the first few weeks of school, listen to children and their families. Work with each family to ensure a successful transition period and ultimately a successful kindergarten year.


Kindergarten teachers play an important role in setting the tone for children's future academic success. Communication, compassion, creativity, and a warm and nurturing environment can help make kindergarten an enjoyable experience for both the family and the child, and set a positive tone for the grades beyond.

That Monday morning long ago (see the opening vignette), I quickly realized that Kendall's mother did not understand the new expectations and routines of kindergarten. I sat down with her, and we discussed strategies she could use at home. Kendall could complete one part of the packet each night, for example, collecting data on what kinds of apples family members prefer. His mother could remind Kendall on Friday morning to turn in his homework. I also reassured her that I would remind him to return his weekly homework packet to the appropriate basket until he adjusted to the new classroom routines. Kendall's mother and I worked together and kept each other informed, and after a couple of months, he and his mother had successfully transitioned to kindergarten.

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