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# Parents and School Readiness

**W**hat does it mean when we say a child is "ready" to learn? Once a child enters first grade, there are certain expectations that teachers have and certain demands children must meet. Children need to be interested in learning; they need to know that books contain exciting information that they themselves will be able to read; they need to have the self discipline to listen in class and follow teachers' directions. Preschools prepare children for school by exposing them to books, by teaching them to identify letters of the alphabet, by setting up classroom routines to accustom children to follow directions and follow a schedule, and by practicing positive discipline to help children learn to self regulate without damage to their self esteem.

But preschools cannot do the job alone. Parents are the most important influence in a young child's life. They are children's first teachers, their

primary source of information and their main source of attitudes toward the world. Parents are also the ones who convey to their children the important values of their families and society. When parents and schools work together to assure that a child enters elementary school ready to learn, children are on the way to success. In fact, research has shown that continued family engagement in children's learning throughout a child's school years can offset other risks, such as low income, that may interfere with a child's academic success.

When children enter kindergarten, there are already significant differences in literacy and math skills between those whose parents actively engage in reading and learning with their children and those children whose parents do not do this. Some children may be able to overcome this deficit, but most cannot. In fact, there is a snowball effect which widens the

achievement gap every year the child is in school. The child who starts off behind will often stay behind. When parents become partners in their child's learning, this gap is able to be bridged.

Interestingly, the first way that parents can partner with their child's school to help their children achieve is not directly connected to learning. One of the family practices that can help a child succeed in school is implementing **Family Routines**. Children do not thrive in a chaotic environment. On the contrary, an organized and predictable home environment helps children feel safe and secure. Children need to eat at regular times, and they need their mealtimes to be pleasant occasions, with conversation with parents and siblings. A regular bedtime is of primary importance. Children need sufficient sleep to function properly, and a regular bedtime helps set their internal body clocks so that falling

*(Continued on page 6)*



## Fathers and School Readiness

The relationship a father has with his child is unlike any other. Even though many people assume that a child's bond with his mother is stronger than the one with his father, this is not necessarily true. A father can establish a tie that is equally as strong. A father can do things for his child that a mother cannot. By nurturing and caring for a child in a specifically male way, a father can give a child a different perspective on life, different approaches to solving life's challenges and a secure sense of gender identity.

In the past, the main role of a father was seen as working to support the family, and his responsibilities within the family played a secondary role. But experts in child development now realize that while a father's influence on his children is different from a mother's, it is just as significant and important.

Researchers have found that children who have involved fathers from infancy on are different in significant ways from those whose fathers are uninvolved. Children with involved fathers are more likely to be emotionally secure, are more confident in exploring their surroundings, have less separation anxiety as babies, are more sociable and popular in early childhood, and have better social connections with peers at school.

The earlier fathers become involved with their children's learning the better. Even when fathers have limited schooling, their involvement

*(Continued on page 7)*

asleep is easier. A bedtime routine – a predictable sequence of events that leads to going to sleep (brushing teeth, taking a bath, putting on pajamas, reading a book, saying prayers) – helps transition children for bed, and a morning routine helps get them out of the house in the morning without too much anxiety. A routine for cleaning up – having children pick up and put away toys, for example – makes children feel valued as important members of their household in addition to teaching them good habits.

Routines take some effort to create, and it may take a while before family members learn the different steps in a specific routine. Ultimately, though, implementing a routine will make parents feel more organized and less stressed, in addition to helping them complete their daily tasks more efficiently. Routines also let children know what is important to their family.

Family rituals are also one kind of routine. Rituals are routines that have symbolic significance for the family. They help strengthen beliefs and values and build a sense of belonging and cohesion. Weekend or Sabbath rituals fall into this category. If fathers are not present at children's meals during the week, Sabbath meals may offer an opportunity for children to bond with their fathers. It is important, however, to make participation in these routines age appropriate. A preschooler, for example, cannot be expected to remain at the table without fidgeting for as long as his grade school sister or brother can. If unpleasantness results, the force of the ritual is blunted and it can even have a negative impact.

As Drs. Mary Spagnola and Barbara Flese put it, "Family routines and meaningful rituals provide both a predictable structure that guides behavior and an emotional climate that supports early development."

**Positive Discipline** is another way that parents can prepare their children for school. Every adult who cares for children has a responsibility to guide children towards appropriate behaviors and to correct them when necessary. The goal of discipline is



ultimately to help children develop self control and self discipline so that they become responsible adults who make good choices. Positive discipline does not mean allowing or ignoring misbehavior. Rather, it is a way of disciplining that teaches a child to develop his own internal discipline.

One of the cornerstones of positive discipline is that discipline must preserve the child's dignity. Intimidation or shaming a child are unlikely to cause the child to internalize positive attitudes or behaviors. Parents must also be sure that they do not demand more from a child than he is able to do. They must be aware both of their child's developmental stage and his own unique personality and temperament. They must have, in addition to patience, a good understanding of their child. Effective discipline is discipline that not only addresses misbehavior but guides the child in his development.

While it is impossible to prevent child misbehavior completely, parents can be more successful at reducing behavior problems if they understand why their child misbehaves. A child may misbehave because he is tired or hungry, because he does not clearly understand what is expected of him, or even because this is the only way he can get the attention of his parents. Once a parent has a clear understanding of a child, this can help guide discipline.

When possible, parents should employ proactive strategies to reduce the

occurrence of misbehavior. Clear, consistent rules, focusing on the positive, expecting the best from a child, and building the child's image of himself as cooperative and good are some ways a parent can do this.

When a child misbehaves knowingly, positive discipline calls for a problem-solving approach. If the child is old enough, the child can be asked the reasons for doing what she did. Then both parent and child can work on a way to correct the situation. If a child damages something, she can help fix it. If she made her brother cry, she can apologize and help soothe him. If the situation cannot be fixed, the child experiences the consequences of her misbehavior: the toy is broken, so she can no longer play with it.

The parent who employs positive discipline is authoritative (not authoritarian). Some characteristics of authoritative parents are setting appropriate rules, being firm, consistent and fair, and having reasonable expectations. The parent also consistently models the self regulation he hopes his children will achieve. Teaching children self discipline is not an easy task.

More and more, educators are finding that self regulation is a key trait that helps people succeed in life. Positive discipline encourages a child to self regulate, giving him tools that will help him throughout his lifetime.

Of course, preparation for school would not be complete without some learning. **Reading** books with a child is probably one of the most important ways parents can help children prepare for school. While children are exposed to books in preschool, most children need reinforcement of early literacy skills. Parents who read books with their child as part of an ongoing routine help the child associate reading with a pleasant experience. Reading with a child reinforces alphabet recognition and the idea that combinations of the alphabet form words with meaning. If parents ask questions about the book and discuss some of the ideas in the book with the child, this requires higher order thinking, an important skill

in reading comprehension. Finally, reading with children introduces new vocabulary. A rich vocabulary is one of the indicators of the ability to discuss complex ideas.

**Vocabulary** building is one of the outcomes of another important way parents can help their children prepare for school. Talk to the child. Parents do not need to wait for a special time to talk to a child. They need to include him in their everyday activities, describing, for example, what they are cooking – how they are choosing and measuring the ingredients, what utensils they are using, whether the food will be put in the oven or on the stove, etc. At the supermarket, they can discuss what they are buying and why. When driving, they can describe to the child the different kinds of buildings and bridges they are passing. If they can, they need to provide experiences for the child where he can learn new things, such as outing to museums or historical buildings. They do not need only to talk, but also to listen, to elicit answers from the child and teach him how to share thoughts and ideas.

Education is too important to be left only to schools. Without parental input, a child will not gain as much as he should from his school experience.

## Resources

Jane Nelson, *Positive Discipline*. Random House, 2006.

Jane Nelson, *Positive Discipline for Preschoolers, For Their Early Years - Raising Children Who Are Responsible, Respectful, and Resourceful*. Revised Second Edition: Prima Publishing, 1998.

Jane Nelson, *Positive Discipline: The First Three Years: From Infant to Toddler - Laying the Foundation for Raising a Capable, Confident Child*. Prima Publishing, 1998

[www.parenting.com](http://www.parenting.com)  
[www.centerforparentingeducation.org](http://www.centerforparentingeducation.org)  
[eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov](http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov)

*YvY Head Start parents are invited to use the YvY CIRC library where they can access additional articles and books on parenting topics. They can also access these, and related, websites for additional information.*

*(Continued from page 6)*

in their children's schools and school lives is a powerful factor in their children's academic achievement. In a recent study of Head Start children, researchers discovered that early academic readiness levels in reading and mathematics improved when there was a high level of father participation in the process.

Without the benefit of a dedicated father, children – both boys and girls – will have an incomplete development experience which will affect their relationships with other men and women for their entire lives. The modeling of both a father and mother is extremely important in developing the proper balance in a child's life.

Few events will change a man's life as much as becoming a father. Being a father can be both frightening and frustrating. Being entrusted with the responsibility for the care of another person can be an awesome task. But the opposite can also be true. Nothing may give a father more pleasure than to see his children gradually grow into adulthood and return his affection. To reap these positive rewards, fathers need to be involved in their children's lives in positive and loving ways.

What type of things can a father do to become a more fully involved parent? Here are some helpful pointers:

- **Be available and accessible**
- **Play with your child**
- **Stay involved in all aspects of your child's life**
- **Discipline with reason and gentleness when necessary.**
- **Provide a safe and stable home environment**
- **Don't confuse financial support with love**
- **Be a good role model!**