

School Readiness Assessment

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School readiness assessment is a hot topic these days, in large part because of increased accountability pressures in both the public schools and early care and education settings. What exactly is meant by the phrase *school readiness assessment* and what should early care and education teachers and administrators know about it? This Research in Review article uses a question-and-answer format to address several issues about school readiness.

What is school readiness?

School readiness is more than just about children. School readiness, in the broadest sense, involves children, families, early environments, schools, and communities (NASBE 1991). Children are not innately *ready* or *not ready* for school. Their skills and development are strongly influenced by their families and through their interactions with other people and environments before coming to school. With 81 percent of U.S. children in nonparental care arrangements the year before kindergarten (West, Denton, & Germino-Hausken 2000), child care centers and family child care homes are important early environments that affect children's development and learning.

Schools are also an important piece of the readiness puzzle because different schools have different expectations about readiness. The same child, with the same strengths and needs, can be considered ready in one school and not ready in another school. It is the school's responsibility to educate all children who are old enough to legally attend school, regardless of their skills (see "Characteristics of Ready Schools").

Characteristics of Ready Schools

The National Education Goals Panel identifies 10 keys to schools being ready for children. Ready schools should

1. Smooth the transition between home and school.
2. Strive for continuity between early care and education programs and elementary schools.
3. Help children learn and make sense of their world.
4. Make a commitment to every child's success.
5. Show they are committed to every teacher's success.
6. Introduce and expand strategies that have been shown to improve achievement.
7. Function as learning organizations that change their practices if they do not help children.
8. Serve children in communities.
9. Take responsibility for results.
10. Maintain strong leadership.

Source: Shore 1998.

Finally, communities are important because readiness for school success is a community responsibility, not just the responsibility of parents and preschool teachers. Communities, for example, should provide high-quality health care and support services for families of young children and work to ensure that all families with young children have access to high-quality care and education.

Most school readiness assessments focus on one part of the puzzle—the child. The National Education Goals Panel (NEGP 1997) identifies five domains of children's development and learning that are important to school success: physical well-being and motor development, social and emotional development, approaches toward learning, language development, and cognition and general knowledge (Kagan, Moore, & Bredekamp 1995; see NEGP 1997 for a family-friendly description of

school readiness). The NEGP work on school readiness has been important in broadening people's understanding of readiness beyond the ABCs and 123s and highlighting the interconnections among the five domains.

What can we learn from school readiness assessment?

School readiness assessment typically refers to assessment of young children around school entry—right before kindergarten, at kindergarten entry, or very early in the kindergarten year. The tools described as school readiness assessments vary in their purposes and designs. Thus, people using the phrase “school readiness assessment” may be referring to very different kinds of assessment.

The NEGP report *Principles and Recommendations for Early Childhood Assessments* (Shepard, Kagan, & Wurtz 1998) identifies and describes five major purposes for assessing young children. School readiness assessments typically fall under one of these purposes. It is important to understand the different purposes of assessment because assessment tools are typically developed for a single purpose and cannot easily be used for some other purpose. Each of the five purposes described in the *Principles and Recommen-*

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Assessments report are highlighted on the following pages.

1. Improve learning. Teachers of young children assess children's skills to help teachers adapt their teaching. The information is gathered on all children because the teacher needs to know the strengths and needs of each child in the class, not just some. Assessments are often informal, such as teacher observations or children's work samples, but may also include more formal assessments. The content of assessments for this purpose should be closely tied to the classroom curriculum.

These assessments can help kindergarten teachers improve classroom instruction by indicating children's strengths and weaknesses. Well-prepared teachers assess children's skills throughout the day, for example, by taking a picture of a child's block structure or writing a note at the end of the day about two children's social interaction. Focusing on school readiness assessment for the purpose of improving learning can support good teaching practices. These assessments also help families to better understand the developmental status of their children.



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A Note

Although most school readiness assessments focus only on children's skills, a few states, like North Carolina, also include schools in their official definitions and assessments of school readiness (North Carolina Ready for School Goal Team 2000; Maxwell et al. 2001).

2. Identify children with special needs. This type of assessment generally uses a two-step process. First, all children are screened. If the screening suggests that a child's development is atypical, then the second step is implemented—the child is referred for a more thorough assessment to determine specific needs and eligibility for special education or related services. More thorough assessments must meet high standards of technical adequacy because they will be used to help make important decisions about children.

Many early care and education programs and public schools routinely conduct screenings of young children when they enter the program. Screening tools should cover general developmental milestones in multiple areas, rather than be tied specifically to a curriculum.

The reason is that screening serves to determine whether a child's development is within the range of what is expected for children that age, not whether the child is learning particular concepts covered in a curriculum. Screening tools can tell parents, teachers, and specialists whether a child's development is within the range of expectations or whether the child should be referred for a more in-depth evaluation. Screenings, however, cannot positively identify children with special needs.

3. Evaluate programs. Assessments of young children's skills are often included in evaluations to determine the effectiveness of early childhood programs. Assessments chosen for this purpose should reflect program goals and be appropriate for the

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children attending the program. Generally, child assessments for the purpose of program evaluation need only include a sample of children rather than all. Program effectiveness can be determined by showing that a representative group of children from the program has improved; the program does not have to demonstrate success for each and every child. Gathering evaluation data on a sample of children rather than all children minimizes the likelihood of information being used inappropriately to make decisions about individual children or judgments about individual teachers. School readiness assessments for program evaluation provide important indicators of an early childhood program's effectiveness in preparing children for school. They provide useful feedback to help administrators continuously improve program quality. If teachers complete these assessments, there must be safeguards to ensure that the data are not biased because the teachers are invested in the results (that is, want children in their class or program to do well). Assessments for the purpose of measuring program success typically cannot provide teachers with information to help improve children's learning. Such assessments often sample only some, not all, children, and the tools used often are not designed for the purpose of improving instruction.

Multiple conversations will most likely be needed to enable a community to reach consensus about school readiness.

4. Monitor trends over time.

Communities or states may choose to conduct school readiness assessments to provide a snapshot of children as they enter kindergarten. Were this snapshot taken

of a group of kindergartners every few years, then policy makers could monitor readiness trends (for example, determine whether over time children come to school with more skills). This type of school readiness assessment is broader than that done for program evaluation purposes. It does not focus on a single program but instead allows the public and policy makers to determine whether the many early childhood investments collectively are positively affecting school readiness.

As with program evaluation, child assessments for determining a ready school generally should be conducted on only a sample of children. Such assessments can provide a general picture of the characteristics of a group of children as they enter kindergarten but cannot relate information about individual children's skills.

Program assessments rarely provide detail about any individual program's effectiveness. (See Love, Aber, & Brooks-Gunn 1994 for a discussion of community school readiness assessments and Scott-Little, Kagan, & Clifford 2003 for a discussion of state school readiness assessments.)

5. Use for high-stakes accountability. Assessments become high stakes if used to make decisions about individual children or teachers. Assessment tools for this purpose must meet rigorous standards of technical accuracy because they will be used to make important decisions about individuals. Because few assessment tools for young children meet high standards, the NEGP report (Shepard, Kagan, & Wurtz 1998) recommends that no child assessments be conducted for high-stakes accountability purposes until third grade.



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Assessments of all children, for any purpose, may be used for high-stakes accountability. Once data are gathered and available, it may be tempting to use them to make decisions about individual children and teachers. For example, readiness assessments may be used to deny or discourage entry into kindergarten even when children are legally entitled to the service. Similarly, such assessments may be used to punish teachers whose average classroom assessment scores are low, even though the assessment tool did not meet high standards of technical adequacy. The potential risk for harm must be considered *before* any assessment data are collected. Safeguards should always be in place to minimize risks.

Bill Geiger



lower skills in all five areas of development tested (physical well-being and motor development, social and emotional development, approaches toward learning, language development, and cognitive development and general knowledge) as they entered school.

Ethnicity. Using data from the same national study of children entering kindergarten, Lee and Burkam (2002) found that African American, Hispanic, and other children (including biracial and Native American) had lower math and reading skills at the beginning of kindergarten than did White or Asian children. African American and Hispanic children in families from lower socioeconomic status had the lowest math and reading skills.

What characteristics of children are related to school readiness?

As stated earlier, individual children vary widely in their skills. However, research has shown that there are some general group differences in children's school readiness skills. The most recent and comprehensive national data about children's skills when they enter kindergarten come from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Kindergarten Cohort (ECLS-K)—a study of a nationally representative group of approximately 22,000 kindergartners conducted by the U.S. Department of Education (Zill & West 2001). Relevant findings from this study are highlighted below.

Family background characteristics. The ECLS-K study demonstrates that children with particular risk factors—living in a family that receives food stamps or temporary assistance; living in a single parent home; having a mother with less than a high school education; and having parents whose primary language is not English—had lower skills when they entered school (Zill & West 2001). Specifically, children with at least one of the four risk factors had lower skills in reading, math, and general knowledge, and were more likely to be in poorer health upon entering kindergarten compared to children with no risk factors. The effect of risk factors was cumulative: children with more risk factors had

Gender. Zill and West (2001) found that girls in the ECLS-K study had slightly higher reading skills than boys, were about the same as boys in math and general knowledge, had better prosocial skills than boys, and were less likely to engage in problem behaviors than boys at the beginning of kindergarten.

These research findings suggest that some groups of children tend to start school less prepared to succeed than others. It is important to remember that these are *group* differences. Not all children within the at-risk groups had poor skills when they entered school (Zill & West 2001). Some children within each at-risk group had strong skills. Understanding group differences may help early childhood and kindergarten teachers plan appropriate learning opportunities needed for children at risk. Teachers must not make assumptions, however, of individual children's skills based on their membership in one or more of the groups discussed.

What are the limitations of school readiness assessments?

There are several important limitations of school readiness assessments. First, each assessment tool is designed for a *particular purpose* and cannot automatically or easily be used for another purpose. This means that the purpose of the assessment must be clear

before an appropriate assessment tool can be selected. It also means that multiple assessment tools or approaches are needed to address multiple purposes.

Second, each school readiness assessment tool is

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designed with an explicit or implicit definition of school readiness. Assessment users must articulate their own definition of school readiness before they can select an appropriate measure that matches their definition. If this is not done, then the assessment instrument(s) will by default define school readiness—for better or for worse. For instance, if school

readiness is defined as covering all five domains described by NEGP, then the school readiness assessment needs to measure all five domains. If the assessment measures only early literacy, then users are automatically equating readiness with literacy skills.

Third, assessments are only as good as the people conducting them. Any assessment requires careful training before use. If assessments are not done well, then the data collected may not provide the information sought. This, in turn, could lead to worse—not better—decisions being made about young children and programs.

How should I choose a school readiness assessment?

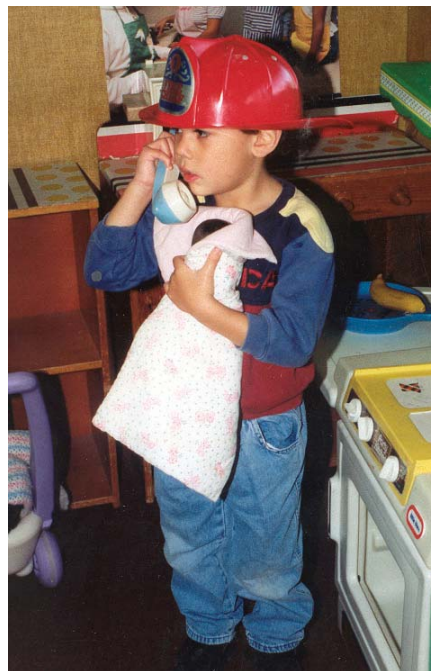
A team of people, rather than one individual, generally works together to plan a school readiness assessment. Ideally, this team includes administrators, teachers, families, and experts in the assessment of young children's skills. The following key questions can help guide the team's planning.

- What is your definition of school readiness? Are you interested in all five domains of development—

physical well-being and motor development, social and emotional development, approaches toward learning, language development, and cognitive development and general knowledge? If so, do you already collect information on some domains (for example, health), or are you looking for assessment tools that cover all five domains? If the purpose of the assessment is to improve learning, does the content of the assessment match the curriculum content?

- What is your purpose or purposes? You will need to select an assessment tool or tools to match each of your purposes.
- What are the characteristics of the children to be assessed? How old are they? Do they speak languages besides English? What are their races or ethnicities? Do some have disabilities? In what part of the country do they live? The assessment tools selected should be designed to be used with children similar to the ones you will be assessing. Furthermore, the assessment tool should include documented evidence of the characteristics of children on which the assessment was tested.
- What are the technical properties of the assessment? Is there evidence for adequate validity (the tool really measures what it claims to measure)? Is there evidence for adequate reliability (i.e., the tool produces similar results for a child, across a short time frame or across the different individuals administering the assessment)? Different purposes require different standards of technical properties (Shepard, Kagan, & Wurtz 1998).

Assessment tools for the purposes of program evaluation and monitoring trends must meet high standards for technical properties. The *Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing* (AERA, APA, & NCME Joint Committee 1999) may be a useful resource for evaluating the technical adequacy of assessments.



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What are appropriate tools for conducting school readiness assessments? Who should gather school readiness assessment data?

There is no one best approach to or tool for assessing school readiness. Different purposes require different approaches. Even within a particular purpose, there is still variability in the assess-

Type of Assessment

	Naturalistic	Standardized, norm-referenced
Advantages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does not disrupt a child's ongoing routine • A child has multiple chances to demonstrate skill • If done over time, it may more accurately reflect a child's skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allows comparisons of same-age children • Better agreement across multiple teachers or observers • Less chance for observer/teacher bias to affect assessment results
Disadvantages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does not typically allow comparisons of same-age children • Hard to achieve agreement across multiple teachers or observers because each may have different understandings of the assessment items • Observer/teacher bias may affect assessment results if individuals know that the results will be used to make decisions about them or their programs • May not be as accurate for determining group comparisons or program effects • Typically requires more of the teacher's time 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May not reflect skills for individual children accurately because it is usually conducted outside the natural environment • A child is given only one opportunity to demonstrate skill • A child's performance may be less accurate if the person administering the assessment is unfamiliar to the child • Typically provides less information of use in guiding instruction for individual children • Available measures may not accurately reflect the skills of children from diverse backgrounds and of children who do not speak English

ments chosen. For example, a review of state prekindergarten evaluation reports identified 42 different assessment tools used in 13 state evaluations (Gilliam & Zigler 2001). For a review of commercially available school readiness assessments, see *Assessing Kindergarten Children: A Compendium of Assessment Instruments* (Niemeyer & Scott-Little 2001).

Generally, there are two different kinds of school readiness assessments: naturalistic assessments (sometimes referred to as informal or authentic) and standardized, norm-referenced assessments (sometimes referred to as formal). Naturalistic assessments include observations, work samples, and teacher checklists. Although both types of assessment are sometimes used for various purposes, the naturalistic type is most often used for the purpose of improving learning.

Standardized, norm-referenced assessments follow a standard set of administration rules so that each child theoretically experiences the assessment similarly (for example, each person administering the test gives the same instructions). Norm-referenced assessments permit a child's performance to be compared to those

of other children his age. This type of assessment is used frequently for identifying children with special needs, for evaluating programs, and in high-stakes accountability. The table above highlights key advantages and disadvantages of each type of assessment.

With regard to gathering assessment information and from whom, generally it is best to tap multiple sources—teachers, families, and the child himself (Shepard, Kagan, & Wurtz 1998). In North Carolina's statewide school readiness assessment, for instance, teachers provided information about children's social skills and problem behaviors, families contributed knowledge about children's health and their approaches toward learning, and one-on-one assessments conducted with children added to the learning about children's communication skills and general knowledge (Maxwell et al. 2001). Gathering information from multiple sources is useful in understanding children's skills across various settings. Families, for example, have a perspective on their children's skills from experiences at home that may differ from how teachers see children in a group, classroom setting.

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Photos by Casey Sills

What should happen to children who are not ready for school?

The NEGP concept of a ready school suggests that it is a school's responsibility to educate all children who walk through its door, regardless of whether children are ready or not ready. The idea of schools' readiness for children is also evident in state policies regarding school entry. Most states use age, not skill level, as the criterion for determining when a child is eligible—and legally entitled—to attend public school (Saluja, Scott-Little, & Clifford 2000). Thus a child's readiness should not be a factor in determining eligibility for kindergarten. However, practice does not always follow this philosophy. Some families, school administrators, and teachers may want to delay school entry based on children's readiness. But research suggests that delaying

school entry does not generally benefit children. (See Marshall 2003 and Stipek 2002 for research summaries on the effects of delayed kindergarten entry.)

If a child is deemed not ready for school, preschool teachers and administrators can talk to the family and kindergarten teacher about the particular needs of the child and work together to develop strategies for improving the child's skills. If concerned that the child's skills are far behind those of her peers, the team may refer the child for screening to determine whether she has a disability. Recognizing that school readiness concerns more than just the child, the team can also identify strategies all can use to support the child's success. The preschool teacher and administrator, for example, can discuss

Research suggests that delaying school entry does not generally benefit children.

strategies for ensuring that the child receives high-quality, individualized, and developmentally appropriate instruction that addresses all five domains of development.

If the team believes that the child is considered not ready because of inappropriate expectations from school staff, then a larger effort is likely needed to bring about change. The next section of this article discusses these larger efforts to develop consensus on school readiness.

What if preschool and kindergarten programs differ in their expectations of readiness? How can they work together to set appropriate expectations?

Even with the work of the NEGP and multiple years of research and discussion, a common definition of school readiness remains elusive (Meisels 1999). Parents,

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preschool teachers, and kindergarten teachers—even within the same community—may differ in their expectations of school readiness (Graue 1993; NEGP 1993). Discussions about people's views of school readiness are needed to develop a community-wide set of expectations regarding school readiness.

Communities, schools, or preschool programs can sponsor school readiness forums in which families, teachers, administrators, and community leaders discuss school readiness. Individual preschool programs can host meetings to discuss school readiness among preschool teachers and parents from their program along with kindergarten teachers in their neighborhood schools. Multiple conversations most likely will be needed to enable the group to reach a consensus about school readiness.

Joint professional development and kindergarten transition activities can be helpful in minimizing differences in expectations between preschool and kindergarten programs (Firlik 2003). Public schools and early care and education programs in the school district could cosponsor staff training for preschool and kindergarten teachers. Such experiences may help teachers from different systems develop more views in common on readiness. Preschool teachers visiting kindergarten classrooms gain a better understanding of the kindergarten experiences their students will encounter. And when kindergarten teachers visit preschool classrooms, they appreciate and understand the preschool experiences their students have had.

What can I do to support appropriate practices regarding school readiness assessments?

Although the many challenges in ensuring that school readiness assessments are done appropriately require the efforts of many, every individual can make a difference. Here are some ways an individual can work to support the appropriate use of school readiness assessments.



When kindergarten teachers visit preschool classrooms, they appreciate and understand the preschool experiences their students have had.

- **Be informed.** Reading about school readiness and participating in other professional development activities will help you develop expertise in this area.
- **Get involved.** Apply your expertise to the discussion of school readiness at the local, state, or national level. You can speak out to help ensure that school readiness assessment efforts benefit, not harm, young children. Start with your own program, making sure that you are using the appropriate instruments and procedures for your particular purpose of interest and that the program's assessment results are used to help children.
- **Build partnerships.** People have different perspectives about school readiness and school readiness assessments, which can lead to some heated discussions. Strengthening relationships with preschool teachers, administrators, families, and public school staff makes it easier to work together toward a common understanding of this controversial topic. If you work in an early care and education setting, reach out to kindergarten teachers to discuss your views of school readiness and assessment. If you are a kindergarten teacher, work with preschool teachers on school readiness issues.

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