

Championing School Readiness

By Lisa M. Belisle, M.D., M.P.H., Medical Advisor, Raising Readers

THE SUMMER IS BEGINNING its slow fade into autumn, and a new group of children are anticipating their entrance into formalized education. Yes, the kindergartners are starting school. As pediatric providers, we see many of these five-year-olds when their parents present them for their requisite vaccinations. Our influence can extend beyond immunizations, however. We have the potential to be true champions of school readiness.

What is School Readiness?

In 1989, then President George H.W. Bush and a group of state governors proposed certain goals for education in this country. The first of these was that “all children in America will start school ready to learn.”¹ Helping children meet this goal—otherwise known as school readiness—involves having an understanding of each child’s:

- physical and motor development,
- cognitive development and approaches to learning,
- language development, and
- social emotional development.²

According to the National Education Goals Panel, school readiness extends beyond the child. It also necessitates having “schools that [are] ready for children...and parents and communities that [can] support the child’s developmental process.”³ The interplay of a prepared child, a prepared school and a supportive living situation is crucial to acquisition of knowledge.

Some controversy exists as to the best way to determine whether children are ready for kindergarten. Consequently, there is little uniformity in the process among Maine (or even U.S.) schools. Most districts require a springtime pre-kindergarten screening, which may or may not include a standardized examination. The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) does not support the use of standardized exams, believing that they do not give an accurate measurement of ability in the preschool years.⁴

Why is School Readiness Related to Health?

Children who come to kindergarten prepared to learn are more apt to succeed in school. Children who are academically successful are less likely to engage in high risk behaviors such as cigarette smoking, substance use, unprotected sex and violent acts.⁵ These behaviors have a significant impact on morbidity and mortality in later years. In general, “individuals with higher educational attainment not only live longer but have a shorter duration of disability before death compared with individuals with lower educational attainment.”⁶ Children who are ready for school are more inclined to become adults who will be enjoying longer, healthier lives.

How Can Pediatric Providers Influence School Readiness?

Pediatric providers are in the enviable position of being implicated in school readiness on many levels. The first is ensuring a school-ready child. Our interactions with young children enable us to:

- determine whether age-appropriate developmental milestones are being met,
- make referrals to organizations like Child Development Services when further evaluation is necessary,
- offer competent anticipatory guidance on issues such as literacy,
- recognize those who are economically disadvantaged, and connect them with early education programs like Head Start,
- have familiarity with early childhood programs in the community (i.e. daycare and preschool),
- test patients for lead and other neurotoxins, and educate parents about minimizing exposure to these,
- perform vision and hearing evaluations at recommended ages.

As providers, we can affect child-ready schools by identifying special-needs or high risk children in a timely fashion. Finally, we can help parents provide a supportive learning environment for their children.

This is easily accomplished by offering Raising Readers books at each well child visit, modeling reading behavior for parents, and encouraging regular book use. For children who are on the brink of attending school, providers can ease the transition by having books on the subject available in their waiting rooms (see **Books about Starting School**).

Pediatric providers are an integral part of evaluating the developmental aspects of school readiness in children. Our potential influence in this realm is even greater. Because school readiness is related to better health and a longer life, we must champion this cause.



FOOTNOTES:

- 1 www.futureofchildren.org/information2826/information_show.htm?doc_id=71010 from August 7, 2006.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 <http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/cgi/content/extract/111/6/1433?eaf> from August 7, 2006.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Ibid.

REFERENCES:

- 1 www.futureofchildren.org
- 2 www.nccp.org
- 3 www.zerotothree.org
- 4 www.gettingready.org

**Raising
Readers**

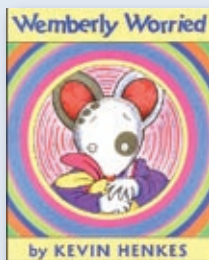
Research assistance provided by Kate Bartley.



raising readers

A Family Health and Literacy Program
for Maine Children Ages Birth to 5 years

Books about Starting School



Wemberly Worried

by Kevin Henkes
(Greenwillow, 2000)
ISBN: 0688170277



Miss Bindergarten Gets Ready for Kindergarten

by Joseph Slate
Illustrated by Ashley Wolff
(Dutton Juvenile, 1996)
ISBN: 0525454462



Countdown to Kindergarten

by Alison McGhee
Illustrated by Harry Bliss
(Silver Whistle, 2002)
ISBN: 015205586X



The Night Before Kindergarten

by Natasha Wing
Illustrated by Julie Durrell
(Grosset & Dunlap, 2001)
ISBN: 0448425009