



## Early Childhood School Readiness Series

### Preparing Children for Kindergarten: Seat Work

Rimm-Kaufman, Pianta, and Cox reported in 2000 that 40% of young children were simply unprepared for the demands of kindergarten classrooms. Recent interviews with kindergarten teachers and elementary school principals in Indiana suggest this statistic holds true a decade later.

Over the past four years, we investigated early education practices that promote school readiness and contribute to successful school outcomes. As a result of these studies, we have developed a series of papers identifying the skills and routines associated with successful school readiness for all children.

This paper is part of a series of briefs that examine 4 common kindergarten routines: arrival, whole class instruction, seat work, and learning centers. The briefs describe the routines and the critical skills children need to successfully engage and learn in them. They also suggest strategies early educators can use to bridge preschool practices with kindergarten expectations.

*Grace's class has been writing stories during its Writers' Workshop time. Today Mr. Andrews asked the children to work from their story web about a big moment in their lives, filling in the details and finding "juicy words" to describe the people, places, and events in their stories. There are four other children at Grace's table, and they are all focused on their work. Sometimes one of the children has a question and raises his or her hand. Grace often finds the word she wants to use on the word wall, and she is working independently to sound out the other words she needs. Mr. Andrews circulates throughout the room, stopping to comment or answer a question. After writing for 30 minutes, he rings the chimes, indicating that the pencils and papers should be put up and that the children should move to group time on the carpet.*





## Early Childhood School Readiness Series

There are periods during a kindergarten child's day in which he or she spends time at a table or desk doing individual work. This section of the brief will describe the physical, social, and instructional designs of the seat work routine and highlight both the teacher's actions and the critical skills children need. Table 1 presents the essential skills that are used most frequently during seat work and provides examples from our observations.

Throughout the mornings we observed, there were two distinct times during which children engaged in this routine. The first occurred after arrival. (See brief on *Arrival* for more information about this routine.) Children had completed their initial arrival routine, gathered needed materials, and moved quietly to their assigned spots at tables. The second time when we were most likely to observe seat work was following teacher-led group time, during which children were presented with a lesson, as in Grace's class vignette, above.

The physical design of this routine also had two variations. Some classes used a large "U"-shaped configuration of tables where all the children sat around the outside of the "U." In other classrooms, clusters of tables held from four to eight children. At times the children were expected to independently find the work in their baskets or backpacks. Sometimes the work was already passed out, awaiting children at their tables, and at other times, the teacher distributed work in the large group that preceded the seat work session. In all variations, while the materials were teacher-designed and prepared ahead of time, the children were expected to be responsible for their own materials from the start of this routine to its end. Seat work sessions lasted an average of half an hour, with one lasting only a little longer than 10 minutes; the longest lasted just over 50 minutes. When the teacher cued the class that it was time to finish their work and put away materials, the children were expected to complete the tasks, clean up, put materials away independently, and move to the next activity— typically a large group time.

The social design of seat work reflects the social-communicative rules, roles, and expectations of that routine. Within seat work, we observed varying degrees of interaction between the teacher and children and among classmates. Several factors contributed to this variation. First, the amount and type of interaction varied depending on the purpose of the activity. In the post-arrival seat work time, the teacher was typically finishing up the arrival routine with some class members, and the children engaged in their seat work were expected to be working quietly and independently. During the seat work routine that followed instructional time, the teacher often interacted with the children to support their content understanding. The opportunity for children to interact during this part of the seat work routine varied across classrooms. When children received instruction before individual practice at their tables, they were typically in large groups quietly listening to the teacher. Once at their tables, children in some classes were allowed to talk with one another about their work, while in other classes, they were reminded to be quiet while working. Although there was some variation across classrooms as to how



## Early Childhood School Readiness Series

much teacher assistance was available, the overall expectation was that children independently complete their seat work in all settings.

In our classroom observations, seat work was primarily focused on literacy. Seat work following arrival had been planned in advance to require little or no introduction or assistance from the teacher, with the teacher providing an opportunity for the children to practice skills that had been learned previously. Some of that early morning seat work consisted of finding handwriting or literacy questions on the board and practicing those skills. Worksheets were not unusual during this first seat work session. Children clearly understood and followed the steps in this routine.

The seat work routine that followed large group instruction was more varied instructionally. While worksheets were still present, we also observed some innovative ways in which teachers helped students practice and integrate their knowledge and skills. Writing exercises on either white boards or paper were common, with an occasional art work activity that supported content as well as occasional collaborative work with classmates. The latter more often appeared in learning centers. (See *Learning Centers* brief for more information).

The number and complexity of directions that the children were asked to follow depended on the activity. Following the whole group instruction, children left the large group area and went to their tables, desks, or other work areas to complete individual seat work that directly related to the preceding lesson. At this time, children reviewed, practiced, and sometimes expanded on the content of the large group lesson. If they had questions, they were expected to raise their hands and wait for adult attention. In some classes, an adult checked student work before it was put away.

**Table 1 - Essential Skills for Seat Work**

<b>Skill</b>	<b>Examples of Behaviors</b>
Follows classroom rules	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Remains seated in chairs.</li><li>• Is respectful of materials.</li><li>• Puts materials away when done.</li><li>• Raises hands for teacher attention.</li><li>• Uses materials safely.</li></ul>
Follows classroom routines	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Listens to instructions from the front of the room.</li><li>• Moves quietly to assigned seats.</li><li>• Gets out materials.</li><li>• Completes work.</li><li>• Puts away materials when finished.</li></ul>



## Early Childhood School Readiness Series

Skill	Examples of Behaviors
Listens to gather information	Listens to directions about: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• How to do assigned seat work</li><li>• How to make a specific letter</li><li>• What to do next in the schedule</li></ul> Listens to learn about: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Phonics</li><li>• Writing in journals</li><li>• Counting and identifying numerals.</li></ul>
Sees a simple task to completion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Completes assigned worksheets.</li><li>• Completes assigned artwork.</li><li>• Completes project before moving on to the next activity.</li><li>• Puts away materials.</li></ul>
Understands and follows directions	Follows seat work specific directions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• In group pertaining to specific task</li><li>• Waiting for papers to be handed out and getting pencils to start work</li><li>• Going to an assigned table</li><li>• Picking up and putting away materials</li><li>• Turning in papers.</li></ul> Follows general classroom directions when: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Asking or answering questions</li><li>• Turning to a specific page</li><li>• Following along as the teacher explains a workbook page</li><li>• Sounding out a word</li><li>• Drawing a picture.</li></ul>
Uses speech that is understandable	Use understandable speech when: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• responding to questions</li><li>• talking among themselves.</li><li>• they read what they have written to the teacher, to the whole class, or to each other</li><li>• asking for clarification</li></ul>
Copies or writes name	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Write their names on all work</li></ul>



## Early Childhood School Readiness Series

### Seat Work in Preschool

#### Preschool vignette

J'won is excited. There is a new center open today. His teacher, Ms. Carson, has laid out paper, glue, big crayons, and the leaves, grass, and acorns they collected on their walk yesterday. She has asked the class to make a story collage with pictures about the walk and has posted some words on the flip chart for the children to copy if they want. Art is one of J'won's favorite activities, and he can't wait to rub the crayons over the leaves and make them magically appear like Ms. Carson did. It's really hard to wait for his turn at the table. When it comes, J'won colors, cuts, and glues happily. He compares his project with his classmates at the table and adds a couple flourishes after he is reminded of some details. When Ms. Carson comes around, he proudly shows her his collage before placing it on the "finished" table.

In preschool, the seat work routine provides children with the opportunity to spend time working with ideas and materials that do not lend themselves to floor play, large group, or large motor activities. For the sake of brevity, the word "preschool" is used to refer to all early care and education programs that serve children prior to their entry into kindergarten, including preschool, pre-kindergarten, and childcare.

In these settings, seat work is often one of the table tasks that is included in center choices. Children are free to enter and leave the table, with a range of time spent and a variety of products completed.

Seat work is one of the more teacher-directed and organized small group or individual activities in preschool. Seat work in the preschool setting often integrates several different academic, social, and motor goals. In J'won's class, this is a science/math/literacy/art activity that combines a variety of goals and outcomes into one project. It is more open-ended, active and creative but no less goal-driven than most kindergarten seat work. Preschoolers are guided to be involved in a seat work project, but depending on their level of development, they may take more or less time to develop the ideas and complete the work. Thus the completed work has varying degrees of complexity.

While the product expectations in kindergarten are almost always written, the products in preschool may be a piece of art that the child can take home or a temporary construction with puzzles or blocks. The flow between centers and seat work in preschool is more fluid, with similarities becoming more obvious as preschoolers prepare to transition to kindergarten. During the spring, preschool teachers may focus more on literacy activities, seat work time may be extended, and written products may be seen more frequently with a focus on kindergarten preparation.



## Early Childhood School Readiness Series

The differences in instructional designs outlined above have immense impact on the social design of this routine. Preschool children are often encouraged to interact and to share materials, space, and ideas. Logically, with expectations for independent work in kindergarten, there is much less interaction between classmates, and the teacher serves as a support rather than direct instructor.

In kindergarten, seat work is done individually on an assigned task or with the whole class working on a common task and is almost always academic in nature. There is also a distinct expectation for the finished project which is to be independently completed. Table 3, below, shows some of the similarities and differences between the two settings, focusing on the physical, social, and instructional designs.

### Strategies for Bridging Preschool and Kindergarten Seat Work Routines

Preschool activities are frequently designed to allow young children to be actively involved with the learning materials in their environment. Seat work activities are no different, and they often entail multiple ways in which a child can approach a project and multiple acceptable types of products at completion. When children enter kindergarten, seat work becomes more narrowly focused and typically entails paper and pencil tasks.

Several of the bridging strategies summarized in Table 2 emphasize increasing the number of experiences preschoolers have with more structured, independent, and extended work at a table. Others focus on the complexity of the directions given and the tasks presented. Drawing and artwork begin to evolve into writing and narratives, children learn to focus on one project for longer periods, and direct teacher involvement decreases as children's independence grows. Preschoolers are learning to follow classroom rules and routines, to listen to and gather information, to follow directions, and to see a task to completion. As children enter kindergarten, verbal instructions for seat work become more complex, the number of directions they are expected to follow increases, and the tasks they are given require a longer period of concentrated work than in preschool. The following three general strategies help prepare preschoolers meet the high expectations for independence and skill performance in their kindergarten seat work routines:

1. **Introduce seat work activities that have clear teacher expectations and tasks to complete.**

Gradually introduce and expand the number of opportunities during the day in which the teacher has clear expectations for completion of a task. The tasks do not need to be worksheets that emphasize advanced academic subject matter; they may include simple writing projects, art projects, or social games. The goal is to introduce small amounts of child-directed work with clear teacher expectation.

2. **Increase the demands placed on children at the beginning of the routine.**



## Early Childhood School Readiness Series

When introducing the seat work routine, kindergarten children may be presented with a fair amount of information and direction concerning the expectations for the activity. Begin to prepare children for this challenge by gradually introducing and increasing the amount and complexity of information and instructions provided. This will include an increase in expectations that children will attend to, remember, and follow directions regarding seat work assignments and tasks to complete.

3. **Implement seat work activities that require children to work independently.**

In kindergartens, children need to be more self sufficient in managing their learning. Include activities that have clear tasks to accomplish with minimal ongoing assistance. If the seat work activity involves collaboration with other children, place responsibility back on the children to solve problems that might arise when working with others.

### Summary and Implications

Children face many new challenges in kindergarten, where they will be expected to build the literacy and other essential skills they will need throughout their elementary school experience. As children enter kindergarten, verbal instructions become more complex, the number of directions they are expected to follow increases, and the tasks they are given require longer periods of concentrated work than in preschool. During the spring before children enter kindergarten, preschool teachers can prepare children for this complex transition by focusing more on literacy activities, on more structured work, and on generating written products. And kindergarten teachers—who are often under pressure to move children through demanding new curriculum quickly—can focus seat work on encouraging children to practice and integrate skills and knowledge. These efforts will contribute to helping children meet the overall goal of building the essential skills they will need throughout their academic lives.



## Early Childhood School Readiness Series

**Table 2**  
**Strategies for Bridging Differences in Seat Work Routines**  
**between Preschool and Kindergarten Settings**

	<b>Preschool Setting</b>	<b>Bridging Strategies</b>	<b>Kindergarten Setting</b>
<b>Physical Design</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Seat work is done at tables with children seated or standing.</li> <li>• Materials typically include those that are useful for art (scissors, paper, paint, markers), writing (paper, pencils, markers), or other creative projects.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Expand the number of times during the day that children are expected to engage in activities that are teacher-planned with clear tasks and products for children to complete.</li> <li>• Expand the number of seat work activities that include literacy and writing.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Seat work is done either at tables with four to six children or at tables configured in a large “U” shape that accommodates the entire class.</li> <li>• Materials typically include writing supplies such as paper, pencils, markers, erasers, rulers, and worksheets.</li> </ul>
<b>Social Design</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Seat work is an organized activity done individually or with a small group at a table.</li> <li>• Seat work is often one of the center choices that is more teacher-designed than are other centers.</li> <li>• Seat work is child-directed so that preschoolers have more freedom as to the social interactions that occur.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Introduce and expand the number of centers that have clear, teacher-designed expectations and tasks for children to follow (including seat work).</li> <li>• Gradually decrease the amount of guidance provided to encourage children to work independently.</li> <li>• Increase the amount of time children are expected to stay at each seat work activity.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teacher-designed, teacher-directed activities are conducted with children who are expected to manage their time and complete assigned work independently.</li> <li>• Children have assigned seats and are expected to work quietly. Minimal interaction is accepted.</li> <li>• Children are expected to stay in their seats and continue working until the session is completed.</li> </ul>
<b>Instructional Design</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teachers provide more direction for seat work centers than at many other times of the day.</li> <li>• Children are encouraged to stay at their chosen tables until their project is finished.</li> <li>• Teachers offer a wide variety of activities including art, writing, and use of many kinds of manipulatives.</li> <li>• Teachers monitor seat work, provide guidance, respond to requests for assistance, and recognize completed work.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Introduce seat work centers by discussing/negotiating expectations concerning work and finished products.</li> <li>• Introduce tasks that require children to work independently and result in a completed product they turn in</li> <li>• Gradually increase the complexity of the tasks and the amount of time children need to work on it.</li> <li>• Introduce teacher-lead centers that include more direct instruction.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teachers provide directions concerning work expectations and completed products.</li> <li>• Children are expected to complete work independently and may ask teachers or peers for assistance.</li> <li>• Teachers monitor seat work, provide guidance as needed, respond to requests for assistance, and check completed work.</li> </ul>





## Early Childhood School Readiness Series

### Summary of our Research

Over the past four years, we have been investigating early education practices that promote school readiness and contribute to successful school outcomes for all young children. Our work has focused on determining what early childhood programs can do to effectively prepare children for the social, physical, communicative, and instructional rigors of kindergarten. In October 2006, we wrote a series of briefs in which we identified skills that the research literature suggests are important for children to learn as they enter kindergarten.

Building on our previous work, we conducted a series of small studies (2007-2010) to validate the skills that kindergarten teachers identified as important and *essential* for children to have when they enter kindergarten. The results indicated 74 skills that kindergarten teachers ranked as important, of which 22 skills were identified as critical. Table 3 presents those 22 skills in alphabetical order.

**Table 1**  
**Essential School Readiness Skills Their Frequency of Occurrence Across Kindergarten Routines**  
**(Percentage of observed routines)**

<b>Skill</b>	<b>Arrival N=14</b>	<b>Learning Centers N=12</b>	<b>Seat Work N=16</b>	<b>Whole Class Instruction N=33</b>	<b>Total N=75</b>
<b>Accepts guidance and limits</b>	64%	83%	56%	64%	65%
<b>Asks for help</b>	43%	67%	50%	24%	40%
<b>Communicates needs and wants</b>	79%	67%	44%	39%	52%
<b>Controls feelings of frustration</b>	43%	67%	38%	48%	48%
<b>Copies or writes own name</b>	43%	58%	63%	18%	39%
<b>Disposes of bodily wastes</b>	7%	17%	19%	21%	17%
<b>Follows basic health and safety rules</b>	50%	33%	50%	42%	44%
<b>Follows classroom routines</b>	100%	100%	94%	94%	96%
<b>Follows different rules/routines</b>	14%	25%	31%	30%	27%
<b>Follows simple classroom rules</b>	93%	92%	100%	85%	91%
<b>Gives name, age, and gender</b>	14%	17%	13%	9%	12%
<b>Listens to gather information</b>	64%	92%	88%	91%	85%
<b>Recognizes five colors</b>	29%	8%	25%	27%	24%
<b>Recognizes own name in isolated print</b>	21%	17%	13%	6%	12%
<b>Resolves conflicts</b>	21%	75%	25%	24%	32%
<b>Sees a simple task to completion</b>	86%	100%	81%	58%	75%
<b>Stays on adult-directed task 10 or more minutes</b>	29%	92%	81%	82%	73%
<b>Takes care of toileting needs</b>	36%	67%	6%	55%	43%
<b>Understands and follows directions</b>	86%	92%	81%	85%	85%
<b>Uses speech that is understandable</b>	100%	92%	75%	85%	87%
<b>Washes hands and face</b>	7%	42%	19%	12%	17%



## Early Childhood School Readiness Series

Skill	Arrival N=14	Learning Centers N=12	Seat Work N=16	Whole Class Instruction N=33	Total N=75
<b>Watches/listens to stories</b>	14%	17%	13%	42%	27%

We also began to examine the importance of these skills in the context of children’s successful engagement in typical kindergarten routines. In our most recent study, we observed children in kindergartens to determine whether they demonstrated these critical skills as they navigated routines such as arrival, whole class instruction, seat work, and learning centers. This latest work further validated the importance of the 22 observed skills and highlighted the significance of looking at common kindergarten classroom routines as important units of analyses. Table 3 presents data summarizing these observations. It presents the percentage of observations each skill was observed during the four different kindergarten routines mentioned. For example, the first skill in Table 3, *Accepts guidance and limits*, was occurred in 64% of all observed *arrival* routines (N=14). That same skill was observed to occur in 65% of all instances of the four kindergarten routines we studied (N=75). *Follows classroom routines* was the most frequently observed skills, occurring in 96% of all observed routines.

### References

Rimm-Kaufman, S. E., Pianta, R. C., & Cox, M. J. (2000). Teachers’ judgments of problems in the transition to kindergarten. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 15*(2), 147-166.

Early Childhood School Readiness Series 2

Preparing Children for Kindergarten: Seat Work

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*Essential Skills for Successful School Readiness* Research Project

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The Early Childhood Center is one of seven centers located at the Indiana Institute on Disability and Community at Indiana University, Bloomington. The work of the Indiana Institute encompasses the entire life span, from birth through older adulthood. Areas of emphasis include: early intervention; school improvement and inclusion; transition; employment and careers; age-related change; autism spectrum disorders; disability information and referral; technology; planning and policy; and Individual and family perspectives.

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