

School Readiness: What Teachers Expect. What Parents Can Do.

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Introduction

Children entering kindergarten are presented with many new and exciting opportunities but also with many new demands. Kindergartners spend nearly all of their class time in structured learning activities where they are expected to sit with their classmates, listen to the teacher, follow instructions, and complete specific tasks. Kindergarten teachers, facing increased academic demands, expect children to enter school able to follow the rules, roles, and routines of the classroom. Since we want all children to be learning from their first day of kindergarten, we need to make sure they are prepared to do just that.

From the moment children enter the kindergarten classroom, they are expected to complete a series of tasks that make up classroom routines. The arrival routine includes hanging up the backpack and coat in the spot designated by the child's picture or name, handing in papers from home, finding the spot for the next activity, and either starting that task or waiting patiently for the teacher to start. From arrival and throughout the day to departure, children participate in many learning opportunities. All day long, they are expected to follow the rules and know the elements of classroom routines. They are also expected to take care of their own personal needs such as blowing their noses, using the bathroom, and washing their hands.

The Early Childhood Center at the Indiana Institute on Disability and Community recently conducted a series of small-scale studies that looked at the skills children need to successfully participate in the common learning routines of kindergarten classrooms. The studies identified some essential skills such as following simple classroom rules and routines, understanding and following directions, listening to an adult for information, completing tasks, and asking for help. For a complete list of skills, other papers describing the research process, findings, and further resources, go to <http://www.iidc.indiana.edu/index>.

Kindergarten Skills
Follows daily routines
Follows directions
Asks for help
Listens to gather information
Completes a simple task
Follows classroom rules
Accepts guidance and limits from familiar adults
Takes care of personal needs (e.g., toileting, blowing nose)

Instructional Routines

The Early Childhood Center identified three main instructional routines within the kindergarten day. Some of these routines occurred more than once during the day, and they lasted from less than 10 minutes to close to an hour. Following is some information on each of the main routines:

- **Whole class instruction** includes any time during which the teacher is teaching the whole class at the same time. We observed two different types of whole-class instruction. During times such as circle or morning meeting, children sat on the floor and focused on the teacher and materials being used. At other times, children sat at tables or desks while the teacher led them step-by-step through an activity. In both cases, children were expected to sit quietly, listen to the teacher for information and instructions, and follow the rules for the activity (e.g., keeping hands to self, staying seated, responding to questions). A whole class time occurred every morning and lasted about 30 minutes. Some classes had more than one whole class time in the morning and another in the afternoon, and this instructional time lasted from less than 10 minutes to close to an hour.



- **Learning centers** sometimes called “stations”—were common in the kindergarten day. In learning centers, the teacher sets up four or more activities with a specific instructional focus at tables or on the floor around the room. Students are expected to listen to the instructions for all the centers, then independently complete the tasks at each. Children negotiate materials and space with their classmates, and ask for help when needed. In some classrooms that we observed, the teachers worked directly with a small group of students that rotated into their center as part of the cycle of student movement. In most classrooms, learning centers lasted about an hour, with the shortest lasting 25 minutes and the longest lasting 80 minutes. Teachers typically controlled the amount of time each group spent at a center by indicating when the groups needed to rotate.
- **Seat work** is a time during the day when children are working independently at tables or desks. This activity typically follows a whole class instruction period, and the children are asked to independently practice the knowledge and/or skills they have just learned. This means that they need to listen to the lesson and remember the instructional content and directions as they move to independent work at their table or desk. Again, when help is needed, they are expected to raise their hands quietly and wait for teacher attention. By the end of the period, which ranged in our study from 10 to 50 minutes, each child was supposed to have a finished product such as a drawing that related to the story just read, a worksheet, or a journal entry.

The shift in expectations from preschool, which is largely play-based in nature, to kindergarten may be difficult for some children. But because entering kindergarten ready to learn is critical not only for the kindergarten year but also for later school success (Howes, Burchinal, Pianta, et al., 2008; Li-Grining, Botruba-Drzal, Maldonado-Carreno, & Haas 2010), it is crucial that children have early experiences that prepare them for this step. Whether or not children attend a program (e.g., preschool or day care) prior to kindergarten, parents play a crucial role in preparing them for the formal schooling that starts in kindergarten and continues across a child’s life.

The National Center for Family and Community Connections with Schools published a synthesis of research (Henderson & Mapp 2002) that found that “students with involved parents, no matter what their income or background, were more likely to:

- earn higher grades and test scores, and enroll in higher-level programs.
- be promoted, pass their classes, and earn credits.
- attend school regularly.
- have better social skills, show improved behavior, and adapt well to school.
- graduate and go on to postsecondary education.”

Clearly, parent involvement in children’s lives is important at all times but even more so as children begin the major transition into school. Research shows that not only do parents want to know about the academic and behavioral expectations for the upcoming year (Wildinger & McIntyre, 2010), but they also want to know what they can do to prepare their children for the transition (McIntyre, Eckert, Fiese, DiGennero & Wildenger, 2007). Though much has been written about what teachers can do to prepare children, little has been written about what teachers can do to inform and support parents in preparing their children for this transition.

We recognize that family routines vary from family to family; however, there are universal recommendations for activities that all families can do to help prepare their children for kindergarten.

The next section of this paper looks at ways teachers can help families prepare their children for kindergarten. Specifically, it is a discussion of how parents and other primary caregivers can use their daily routines to prepare children for the instructional activities they will encounter in kindergarten classrooms.

Family Routines

One of the easiest things preschool teachers can do to help parents prepare their children for kindergarten is to talk with them about their family routines. Within family routines, parents can work on many of the essential kindergarten skills such as listening, following directions, or completing a task.

Although many children have regular routines, a significant number do not (Wildenger et al., 2008) creating a major recommendation that the family begin school-like routines during the summer and become more consistent in those routines as the school year approaches. Families typically have three types of routines: daily routines such as bedtime and mealtime routines; weekly routines such as laundry or grocery shopping; and other routines that involve community outings, birthdays, or holidays. Each of these routines has the potential for teaching children some of the skills they will need in kindergarten. So not only does a predictable home schedule help children feel safe and secure, but it also prepares them for school.

When children enter school, the routines that have been in place thus far become more consistent. Early education professionals can help families anticipate the routines that will become necessary when school starts so that they can begin to move toward a similar schedule during the summer. This helps children acclimate to a new morning and bedtime routine and to get enough sleep—10 to 12 hours according to the National Sleep Foundation (2010)—to be alert, active, and ready to learn throughout their day. Creating consistent routines around waking and bedtime may be a good place to start your conversations.

Embedding Skills into Routines

We recognize that family routines vary from family to family; however, there are universal recommendations for activities that all families can do to help prepare their children for kindergarten. Families don't need to carve out a separate time in the day to focus on these skills, but they might need help recognizing the ways they can work on them during a typical day.

Within each family's day, there is a time to get up, a time to eat, and a time to go back to bed. In some families, everyone leaves home to go to work, school, or childcare. Some families have members that stay home. Whatever the makeup of the family and whatever happens during the day, parents and/or primary caregivers can do some activities to help their children enter kindergarten successfully.

The Early Childhood Center developed a series of tip sheets that look at family routines and how families can use their routines to support skill development for kindergarten entry. The following are some ideas that are presented in one of the tip sheets, Morning Routines. These are only suggestions; each family will create its own version of what works and what feels comfortable within its family routines.



Getting Up in the Morning

When a child goes to school, he or she will need to get up at the same time each school day. Preschool teachers should find out when school will start for the children in their program or class and let the parents know so that they can begin a morning routine several weeks or even months before the beginning of the school year. Children will need to be ready to walk out the door the same time every morning, whether a bus will pick them up or if they will be walking down the block with an older sister. Encourage the parents to start getting up early enough to be ready for that time. Remind parents to allow enough time in the morning routine for their children to build independence. There is no time to practice when everyone is running out the door.

Help parents look at their existing routine. What happens? The ideas used here are generic. There are things that most children will need to do, but each family also needs to adapt these suggestions to its individual situation and routines.

Wake up! This is not the favorite message for many of us. But it is the first opportunity in the day for a child to practice following directions in a timely manner. The ability to follow directions is an important skill children need in kindergarten. There are many opportunities they can practice throughout the day, but in the morning, things need to run quickly and smoothly, so it is important that children listen to what is being asked and follow through and do it.

Kindergarten also moves fast, just like many mornings at home. Suggest to parents that they give their children simple directions at first such as “Come to breakfast” or “Find your shoes.” As children get better at following simple directions that are logical parts of the routine, parents can give them multi-step directions such as “Go to the bathroom and wash your hands when you are finished.” The next step is directions that are novel (not said every day) and have many parts, such as “Find your backpack and put it by the front door with your raincoat.” Remind parents not to jump in with assistance until their children have attempted the task first and asked for help.



Within this small snapshot of the morning routine, parents will be helping their children learn to follow a routine, listen to and follow directions, complete a task that has been asked of them, ask for help when needed, and take care of personal needs such as toileting and washing hands. These are all skills they will need in kindergarten.

The tip sheets in the appendix take four family routines and discuss them in more detail. They suggest ways parents can foster the school readiness skills identified through the Early Childhood Center research within the following family routines:

- Waking up and getting ready in the morning
- Mealtime
- Community activities such as grocery shopping, riding on the bus or in the car, and going to the library
- Getting ready for bed.

Throughout each routine, the tip sheets emphasize the skills identified through our research. Highlighted skills are the ones we found to be necessary most frequently throughout the daily classroom routines and include:

- Following daily routines
- Following directions
- Asking for help when needed
- Listening for information
- Completing a task
- Following simple (classroom) rules
- Accepting guidance and limits
- Taking care of personal needs.

Getting children ready for kindergarten is a collaborative effort between preschool and/or child care programs and families. It is important for teachers to recognize the critical importance of the family in preparing their children for kindergarten. Although each family has its own routines, teachers can help families identify what they can do within them to pave the way for success in school and beyond.

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Helping Children Get Ready for Kindergarten Using Family Routines

Morning Routines

Children entering kindergarten are presented with many new and exciting opportunities but also with many new demands. Kindergartners spend most (82%) of their class time in structured learning activities where they are expected to sit with their classmates, listen to the teacher, follow instructions, and finish specific tasks.

Families also have routines at home. Each part of the day is a part of a larger routine, and each activity can be an opportunity to help your child learn skills that will help him or her prepare for a successful kindergarten entry.

When your child goes to school, he or she will need to get up at the same time each school day. Find out when your child will need to be ready to walk out the door, whether a bus will pick him up, or she will be walking down the block with her older sister. Start getting up early enough to be ready for that time — several weeks or even months before school starts.

Then look at your daily routine. What happens? There are activities that most children will need to do and that you can adapt these suggestions to your own family situation and routines. Remember to allow enough time in the morning routine for your child to build independence. There is no time to practice when you are running out the door.

Kindergarten Skills
Follows daily routines
Follows directions
Asks for help
Listens to gather information
Completes a simple task
Follows classroom rules
Accepts guidance and limits from familiar adults
Takes care of personal needs (e.g., toileting, blowing nose)



Wake up! This is not the favorite message for many of us. But it is the first time during the day when your child can practice following directions in a timely manner. The ability to follow directions is an important skill your child will need in kindergarten. You can practice it all day, but in the morning, there are many times you need to help your child listen to what you are asking, then follow through and do it. There is not a lot of time in the morning, so children need to listen to what you are saying and do it the first time. Kindergarten moves fast, just like your morning at home.

At first, give your child simple directions such as “Come to breakfast” or “Brush your teeth now.” As he or she gets better at following directions that are logical parts of the routine, you can give multi-step directions that are specific to the needs of the moment. “Find your backpack and put it by the front door with your blue raincoat” is an example of a direction that has many parts and that you probably will not say every day.

Following a routine is another important kindergarten skill. Your child is not going to be independent in completing a routine the first time. He or she will need help to remember the parts of the routine and to accomplish some of them. A morning routine may consist of helping your child get up with one request, and maybe one reminder, then come to breakfast when asked, get his or her teeth brushed when told it is time, get dressed, find a coat and backpack, and be ready when it is time to leave. All of these tasks provide opportunities to practice following directions.

In kindergarten, children must also persist in a task until it is finished. When you ask your child to perform more tasks (during breakfast, dressing, etc.) he or she needs to work at it, try new skills, and make a good effort to do it on his or her own. You will need to help with getting the breakfast items on the table, then expect your child to sit and eat independently. You may need to help select the right clothes and work zippers, buttons, or ties, but while practicing these tasks, your child will become more independent. Remember that in school, he or she will need to go to the bathroom independently, and that includes knowing what to do within that routine, including the elements of dressing.



Your child also needs to know when to ask for help. In kindergarten, he or she will be expected to ask adults for help. All through the day, allow time for your child to practice the skills you are asking him or her to do.

The many steps in the morning routine are like the many steps in kindergarten routines. Giving your child the opportunity to practice skills such as learning to listen and follow directions, independently complete parts of the morning routine, and ask for help when needed will pave the way for a successful kindergarten experience.

We know that families have a variety of routines. We hope that you can use these suggestions and ideas and adapt them to your particular bedtime routine. For more information about school readiness, please visit our website at <http://www.iidc.indiana.edu/ecc>



Helping Children Get Ready for Kindergarten Using Family Routines

Mealtime Routines

Children entering kindergarten are presented with many new and exciting opportunities but also with many new demands. Kindergartners spend most (82%) of their class time in structured learning activities where they are expected to sit with their classmates, listen to the teacher, follow instructions, and finish specific tasks.

Families also have routines at home. Each part of the day is a part of a larger routine, and each activity can be an opportunity to help your child learn skills that will help him or her prepare for a successful kindergarten entry.

Meal times are wonderful opportunities to help children learn some of the skills they will need in kindergarten. The dinner routine, which we discuss here, is just an example. You will need to look at your own routine and adapt the ideas to fit your family.

Ask your child to help set the table. You can start with simple directions such as “Get out the bowls” and move to “Get out the bowls and put them on the table.” Then move up to “Get out the bowls, the spoons, and the glasses and put them on the table.” Gradually increase the number of tasks you are asking your child to do.



You can also make your directions more complicated.

For example, you can say, “We need four plates tonight. Let’s use the paper plates in the cupboard by the stove.” This is much more complicated than just “Please get out the plates” and is the type of instruction that will help him or her listen for all the information

you are giving.

In kindergarten, children must follow directions to move from one activity to another and to know how to complete a project or assignment. They need to listen to the teacher, remember what to do, and work at a task until it is completed. You can practice all these skills by encouraging your child to set the table for dinner. Eventually you should be able to ask, “Would you please set the table?” and your child will perform the entire task independently. Kindergarten children must be able to work at an assignment until it is complete, to follow directions, and to participate in a classroom routine—that is, to perform a series of skills like setting the table.

Kindergarten Skills
Follows daily routines
Follows directions
Asks for help
Listens to gather information
Completes a simple task
Follows classroom rules
Accepts guidance and limits from familiar adults
Takes care of personal needs (e.g., toileting, blowing nose)

Many children who are old enough to attend kindergarten can help with some of the cooking tasks. Again, look at what your child can safely do, and build the number of requests you make. For example, making soup requires a large pan, a spoon to stir, and a can or two of soup. Start by asking for one item at a time, and then increase the number of directions you are asking your child to listen to and follow. If you are a baker, you can request a series of activities such as “Put this in here” to “Add the flour to the bowl and mix it with the big spoon.”

Kindergarten children are asked to spend time sitting in activities such as circle time and doing seat work at tables. Mealtime is one of the only family routines during which it is reasonable to expect your child to sit until the activity is finished. It doesn't matter if you eat at the kitchen table or the coffee table. Gradually increase the length of time your child is expected to sit with you while he or she finishes the meal.

At the end of the meal, you can ask your child to clear his or her place, put dishes and other items where they belong in the kitchen, and wash up. These directions may be easy to follow since they are a logical part of the routine. But there are many parts to the activity for a child to remember, and it is good practice in staying with a job until it is finished.

Your child also needs to know when to ask for help when needed. In kindergarten, children are expected to ask for adult assistance if they need it to do their work. All through the day, allow time for your child to practice the skills you are asking him or her to do.



The many steps in the mealtime routine are like the many steps in kindergarten routines. Giving your child the opportunity to practice skills such as learning to listen and follow directions, independently complete parts of his or her mealtime routine, and asking for help when needed will pave the way for a successful kindergarten experience.

We know that families have a variety of routines. We hope that you can use these suggestions and ideas and adapt them to your particular bedtime routine. For more information about school readiness, please visit our website at <http://www.iidc.indiana.edu/ecc>



Helping Children Get Ready for Kindergarten Using Family Routines

Community Routines

Children entering kindergarten are presented with many new and exciting opportunities but also with many new demands. Kindergartners spend most (82%) of their class time in structured learning activities where they are expected to sit with their classmates, listen to the teacher, follow instructions, and finish specific tasks.

Families also have routines at home. Each part of the day is a part of a larger routine, and each activity can be an opportunity to help your child learn skills that will help him or her prepare for a successful kindergarten entry.

Grocery shopping can be a chore when your children are with you. It can also be a lot of fun and a great time to practice some of the skills your child will be expected to use in kindergarten.



Make the list ahead of time. Ask your child to go and see how much cereal is left, then come back and tell you. As he or she learns to report on one item, gradually increase the number of items to remember to

two or three. This will help your child practice listening to you for important information, following your directions,

and following through on tasks.

You can do the same thing in the store. Ask your child to get five potatoes and put them in the cart while you are picking out the apples. He or she can get the tomato soup while you get the chicken noodle. Be sure to give tasks that keep your child in your line of sight.

Another community routine that will help your child develop skills is going to the public library. During instructional time in kindergarten, children sit and listen to the teacher. Sometimes the teacher asks questions about the stories or is teaching a lesson that contains information the children need to remember. Your child should be able to sit and listen to the teacher, gather information from what is being said, and take his or her turn to talk when called on.

Kindergarten Skills
Follows daily routines
Follows directions
Asks for help
Listens to gather information
Completes a simple task
Follows classroom rules
Accepts guidance and limits from familiar adults
Takes care of personal needs (e.g., toileting, blowing nose)

All this is part of following a routine in the classroom. Libraries and some bookstores have story times. This will give your child practice following the rules, listening for information, accepting limits set by the adult, and staying with a task (the story) until it is finished.



Riding on the bus or in the car provides many little routines within the big routine of taking a ride. Children need to gather the items they should take. Ask your child to find his or her backpack and coat, and make your child responsible for taking them when leaving the house. Once on the bus or in the car,



you can play a game to pass the time. “I Spy” games are popular among kindergarten children. This is a fun game that you can play while riding on the bus or in the car together. Find an object that won’t fly past too quickly and say “I spy something that tells us we need to stop.”. When your child finds it, it is his or her turn to find an object. This game provides an opportunity to practice listening for the information needed to find the object and then remembering it until the object is found. It involves remembering the rules of this game, a little routine you can start with each other within the big routine of riding on the bus.

Your child also needs to know when to ask for help. In kindergarten, he or she will be expected to ask for adult assistance if he or she is having trouble doing their work. Being in the community means there may be many things that are new and different. Your child may need more help than he or she does at home, so it is good to practice this skill while you are out. The many skills needed in the community are like the skills needed in kindergarten routines. Giving your child the opportunity to practice skills such as learning to listen and follow directions, independently complete parts of a routine, and ask for help when needed is paving the way for a successful kindergarten experience.

We know that families have a variety of routines. We hope that you can use these suggestions and ideas and adapt them to your particular bedtime routine. For more information about school readiness, please visit our website at <http://www.iidc.indiana.edu/ecc>



Helping Children Get Ready for Kindergarten Using Family Routines

Bedtime Routines

Children entering kindergarten are presented with many new and exciting opportunities but also with many new demands. Kindergartners spend most (82%) of their class time in structured learning activities where they are expected to sit with their classmates, listen to the teacher, follow instructions, and finish specific tasks.

Families also have routines at home. Each part of the day is a part of a larger routine, and each activity can be an opportunity to help your child learn skills that will help him or her prepare for a successful kindergarten entry.

It can be a struggle to get your child to bed at a reasonable hour in the summer when it is still light outside. About a month before school starts, you can begin to move bedtime to the time your child will need to get to bed to be well rested for school. Establishing a bedtime routine can help this transition.



Many families start the bedtime routine with with a bath. It is a way to clean up from summer play and to calm down from a higher level of activity. Ask your child to gather the items needed for his or her bath. Start with pajamas and then add to the list — towel, soap, and favorite toy — so that your child must listen carefully to you and follow your directions before getting into the tub. If your child can't find what's needed, remind him or her to ask for help. Don't jump in if you see your child is having trouble unless he or she is getting frustrated.

Then remind him or her to “Say ‘help me’ when you don't know what to do.”

There are many steps in a bath time routine. Help your child to learn the routine so that he or she can become as independent as possible, remembering that your pre-kindergarten-age child should be supervised in the tub. Instruct your child that, after Mom or Dad runs the water, get in and wash everything. Make sure all the soap is gone, then carefully get out and dry off. This sounds obvious, but in kindergarten your child will be expected to follow many routines as part of his classroom day, and it will help to begin with the expectation that he will complete one that is short and clear. Teaching routines at home will help your child as he or she learns to complete new routines in school.

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Follows daily routines
Follows directions
Asks for help
Listens to gather information
Completes a simple task
Follows classroom rules
Accepts guidance and limits from familiar adults
Takes care of personal needs (e.g., toileting, blowing nose)

Story time is a nice way to wrap up the bedtime routine. It is another way to wind down, calm down, and get ready to go to sleep. Not only does it serve these functions, but it is also a time your child could practice listening to a story for the ideas presented and then telling the story with you the following evening. Story time helps your child to attend, listen, and participate in a nightly routine until you are finished with the story or he or she falls asleep.



Some children need a “lights out” routine. It may help to structure the routine so that it is the same every night:

- Go potty one last time.
- Have one last drink of water.
- Turn on the night light.
- Turn out the big light on the way to the bed.
- Have one last hug and kiss.
- Say a final “night night,” and
- Close the door to just the right space for your

child’s comfort.

All these separate steps comprise one large bedtime routine. Your child will follow many separate steps to accomplish routines during his or her kindergarten day. By helping your child listen to you and follow directions, accept limits when it comes to lights out, and become independent in completing portions of this routine, you are paving the way to successful kindergarten entry.

We know that families have a variety of routines. We hope that you can use these suggestions and ideas and adapt them to your particular bedtime routine. For more information about school readiness, please visit our website at <http://www.iidc.indiana.edu/ecc>

