

## School readiness: Helping parents decide

A close look at your child – and the school – can lead to the right decision.

**My** oldest son couldn't write his name when he started school, but heck Michael is a long name. He now has two degrees. My third son is a Halloween baby, 31<sup>st</sup> October, and I was concerned he may need to be held back from starting school as he was also quite small. His kindy teacher smiled when I asked her advice, "I wouldn't hold him back as he is the social organiser for the whole kindy!" And she was so right.

### Is my child ready to start school?

No matter how much we want our children to be ready to start formal learning, some are not ready when our education system says it would be good. The range of school starting ages, even amongst Western countries, demonstrates the complexity of these issues. In Britain and the Netherlands, like Australia, the school starting age is five years; in Germany it is six years, and in Sweden, Norway and Finland, children often start school at seven years. In Steiner schools they may start at the same time but formalised learning happens much later.

Sometimes children are considered "not ready for school." Renwick's 1984 research suggests that boys are more likely to "not be ready for school" than girls. This study found that boys expressed themselves less clearly and had more difficulty writing their names, recognising numbers and letters and tying their

shoelaces. Similarly, de Lemos and Mellor found that it tends to be boys who are still having difficulties in adjustment at the end of their second year of school. As a consequence, delaying the entry of more immature boys has been recommended.

New Zealand, Australia and Canada have different approaches to understanding children's learning in the early years. Essentially, educators have been helping children with issues of delayed readiness for a long time, and they are all trained to do this. The first year of schooling must honour each child's unique needs and gifts so that they can grow to be ready to meet the demands of the more formal learning that happens in the year they turn 6.

The new Australian National curriculum

has proposed to bring more formalised learning to children the year they turn 5 – hoping all children will be writing sentences (even paragraphs), doing phonetics and more early grammar. This will have a disastrous effect on children with delayed readiness. This is an educationally *ridiculous* decision as formalised learning too soon can turn children away from learning for life. This can have life negating influences on children as many choose to believe they are dumb and stupid instead of delayed! Starting school before a child is ready can create stress and anxiety patterns that can also last for life. There is no race and every child is different – delayed readiness does not mean you have failed as a parent. Albert Einstein was a delayed developer who was not speaking until he was 5. Parents can



help by asking early year's educators – what areas do you think I could be strengthening before my child starts school? Parents can help strengthen so many life skills that build social and emotional competence before they start school by creating safe environments that encourage play in all its forms in as many different contexts as possible with as many different children as possible.

A gifted early year's teacher was telling me how parents often complain that she is not sending home reader books early in Year 1 (year children turn 6). She said they seem really anxious that there is something “wrong” with their child. When children do not know their sounds, they will not be able to start to read. There is a lobe in the brain that comes online sometime between 3 and 14, and this lobe enables the processing of sight and sound. If this is not switched on, a child will not be able to learn to read. Writing legibly needs other brain integration to occur, and no matter how much we want children reading and writing, it will be impossible for a child to do until he or she is ready.

My oldest brother had to repeat Year 1, and he went on to become an exceptional emergency doctor and many, many children with delayed readiness become clever and capable later in life. Relax, there is so much that needs to be learned in the first six years of life that we are unable to assess – and yet they are crucial to the healthy growth and development of the whole child. Early pressure and stress can impact children quite deeply and ironically impair their early learning journey.

Children who have English as a second language – as well as many indigenous and recent migrant children – can be at a disadvantage in terms of readiness on some levels and yet be advanced in terms of their social competence. The Canadian and Australian early years' indicator assessments are now able to identify community needs in terms of what children need to be ready to move into schooling as positively as possible. This means that communities will be able to address any perceived weaknesses by running additional programmes that build strengths. For example, if a community identifies that the children entering school have lower social competence than expected, the community could then fund additional play groups, group activities in local parks and run free parent seminars that help parents understand how to build social

skills. Children who start school with known friends are at an advantage as friendships smooth many of the early fears of starting in a new environment.

In Australia, early years educators look for the following attributes when considering readiness. This is not a prescriptive guide where you tick a box; they are a guide for exploring the many possibilities that influence a child's readiness for formalised learning that begins in the year a child turns 6.

### Physical Health and Wellbeing -

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especially fine motor skills - good health, well fed, well rested, sitting, listening skills, able to grip a pencil, turn pages in a book, build with blocks, able to toilet themselves, feed themselves, dress themselves, some degree of focus to task, blow nose, wipe bottom, wash hands

**Social Competence** - primary need is to be able to get along with other children, cope with stress of new situations and new learning tasks, have healthy assertiveness, ability to play solo and with other children, have pro-social behaviour

**Emotional Maturity** - some ability to self manage their emotions, be able to cope with minimal adult contact in large groups, develop friendships, able to separate from parents

**Language and Cognitive Skills** - basic counting, follow basic directions, basic thinking skills, able to maintain attention in a group setting

**Communication Skills and General Knowledge** - basic conversation skills, manners, ability to communicate needs, understanding of wider world

In New Zealand the Te Whariki's (NZ Early Year Childhood Education Curriculum)

broad principles are empowerment, holistic development, family and community relationships. These principles are then broken down further into strands of well being, belonging, contribution, communication and exploration. Both approaches are very much holistic and are not just focused on a readiness for formalised learning.

**Independence** - For children with special needs - can they have additional support?

### Another idea

Maybe the question should be “Is the school ready for your child?” rather than is your child ready for school.

There is a big difference in school cultures and with a positive, caring school culture, children's transitions can make a huge difference in helping children begin school. Some children with delayed readiness can blossom with an enthusiastic, caring early year's educator. Indeed the most significant other factor is the classroom teacher and her competence, enthusiasm and capacity to care for all the children in a safe environment. Happy, calm children always learn best – regardless of readiness.

Delaying school start time is sometimes not financially possible for many families. This creates an additional challenge for some schools who children with significant delays. It is helpful if the stigma for doing two preparatory years could disappear and especially for boys – let it be OK that they spend an extra year playing in the sandpit.

### Final tips for parents

- Build an openness for life-long learning from birth
- The more play outside with other children - and the more family experiences that build human interaction -- the better
- There is no hurry
- Talk with your early year's educator
- Many delayed starters become clever; children are ready to transition to school at different times
- Trust your own instincts – you know your child best. 