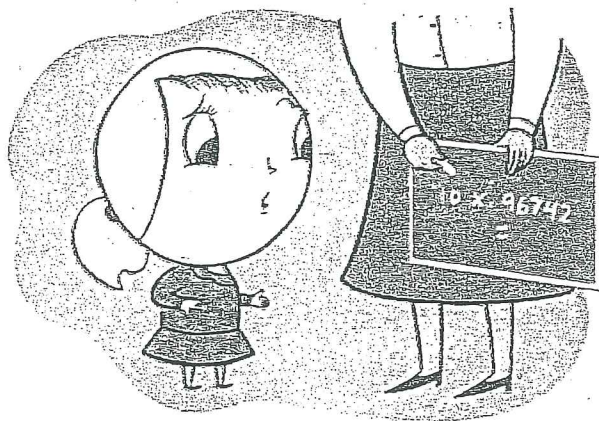


# What Your Children Should Know Before They Start Kindergarten

What your child needs to know before starting kindergarten

By Mary Teresa Birti



There are many things you can do to help your child get ready for school, but most don't involve anything particularly academic. That's the view of Julie Freedman Smith, a mom of two, whose youngest is starting kindergarten.

And that's why Freedman Smith, co-founder of Calgary-based Parenting Power, is not fretting over numbers, the alphabet or patterning concepts. Instead, she is helping Adam feel comfortable making this new educational step. "We're hanging out at the school, looking at the doors we'll be going in, playing on the playground and reading books about the first day of kindergarten."

These are all the right things as far as Dr. Janette Pelletier is concerned. "Parents are the ones who feel their kids need to know their numbers and letters. It's not what teachers expect," says the associate professor of human development and applied psychology at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) of the University of Toronto. "They like children to come to school with a sense of curiosity, an ability to pay attention and be engaged with the materials. It's more of a social, emotional preparedness. Children who are curious will learn quickly."

So what can you do to help get your child ready for school?

## 1 Encourage first steps

“The most important things you can give to your child before he starts school are a sense of wonder, self-reliance and self-confidence,” says Elaine MacDonald from Our Lady of Peace Catholic Elementary School in Oakville, Ont., who has spent 15 of 26 years teaching senior kindergarten. “Your child should be able to get dressed on his own, follow two or three simple directions, and love—and be able to listen to—stories. That’s the key. The rest will follow.”

## 2 Choose your words carefully

Vocabulary is a huge predictor to how well children do in school, says Dr. Pelletier. “Talk to your child, pay attention to words, use more enriched vocabulary and deconstruct language a bit. For example, play rhyming games, count out the sounds within words and play with sounds.”

## 3 Engage their natural curiosity

Know your child’s interests and choose books about those topics. This not only builds on her curiosity, but also engages her in reading. But don’t stop there. “Have children tell and retell stories to you,” says MacDonald. “Ask them questions about the story; this promotes oral language development and comprehension.”

## 4 Make the most of everyday moments

“We know that kids learn through experience, through play, and that everyday moments are phenomenal teaching opportunities,” says Dr. Chaya Kulkarni, vice-president of parent and professional education at Invest in Kids. For example, have them help you set the table, counting out the plates, cutlery, napkins—this will help them not just learn to count but to attach a specific value to a number. Play sorting games when you are doing the laundry. Look for patterns in clothing or anywhere around the house and have them think about what comes next in the pattern.

## 5 Create opportunities to be with other kids

Playing with other children on a regular basis will encourage them to learn to share. “Turn-taking, co-operative play and sharing are a big part of kindergarten,” says MacDonald.

Finally, don’t worry so much, says Dr. Kulkarni. “If you are spending time with your child, talking, reading, encouraging his curiosity, then you’ve already created an environment that promotes a love of learning.”

## What you need to know for kindergarten

To make the first day a little easier on you parents—yes, we know, it’s a big day for you, too—Julie Freedman Smith has a few ideas. “Make a plan for that first morning and go over it with your kids (where you will drop them off, that you’ll give a quick hug and leave them with their teacher).” This should help deter the long, tearful goodbye—both yours and his. Final thought: “Get the camera and everything else ready the night before, so the morning-of won’t be too crazy.”

*Mary Teresa Bitti is a freelance writer and mom of two who had to fight the urge to walk her son to his first day of high school. “It doesn’t get any easier”*