

My Child Isn't Ready for School. What Can I Do to Help?

Maybe you've looked at the Skills for Kindergarten Readiness list in *ABC Ready for School* and you feel your child is not yet ready for school, and may not be by the time you plan to drop him or her off at the classroom door. What can you do?

Many children may not be completely ready for school when the time comes, for many different reasons. For example, maybe your child hasn't learned or mastered foundational information like the alphabet, numbers, and colors. Or maybe your child is shy and has not spent much time in groups learning social skills that will be beneficial in school interactions. Children on the autism spectrum or with ADHD may have difficulty with social skills, focus, and following instructions. Other children may have physical limitations and walk with assistive devices or use wheelchairs. Some deal with anxiety, PTSD, behavioral problems, or learning difficulties.

But there's good news: You and other caring adults can help your child be as prepared as possible before he or she begins school, and you can continue to help after school starts. Kindergarten teachers expect children to arrive with a wide range of skills, so they work hard to help each child do well at his or her own pace.

Whatever needs your child has, here are ways you can help him or her succeed:

1. Consider the educational options that might be available, such as homeschooling, online school, public or charter schools, or private school. Find a fit that works well for the child and those who are helping him or her.
2. Think about when it would be best for your child to start school. You could delay beginning kindergarten and put your child in preschool for a year if he or she needs more time to be comfortable socially in school. It's also possible to repeat a kindergarten year if necessary before beginning first grade.
3. Work on specific skills at home. Take one skill at a time and work on it for a few minutes each day. For example, start with the letter A. Look at it in books. Find it on signs as you walk around a neighborhood. Trace it with a finger in sand, snow, mud, finger paints, or shaving cream. Talk about words that begin with A (referring, if you like, to *ABC Ready for School*, which talks about the word *ask*). Or, work on color identification by talking about the colors of things around you. Point them out to the child, working on one color each day. "This is blue. Can you see something else that is blue? Let's find the blue car in this box."



4. To build and strengthen social skills, place your child in group settings such as preschool, childcare, a class at a place of worship, or an activity in sports, music, art, or dance. Try to keep these visits short (1 or 2 hours) at first, and lengthen them when and if it seems appropriate.
5. Depending on what your child is finding challenging, talk to your pediatrician about one or more of the following:
 - a. An occupational therapy evaluation. Occupational therapists assess and work on gross motor skills, fine motor skills, focus, following instructions, sensory processing problems, social skills, and visual motor skills. They can also work with your child's teacher to make adaptations to the school environment that will make learning more successful.
 - b. A physical therapy evaluation. A physical therapist can assess mobility, balance, strength, and endurance, and can suggest adaptive equipment or other accommodations to help a child with physical challenges be safe and mobile at school.
 - c. A speech therapy evaluation. Speech therapists work with children who have difficulty communicating clearly and help prepare children to interact well with others.
 - d. A referral to a behavioral therapist. A behavioral therapist can assess and work on behavior issues, helping the child learn new ways to interact with others, deal with anger and frustration, and gain confidence by meeting goals.
6. Visit the school before your child begins. Talk to the teacher about any specific needs or challenges your child has (as well as his or her strengths) and how those can be addressed in the group setting. Ask about setting up a one-on-one aide for your child if needed and about modifying school participation times if appropriate.
7. Find a support group that provides help for the parents or caregivers of children with special needs or other challenges. You will learn new skills and get the supportive help you need for your journey through the education system.

Every child deserves the best opportunity to learn and grow to his or her full potential. You are your child's best advocate, so don't be afraid to seek help when you need it or to work with professionals who can encourage and support both you and your child.

