

Not just a good choice...

The Bess Choice! Parent Page

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NOTE:

The Parent Page is a new support feature from **The Bess Choice!** In addition to my current newsletter for teachers, and my consulting and lecture services, I will be writing The Parent Page six times a year. I believe supporting parents in their efforts to raise strong, capable and productive children is vital. As adults, we know that many hands make light work and the more the merrier, so it makes sense that if we support each other in our efforts to benefit our young children - then everyone will gain from the experience. Since February is the time when many parents meet with teachers to discuss their child's readiness for Kindergarten, that will be the first topic of The Parent Page. Happy Reading!

School Readiness Does Not Just Mean Academic Skill

When children enter the school system, parents often feel torn between starting them, or holding them back. Often they turn to teachers and caregivers for counsel on this issue. Teachers are in a good position to know how a child is doing in the context of the group and can be good sources of counsel.

Your child's teacher will be able to tell you how he or she is doing in the social and emotional aspects of being part of a larger group. Remember, what you see at home in the context of your family can be very different from what a teacher sees in the context of a group experience. Your child may be quiet or reserved at home but quite the opposite in "school" or vice versa. A child might be shy and intimidated in social gatherings or be verbal and commanding. He or she may have difficulty expressing his thoughts or feelings, or he or she might be quite able. He or she may be prone to emotional outbursts or periods of aimless wandering. Or, be readily engaged in the learning process and frequently initiate peer interactions and new activities.

In addition, the teacher will be able to tell you if they can sit for long group gatherings, can listen to direction and follow through with them, can focus on an activity for a good length of time and can listen to others in the group (both adult and child) and be engaged. Also the teacher can give you insight into the child's ability to socially engage with peers and express his/her needs, wishes and feelings to them. All of these things will indicate readiness to make a big transition. When children are not socially ready to

make the change, they can have difficulty adjusting to the new teacher, environment, routine or peer group.

It is important to always look at more than just academic skill when discussing school readiness. The WHOLE child will be attending the school, so the WHOLE child should be considered when making the decision- this includes the child's physical size and motor functionality, his/her social skills and comfort in large groups and with new adults, his/her emotional maturity and ability to express him/herself, his/her self-awareness and ability to express thoughts, feelings and ideas, and overall his/her general personal development and personality style. These areas of development should be assessed in advance of school entry, not just writing ability, rote training and memory. Factors such as creativity, musicality and physical agility also should be considered as well as social adeptness and awareness.

Although we have placed our children in a preschool program, the onus of responsibility for teaching and creating new and stimulating learning opportunities should not just rest with the teachers. Parents are a child's first teacher and should be involved in a child's learning, exploring and discovering throughout his or her life. They should take an active role in the learning experiences and enjoy the whole process with their child.

So what does that mean? Parents should regularly talk with their children and listen to what they know or think. Ask your child lots of open-ended questions, (e.g., who did you play with today?, what was your favorite activity?, can you tell me about the story you heard at circle time?) not just yes/no questions. Speak to your child in full and complete sentences and help them learn to do the same. Be sure to include them in family discussions and conversations. Use adult words so they can learn and understand larger and more precise ways of expressing themselves (e.g., frustrated versus mad).

Parents should help their children grow their vocabulary by reading with them. Whenever you can explain what is happening in a story and relate it to a child's own experience. Or ask a child to tell you what he or she thinks will happen in a story based on looking at the pictures or illustrations before reading it. Point out rhyming words or alliterations (repetition of the same sound – "Betsy, the big brown bear"). Read books and newspapers, be a good role model in the home.

They should take advantage of simple moments to broaden a child's understanding of a **topic** (e.g., today it is going to be cold and windy), a **concept** (e.g. are going 'under' the bridge and the cars on top are going 'over' us), or a **skill** (make two bunny ears when tying your shoe.) They should become aware of the environment and point out things to their child that supplement what they are learning elsewhere (e.g., a yield sign is a triangle).

Enjoy "family field trips." Go places where new opportunities exist for your child, such as the aquarium, the zoo or even Rocky Hill State Park to see the dinosaur foot prints. Visit museums that are fun for children like Stepping Stones or the Garbage Museum. Role model the process of asking questions while there, and encourage the same from your child. Don't be stagnant in your own learning.

Invite friends from school over to your home so your child is used to new children and learns to share and better interact with them. Allow them to play on their own, but also offer the chance to do something more structured like make cookies or do a project. The longer a child is able to hold interest in a process or maintain focus in an activity, the better.

Do You Think My Child Is Ready for Kindergarten?

Parents are often anxious about their child's readiness to enter public school. Children feel anxiety too, and it is helpful to know that they take their cues from **you**, the parent. The best way to combat anxiety is to 1) have realistic expectations and 2) learn and impart useful information that will ease the transition.

Become familiar yourself with your child's new school yourself, before s/he goes there. Learn where the bathroom is and where the water fountains are, check out the playground ... then take them on a tour. Show them that there are telephones and tell them that the people in the office are there to help them if they need it. If you can, introduce him or her to the nurse, and to the teacher in advance of the first day. Find out what the general classroom schedule will be for Kindergarten so you can talk about their new school in the comfort and familiarity of your home. Open and honest communication will greatly facilitate the change and help your child successfully transition.

However, don't overload them with information or hype the experience too much. Your child will ask you questions and your job is to answer them honestly. If you hype the experience too much, they will likely become more anxious - that applies to the school bus, Kindergarten and the overall "big school" experience. The truth is ... every child likes the idea of the big yellow school bus in the abstract, but often is scared to actually be on it the first time. Talking about these things a lot in advance might yield a contrary outcome.

If you are unsure about your child's readiness for public or private/parochial school Kindergarten, review these points and realize that if they are able to do most of these things, they will do fine. If they are not proficient at some of these skills, then work on them with your child, without pressure. Since your child has been in a preschool program, they have had a great deal of practice in these areas already.

Personal and self-help skills

- Your child should **know his/her full name, and if possible your family's address and phone number**. They don't need to write this, they just should know it.
- Your child will **need to have the ability to focus on a task or activity for 10 minutes or more**. They will need to be able to listen to a story, focus on a group lesson, start and complete new projects.
- Your child will **need to be able to work individually, in small groups and in a large group setting**. They need to have comfort in each of these contexts.
- Your child will **need to know basic hygiene skills** (e.g., using the bathroom, washing hands, using tissues, etc.)
- Your child will **need to know how to put on his or her own coat, pull up pants/tights and put on shoes/socks**. Tying shoes is not mandatory, but

- those who know how to are often sought out by peers and can have a special role in class.
- Your child will **need to be able to make transitions between settings and between activities**. Help your child learn to move between activities and not become upset. Some children have an innate ability here, others need to learn this skill and others may always have trouble in transition. Perfection is not necessary, only the willingness to try.

Social skills/capabilities and Language ability

- Your child will need to be able to **speak with adults and children**. They should be able to ask for help and express their needs. (e.g., I need to use the bathroom, can I wash my hands?, my tummy hurts, can I have the blue paint?, etc.)
- Your child will need to be able to **listen to and follow directions**. (e.g., Please go and get your coat from the cubby, wash your hands, go get a book and look at it quietly, come to the caret for story time, etc.)
- Your child will need to **be able to relate to his or her peers**, (e.g., be able to listen to others; sit in a group and keep body parts (hands, feet) to themselves; share space, time and materials, resolve conflict, and show empathy and respect).

Cognitive skills/capabilities

- Your child should have a basic **working knowledge of letters and number**, that is recognize their name and identify most letters and numbers, but they are not expected to be proficient.
- Your child should **be able to understand sequence** and have a general idea of how a daily routine unfolds.
- Your child should **be able to ask and answer questions when spoken to and express his or her ideas**, with time and practice.

What you can do with your child in advance of the transition

- If you can, tour the classroom area and office. Show him/her there are bathrooms, cubbies and phones. Tour the school library and tell your child he or she will be able to look at and even borrow the books!
- Talk to your child about the things they will do in Kindergarten and help him/her see they do much of it already at home or in the current preschool.
- Read to your child and help him/her establish a love of reading and a love for learning.
- Go on family fieldtrips and learn about different people, places, and things. Visit zoos, museums, aquariums, and let them experience the arts and sciences first-hand. Enjoy yourself while there so you model curiosity and love of learning and discovery.
- Be consistent in your approach to discipline and rule following. Establish rules, outcomes and consequences so he or she can understand the process in advance of school entry.

What can YOU do make the experience easier?

- Stay calm and control your own emotions. Prepare yourself for the transition, because it is a big milestone for both of you!

- Don't overdo it! Don't over talk it... don't over think it. Keep the talk and enthusiasm in perspective. If you make it too big, your child will become more anxious.
- Enjoy your child and be prepared to marvel at his/her growth. They aren't just getting older, they are getting better! (and so are you!)

Once in the thick of Kindergarten (and the subsequent school years)

- Get to know the classroom routine and support the process.
- Volunteer to assist the teacher either on a regular basis or on occasion.
- Attend field trips.
- Establish a good rapport with the teacher and become involved in your child's school life.
- Join the PTA or PTO and take an active role in your child's education.

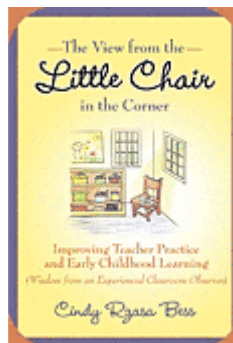
Of course, all school systems are different, so find out exactly what is required in your community's Kindergarten program, by calling your child's future school or attending an informational meeting.

Okay... Now take a deep breath, smile a real smile and believe that all will be well (because it will be).

Has your child's teachers read any good books lately?

I have one for you ... literally. I would like to announce the publication of my first book for early childhood educators, entitled,

The View from the Little Chair in the Corner: Improving Teacher Practice and Early Childhood Learning



The View from the Little Chair in the Corner synthesizes my educational and professional experience (as a preschool teacher, director and ECERS-R rater) over the past ten years into an easily readable text. The intent is to combine theoretical and practical information to create a rationale for best practice. Ultimately, the goal is to provide a path for understanding the role of the ECE professional in the classroom and in the life of each child they serve.

By utilizing my experience as an observational rater, a Developmental Psychologist and former ECE teacher, I propose, describe and explain the reasoning that exists behind the best (worst and average) practice I observed. By using specific situations to highlight the varied points, I provide a rationale for why we do what we do.

Published through Teachers College Press, Columbia University, New York in November 2009, **The View from the Little Chair in the Corner** is available online through tcpress.com, BarnesandNoble.com and Amazon.com.

Cindy Rzasa Bess, Ph.D. owner and sole operator of **The Bess Choice!**, is a Developmental Psychologist and a recognized professional speaker, consultant and educator in the Tri-state area. Cindy has a repertoire of over seventy workshops developed to support, enlighten and educate early childhood professionals, teachers and caregivers. In addition, she has over two dozen workshops that support parents in their efforts to raise bright, healthy, caring and responsible children and create positive, responsive and productive family systems. Contact her for her brochures, it only takes a moment.

The Bess Choice! provides educational information in the areas of child development, early childhood education, interpersonal relationships and successful parenting practices to teachers, parents and all individuals who come in contact with young children. By offering nurturing, warm, supportive learning and life opportunities to young children, we ultimately build, strengthen, and enhance their social and emotional development, language ability, cognitive skills and personal growth.

A Point Worth Pondering...

If you raise your children to feel that they can accomplish any goal or task they decide upon, you will have succeeded as a parent and you will have given your children the greatest of all blessings.

Brian Tracy