

When should we consider

Early Entry?

By Mimi Wellisch

Over the years there has been considerable debate about what constitutes ‘school readiness’, and, as is the case in most debates, there are a number of answers. This paper will attempt to synthesise current research as well as address the issue of when parents should consider early entry for potentially gifted preschoolers.

Starting school is a major milestone for both child and parents. For parents it means compulsory education, the handing over of their child to the wider community – in this case the school - for the next 12 years. Many families feel a sense of vulnerability when faced with this milestone. Questions invariably arise: ‘Will my child cope, have we done a good job in socialising our child, does my child have the skills needed, has my child the necessary knowledge to start school?’

Overall, ‘school readiness’ depends on a number of issues, and at least one of these - the age of the child - has little to do with actual readiness or abilities.

Age

The main criterion over time has been the age of the child. Some states offer school entry as early as 4 years and 7 months, while here in NSW 4 years and 9 months is the earliest age of entry. There is an exception to this, namely when a child is gifted, and in this case early entry to school can be requested. In some countries, children start school much later. In Germany intake time is at 6 years of age, and in Sweden, Norway and Finland children start as late as 7 years of age. So as can be seen, the age criterion has little to do with the child’s readiness or abilities.

An Early Entry Anecdote

Emma*, a gifted child, was 4 years 5 months when she started Kindergarten. She is tall for her age, so she did not appear different from the other children in her class.

Negative experiences:

Tiredness-induced tantrums at home in the evening and at the end of the week.

Positive experiences:

Seeing Emma happy and thriving at school, motivated by her peers. She is aiming to be allowed to use the ‘extension’ books collection.

**Real names have not been used*

So what factors make up school readiness?

In order to weigh up whether a child is ready for school, you have to consider the requirements of the stakeholders: the child, the parents, the teachers and the system.

THE CHILD

Attachment

Research on attachment has shown that by the time children are 4 years of age, they are generally ready and eager to leave their mums and dads and venture out on their own into a secure environment to interact with other children and responsive adults. By 4, most children are only mildly upset at the point of separation, can wait securely until their parents come to collect them and initiate relationships and respond increasingly to others. It has been found that 4 year olds - especially boys - are less likely to want to be in close proximity to their mothers when they return to pick them up from preschool.

Cognitive Skills, Language, General Knowledge and Skills

It has been found that intellectually inquisitive children who are able to use language to communicate adapt more quickly to school (DoCS, 2003). Additionally, most investigators have found ability to communicate **effectively** with both teachers and peers as important for school readiness (for instance, using same words to refer to concepts and ideas as others).

Social Competence

There is evidence that children need to be at least minimally socially competent in order to cope at school. It has been found that children who are generally disliked are at serious risk, especially where the dislike stems from their aggressive and disruptive behaviour. It is worthwhile to note here that one in six children identified as aggressive at the start of school have delinquent behaviours at by the age of 14.

Social competence in a child is shown by

- a generally positive mood
- fairly independent of adults
- willingness to attend child care/preschool
- coping with rebuffs
- having capacity for empathy
- having one or two positive friendships
- having sense of humour
- not apparently lonely
- positive and successful approach to others
- ability to give clear reasons for actions
- appropriately self-assertive
- not easily intimidated by bullies
- appropriate expressions of frustration and anger
- entering discussions

- taking turns
- showing interest in others
- negotiating compromises
- not draw attention to themselves inappropriately
- accepting and interact with others from other ethnic groups
- accepted by others
- sometimes invited by others
- named by others as a friend

THE PARENTS

Parents put equal importance on *skills* (shoe laces, lunch boxes) and *knowledge* (ability to count, write), whereas teachers placed more importance on *skills*. Despite teachers' emphasis on skills as more important, findings indicate that children are most likely to be held back by parents if they lack knowledge (academic skills).

THE TEACHERS

Research indicates that teacher beliefs about school readiness include the

- ability of children to understand and follow instruction
- communicate needs and thoughts
- to play cooperatively
- to be physically well
- to listen
- to attend to and finish task
- to look after belongings and
- to hold a pencil correctly.

Research has also found that 75% of teachers indicated motor coordination and health as essential for school readiness. Additionally, researchers found that teachers have negative attitudes towards children who are easily distracted or demanding on entering school.

A Very Young (Not Early) Entry

Jack* was very demanding, wanting social contact and the stimulation of extra learning his mum did not feel she could provide at home. It was decided that Jack should start school, which he did at 4 years and 10 months. He coped well with the work but was bullied from the beginning, and this affected him badly because of his sensitive nature. He always hated being the youngest kid in the class – there are children in his class who have repeated and are two years older than Jack. Jack is now in year 3, and a few other children his age have joined the class. He is enjoying school more this year and the

bullying diminished with the advent of a new principal, who deals with this more effectively.

**Real names have not been used*

Exceptional Children

Children with disabilities and **children who are gifted** may not show many of the readiness signs discussed above, but may nevertheless be ready for school. For instance, a child with a physical disability may still be very able in other ways, including academically. Children with certain disabilities (e.g. autism) are generally included in school programmes at entry age, and in some areas there are preparatory classes for children with disabilities to help familiarise them with school routines and expectations.

A child who is gifted may be socially and emotionally different. This difference could be perceived as immaturity, but is often a sign that the child does not fit in with his or her chronologically aged peers, whereas they may get on perfectly well with adults and older children. Such a child may never fit in with his or her chronologically aged peers during the school years. Early entry, (within six months of the approved entry age) rather than delaying schooling may therefore be the answer here, especially if the child communicates effectively, is socially competent and has mastered a majority of the skills mentioned previously. There is one exception to these skills: according to research boys are generally less able than girls in small motor areas (writing, tying shoe laces...). However, this should not deter a parent of a boy to hold him back, as he may continue to have problems later on: Research findings indicate that even at the end of the second year of school. Delaying school may therefore not provide any advantages, whilst robbing the bored preschooler of stimulating opportunities.

THE SYSTEM

Parents of young gifted preschoolers should shop around, visiting several schools. Arrange meetings with principals and ask about the school's policy on gifted children, early entry and past experiences involving early entry. Interested principals will show interest in the child and suggest testing by either a school counsellor or a registered psychologist in preparation for possible early entry.

A final word on readiness:

Even if children do not seem ready for school, there is a possibility that attending school will actually mature them. Most parents, however, want the transition to school to be smooth and easy. In this case, delaying school for one year would be an option. This option, however will only be available once, because whatever their level of readiness, children in NSW must be enrolled at a school by the time they turn 6 years of age.

References

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