

Readiness And Kindergarten

by Mrs. Mary Beth Lubbers

Kindergarten. Such a big word for such little people. Kindergarten. What is it? When I think of kindergarten, I think of a puzzle of 8, or 10, or 12 large pieces. No piece is alike; yet every piece is needed to make up that complete, colorful picture called kindergarten.

In kindergarten, variation is the norm. Some children enter it dangling a book from one hand, eager to begin to read. Other children are primarily fascinated with the new and different toys throughout the room. Still others would just as soon hide behind the largest plant in the room or crawl under the table. Some children bombard you with questions. Some supply you with all the answers. Many are wide-eyed and silent. There is simply no common ability or readiness level in kindergarten. Maybe there never will be in their school life. The differences are very noticeable in kindergarten. Some kindergarteners have a very good sense of humor. I think of the little boy who filled me in on a small point of etiquette. After I had told the story of Puss in Boots in which a crafty cat has his arch rival, an ogre, change himself into a mouse and then promptly pounces on him and devours him, this little lad informed me that his Grandpa had told him that a cat never eats the mouse's tail—he uses it for a toothpick. He told me this with a twinkle in his eye as if we shared some private understanding. Other children have not yet achieved this level of humor.

Some children are very factual and realistic. Others flit in and out of an imaginative, fantasy world. One can observe this not only as they speak and as they listen to stories, but also (and most easily) as they play. Some children are remarkably logical.

We have a picture in our G letterbook. It shows a little boy catching a fish. The fish has a nice kindergarten smile on his fishy face. "Teacher, why does the fish have a smile on his face when he's got this sharp hook in his mouth?"

Over the past year several parents have put the question to me, what really happens in kindergarten? And the corollary, how do I know if my child is ready for kindergarten? Then they hit me with the clincher—he knows his ABC's. Ah! If only that were *the* readiness criterion. How nicely everything would fall into place.

Preparing a child for kindergarten—what, in fact, must happen? First of all, if you suspect problems in your pre-schooler, zero in on them. Don't wait until he gets to kindergarten. If your child doesn't speak clearly, if he has trouble pronouncing a certain sound or blend of these sounds, work on these problems early. Baby talk may be cute in a toddler, acceptable in a kindergartener; it is not cute or acceptable in a third and fourth grader. Many speech "problems" are so only because they were not corrected at an early age. If your child is able to make the correct sounds, then you know that you can require correct sounds from him.

Read to your child—from many sources and frequently! I am backed up here by nearly every educator and written article in the country. Children who have been read to from an early age generally comprehend instructions, directions, stories much more easily than those who have had little or no reading activities at home.

In addition to broadening his experiences and enriching his vocabulary (two immeasurable readiness exercises), you increase his attention span. If a child cannot sit for the duration of an interesting story, it is doubtful that his attention span will suddenly be suitable for kindergarten.

Another invaluable kindergarten readiness skill is teaching your child to listen to and follow directions. Can he follow instructions concerning directions of on, under, over, next to, beneath, between, across from, etc.? Can he follow two instructions and then three, stated only once?

Count with your preschooler. Give him 3 M and M's and give yourself 10. Who has more? Who has fewer? Which would he rather have? How many people are in our family? How many girls? How many boys? Which are more? Doing this regularly is not only fun for the child, but develops in him an awareness of the world of numbers. It gives him a degree of confidence about numbers, and certainly increases number dexterity.

Much of the instruction which you can give your child is of an informal nature, and this is good. You don't have to make him sit down at the table at such and such time for ½ hour. Rather, you're teaching all the time. When a flag is flying, can he figure out which way the wind is blowing, and the next day when the flag is flying exactly the opposite direction, can he see this? If he doesn't develop this sense of orientation—that there are different directions from one center—he may have trouble distinguishing a "b" from a "d" and a "p" from a "q". This is understandable, too; all of these letters involve a basic circle and stick combination. Only their directionality makes them the distinctive letters they are.

When a bird lands in your yard or feeder, first, of course, teach him bird, but don't hesitate to teach him the finer distinctions of cardinal, blue jay, robin, and sparrow. When you're chafing at that interminable wait at the railroad tracks, yes, tell him choo-choo and then train, but don't pass by the opportunity to teach him engine, caboose, box cars, car carriers, and coal hoppers.

As your child walks on the rim of the sandbox or on the split-rail fence, he's learning a precise, however perilous, sense of balance—invaluable for later fine motor skills and coordination activities. Encourage these types of physical skills. Educators tell us that the mastery of gross motor skills is requisite for learning to read. And isn't it marvelous to observe that God had so ordered all of the development of our life that it's fairly normal that a child wants to do this? A child from the ages of 1-5 wants to jump, hop, skip, climb, and balance; it's part of his very nature. And even though he doesn't realize it, these activities form a sturdy basis for his future school life. "When I was a child..."

So, when a parent tells me, "Angie knows her ABC's..." (even though I-M-N-O-P sounds like one letter), this only indicates one small part of the readiness process. Reciting the ABC's is not *the* kindergarten readiness standard. I have observed kindergarten students who have come to school knowing few or no alphabet letters, but are so ready to learn that when they are taught these letters and sounds, they soak them up like the proverbial sponge. Every mental and physical muscle has been flexed to prime learning condition. Only then does the actual learning of the letters and sounds become a pleasant and rewarding experience.

These are only a few examples of readiness activities. I'm

confident that you as parents could furnish me with a host of other worthy examples. Who, for instance, hasn't observed the thought processes involved as he watches a young child pick up a puzzle piece and attempt to put it in the right spot? What skills of visual discrimination and manual dexterity are involved in even the simplest jigsaw puzzle! Matching shapes by size, color, position, and outline and then fitting those pieces together is an excellent readiness skill.

I guess what I'm saying is this, the growth of the child is not incidental. Each child is a mini green house—and he needs nurturing. Encourage an awareness of every possible fact of God's world, and stimulate his own sensations, emotions, thought, and skills concerning them. You as parents, and I as teacher, must maximize the potential which is his, however latent. So much of kindergarten readiness consists of a parent talking with his child, telling him about God and His creation and his proper place in it.

I feel that my main task as kindergarten teacher is preparing a child to read. In the past, skills of reading and writing have generally been assigned to the first grade curriculum. Today, however, children entering kindergarten have broader exposure and preparation and are ready and able to absorb more abstract formalized instruction. To achieve this end, I must assess and improve the quality of a child's attention span, directionality, eye-hand coordination, concepts of color and size, listening skills, manual dexterity, and his physical, emotional, social, and spiritual maturity.

To enter first grade, a child must know how each letter is formed, the one sound it usually represents, and how it blends with other letters to form written words which relate to the spoken language. This is arduous work for little hands which easily tire holding a pencil for any length of time, so we learn these letters in subtler ways, too. This is difficult work for little minds which easily wander from the sound that G or D makes, so we sometimes teach by guile. It's hard work to put 3 sounds together like d-o-g, but it's fun to hook up cars to make a train; so sometimes our word becomes a little train.

But when all's said and done, I want a child to be able to look back on his earliest school days and say, "I liked kindergarten, I never wanted to miss one single day. My teacher, although firm, was fair and kind. I knew she loved me. I know she cared about me. No, I wasn't a straight A student (I remember how I couldn't say "four" and the trouble I had with

the sound of G), but I always felt an important part of my class. I want a child to be able to sense his own worth in the classroom no matter what his ability level or mental acuity. Only then will kindergarten succeed in its purpose.

In closing let me say, most of the kindergarten teachers I have spoken with have discovered that although some youngsters come to school with less development than we have assumed, many—if not most—come to kindergarten eager and capable for much more than has been traditionally offered them.

Parents, keep up the good work!

Once again, then, kindergarten—what is it? It is the training ground for the arena of learning. How important is it? It is as important as learning the parries and thrusts of skillful swordplay before the fencing tournament.

“In Christian education also, very much depends upon the heart of the educator. It is not enough for the educator to be ‘for the truth.’ He must also be ‘behind the truth.’ Soundness in doctrine is insufficient, for he must be pure in heart, also in his love to his brother and sister. His ability to criticize others is not enough, if he is not able to be critical of himself, first of all. The Christian educator must realize that in his educational task, too, the paradoxically Christian statement holds: ‘When I am weak, then I am strong.’ ”

Basic Concepts in Christian Pedagogy
by Jan Waterink

“... Christian education is possible only where it is supported by daily prayer. And if this paradoxical statement leads us to ask: ‘Lord, who is equal to these things?’ then we hear another word which explains the secret of the Christian educator’s life: ‘I can do all things through Him that strengtheneth me.’ ”

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