Is My Child Ready for Preschool?
Experts agree that preschool helps kids socialize, begin to share, and interact with other children and adults.

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Your three-year-old is out of diapers and seems to enjoy playing with peers. But is he or she ready to start preschool? Are you ready? And just what are the benefits of preschool? For most kids, it's an experience that should not be missed, experts say.

"I believe that all three- or four-year-olds should have the opportunity and advantages of attending preschool," says Anna Jane Hays, a child development expert in Santa Fe and author of several books, including Ready, Set, Preschool! and Kindergarten Countdown. "It's just too valuable of a beginning, now that we know children are capable of learning at such an early age. The consensus is 'the sooner, the better' in regard to a structured opportunity for learning."

**The Benefits of Preschool**

A landmark study of the benefits of preschool by the Carnegie Foundation concluded that children who began education in early childhood got more out of school in every grade -- and were more likely to graduate from high school and attend college. The children who participated in early education programs were also healthier and wealthier than their peers who did not.

"I really can't think of any disadvantages, and I can't express strongly enough how I think that the foundation that preschool provides is invaluable," Hays says.

Kindergarten teachers will tell you straight out, Hays says, that there are numerous benefits of preschool. The bottom line is that kids who attend preschool are better prepared to succeed. "Children who went to preschool already knew how to get along with others, and came prepared with more language skills and a broader knowledge base," Hays says.

The value of preschool is not strictly academic, says psychoanalyst Gail Saltz, MD, an associate professor of psychiatry at the New York-Presbyterian Hospital/Weill Cornell School of Medicine in New York City. "Preschool is really for socialization, to introduce the idea that learning can be fun, and to teach kids how to share, compromise, and get along as a group," she says. But parents shouldn't choose to send their child to preschool thinking it will push them along, Saltz says. "A lot of people send their children to preschool because they think that, academically, it means their kid will get ahead. But there is no correlation between how early a child learns to read and how good a reader they are," she says.

Psychoanalyst Leon Hoffman, MD, agrees. "Some of the most important benefits of preschool are helping kids to socialize and begin to share and interact with other children and adults," says Hoffman, the executive director of the Bernard L. Pacella, MD, Parent Child Center in New York. "Certainly by age three most kids are in a place where they can start spending more and more time with groups of peers, and if they have the ability to spend more time away from their parents, preschool can be beneficial."

Socialization is the best indicator of whether a child is ready for preschool, Hoffman tells WebMD. "If he or she really loves to be with other kids, has the capacity to socialize and separate from Mom, your child may well be ready."
The Pitfalls of Preschool

Readiness is key because starting preschool too soon can be stressful for a child. "If your child feels anxious about being away from you, the benefit is not going to outweigh any acute symptoms," says Hoffman. "If your child is uncomfortable separating from you at age two or three, you should not force the child to attend preschool."

Saltz agrees. "If your child is not ready for separation, preschool will backfire," she says. "As parents, you know when your child has a lot of anxiety because you can't leave, and when you do, your child gets distressed and stays distressed." In this case, Saltz says, "Preschool is going to be very stressful."

Another telltale sign that your child isn't ready is if he or she isn't toilet-trained, Saltz says. "In my opinion, it creates anxiety for kids, because other kids aren't in diapers -- and teachers don't want to change diapers."

Children who are uncomfortable with high levels of stimulation may also be a little put-off by preschool, Saltz says. "If you have an easily overwhelmed kid who is uncomfortable with music, laughing, and transitioning from one thing to the next, you just might want to put them in some classes -- and not have it be an all-day experience like preschool."

If your child isn't ready for preschool as soon as you'd like, don't let it worry you, Saltz says. "It's not so crucial. It can be a nice thing and a fun thing, but it's not like if a kid doesn't go to preschool, he or she won't be able to socialize, read, or write."

Getting Prepped for Preschool

When you think it's time for your child to try preschool, experts recommend doing plenty of research to find the best atmosphere to provide the benefits. "Talk to the director and the teachers, and see what the preschool's goals are for children that age," says Hays. "Look at the classroom and facilities, and briefly observe how comfortable the children seem to be."

Get your child ready for preschool by building anticipation instead of anxiety, Hays says. "Introduce them to the idea of preschool because when kids know what to expect, they feel more secure," she says.

Specifically, in the year leading up to preschool, visit the classroom. "It's best if the child can see the classroom, meet the teacher -- and if you can, seek out children who will be in the classroom," she says.

"I advise parents to talk to their kids about what will happen in preschool, what they will do, how much fun it will be, and how many friends they will make," she says. "It's about getting your child to have a positive attitude about preschool."

Another tip: "Don't just get everything ready yourself," Hays says. "Let your child pick and pack their backpack and choose a special snack. Invite the child to help because this helps build positive anticipation and makes preschool more of an adventure and something to look forward to."

You can help them get ready to learn too. "Point out letters and numbers on streets and buildings, and shapes and colors in architecture. The more you talk to your child and the more you read to your child, the more vocabulary they are building," says Hays.

Helping your child become self-sufficient is another important step. "Encourage this by allowing your child to brush their hair, put on their own pants, button some buttons and zip some zippers," Hays suggests. "It's good for a child to have that sense of accomplishment, and this will translate into other areas, including using the potty. Self-confidence is the most important thing a kid can go to preschool with. And when they know how to do things by themselves, they will feel accomplished and capable and comfortable going into this big new world."

Saltz agrees. "It is beneficial if can they can manage themselves in terms of eating, toileting, and activities of daily living," she says. "Some parents, in a totally well-meaning way, may keep doing everything for the child. Then they send them to school where it's embarrassing because every other kid is zipping, buttoning, and snapping -- while your kid is just waiting for the teacher."
Easing Separation Anxiety

On that first day, parents can -- and should -- try to help curb separation anxiety even before it starts, so they can maximize the benefits of preschool for their children.

"Help your child know how to say goodbye," Hays says. "This is easier to do when your child understands that there will be a hello -- and when that will be. Talk about it in advance, and on the way to school, and just as you are about to make a departure."

Then, before you leave, make sure your child is engaged in something or caught up in something in the classroom, Hays says. Say a firm goodbye and leave quickly. Her cardinal rule for anxious parents: "Don't linger."