

WHAT Is School Readiness

by Noelle Suntheimer, MSEd

THE CAPACITY to form positive relationships is an essential aspect of healthy child development. Children's relationships and daily interactions with their parents contribute to developing a set of skills that help children succeed in the classroom once they start kindergarten. Collectively, these skills are referred to as "school readiness." They generally include children's language and literacy abilities, social and emotional competencies, and cognitive skills. These key ingredients begin to develop in the earliest years of life and lay the foundation at the start of kindergarten for later academic success.

Recently, executive functioning skills (EFs) have received increased attention as being important for school readiness. They are a set of cognitive processes related to children's ability to manage their attention, behavior, and emotions. Together, these skills allow children to ignore distractions, control impulsive behaviors, shift their attention between tasks, and respond to competing demands. EFs are special because they can be improved with strategic efforts. And they are a skillset that can help children overcome challenges and stressors, better equipping them to thrive in school both academically and socially. Teachers and parents regularly witness children developing and refining their EFs and help children to fine-tune these important skills in the moment.

Starting school at a disadvantage: risks affect readiness

Not all children enter kindergarten with the same level of skill and readiness. Children who are at risk to struggle in school are more likely to live in families that have less time and access to resources. These include families living in poverty or in single parent households. Indeed, while each individual factor can hinder children's development, the more risks children are exposed to (such as living in a single-parent household and in poverty), the less likely they are to be adequately prepared for kindergarten. In other words, the cumulative aspect of risk has powerful, long-lasting negative associations with children's learning.

Furthermore, school staff and educators, who

are responsible for narrowing school readiness gaps, manage a demanding classroom and may favor children who demonstrate greater knowledge and behavioral regulation that matches school readiness expectations. This is troublesome because the children that need it the most may not receive the necessary supports to reach their full academic potential. One implication of this is that it can further contribute to educational gaps.

Teachers matter in children's transition to school

Any parent knows that the relationship children have with their teacher is important for their engagement and success in school. Emotional and warm interactions are essential for learning and development; we know that teaching is not the top-down, dispassionate pouring of knowledge into students. Rather, close relationships and connections can motivate children and help them to connect with the material, as well as build their confidence in their academic abilities.

So, what does "closeness" mean? In the context of research, closeness is typically defined from the teacher's perspective of how they rate different aspects of their relationships with students (via the Student Teacher Relationship Scale developed by Dr. Robert Pianta). This provides a window into how teachers perceive children's abilities to use them as a support.

To be clear, closeness is not simply the absence of conflict (though that is important too); it is the formation of a warm, safe, dependable relationship and classroom environment. This sense of



SCHOOL READINESS:

1. Children draw on a range of skills when starting school, which are collectively known as "school readiness." School readiness refers to children's language and literacy skills, social and emotional competencies, and cognitive abilities.
2. Children experiencing risks at home or in their neighborhoods are at risk for starting kindergarten behind their peers.

and **WHY** Is It Important?



safety communicates to children that mistakes are acceptable, sometimes even welcomed. In turn, children are more likely to ask for help and guidance, increasing the likelihood that they will reach their academic potential. In fact, research shows that children learn best from adults they can depend on, trust, and love.

Research shows close teacher-child relationships in kindergarten matter for learning

It is well understood that teacher-child relationships are vital for children's development and learning, particularly in the early years. Our research findings confirmed that close teacher-child relationships in kindergarten are beneficial for all students, regardless of their exposure to risk. Moreover, we also explored whether these pivotal relationships can act as a buffer against some of the most prevalent environmental risks to which kindergarten children are exposed.

We considered a total of eighteen risks that could negatively affect children's ability to learn and added them up for each child. Some of the most prevalent risks were those related to economic hardships; for example, parents having trouble paying the household bills, reporting an income below the federal poverty line, and frequently moving between residences. Notably, 86% of children were exposed to at least one of the risks; this is a substantial number.

We considered how teachers' close, nurturing relationships with their kindergarteners can protect their academic skills and executive functions from risk. Findings from our study are exciting and promising; teacher-child relationships can, in fact,

act as a shield against environmental risks, particularly for kindergarteners' reading abilities and EFs. The closeness that teachers offer their young and most vulnerable students can help them advance in two of the most essential skills for school readiness.

Kindergarten is particularly important because for many children, it is their first introduction to formal schooling and a new adult caregiver. Thus, kindergarten teachers play a big role in children's lives and they have the potential to shape their academic trajectories. Other research points toward the positive impact that teachers can have on other aspects of children's development, including their social and emotional development.

There are several simple shifts that teachers can make in their practice to strengthen their relationships with their students. These can have profound impacts on children who need the most protection and support. For example, educators might want to consider:

- showing an interest and collecting information on children's lives outside of the classroom—what makes children happy, what their family structure is like.
- promoting play in social connection.
- creating routine and establishing a safe, comfortable space with reasonable expectations and structure.

It would be remiss to ignore how the research discussed here is linked with the global COVID-19 crisis. Many children are out of school to help curb the spread of the virus. Children who will be most affected by this disruption in learning and routine are those who are already at an educational disadvantage as a result of systemic inequities that lead them to be exposed to various risk factors. These are also children who are less likely to form close relationships with their teachers, but need them the most. We trust that our teachers and educators will give all children extra care upon return to school, but particularly those at the highest risk. **A**

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FOUR KEY TAKEAWAYS

3. High quality teacher-child relationships are very important in kindergarten.

4. Close relationships with a teacher in kindergarten protects disadvantaged children the most and supports their learning outcomes.