What is school readiness?

Stephane van Eck

Kapp (1991) reminds us that school entry is one of the main events in the life of a child and therefore it is essential that he/she should be ready for it. Readiness for formal learning forms the basis for the way in which the child becomes involved and gives meaning to the formal learning situation and has an important influence on the future course of the child’s learning.

De Jager (2012b) explains that being receptive to start learning is a gradual process that takes the guise of a journey. This journey of being receptive or “ready” to learn begins when a child is born and mirrors the developmental stages of the child, i.e. reaching each milestone in sequence within the required time frame.

Furthermore a child who is exposed to adequate occasions to experience beneficial growth or development ought to be school ready by the time he is of formal school-going age. In South Africa, compulsory school age is between the ages of 5 and 7. If a child is 5 years old and turns 6 before June of that year, he may go to school. If he turns 7 during the course of that year he has to go to school.

It also needs to be borne in mind that school readiness is associated with a particular society/culture and the norms and values thereof. Therefore, school readiness goes hand-in-hand with a specific educational system. The American and British educational systems, for example, set other requirements for the school beginner than those set in South Africa (Kapp, 1991).

1. WHAT IS SCHOOL READINESS?

Prinsloo, Vorster & Sibaya (1996) state that school readiness refers to the child’s total readiness to benefit from formal education in a group context. It is not directly linked to chronological age, but to the child’s level of development. According to du Plooy (2003), school readiness is a broad term which includes intellectual, social, emotional and physical development. School readiness can be encouraged by providing opportunities to develop physically, by extending the child’s field of experience and by teaching him to use his senses as effectively as possible.

De Jager (2012b) states that a child is not just school ready, but school ready in a specific language and when taught in a second language needs 3 to 5 years to acquire adequate skills in that specific language in order to learn effectively. She also mentions numerous factors that may enhance or inhibit the process of achieving school readiness, such as: stimulation, intelligence, language role models, health, physical, emotional, social and cognitive development.

A child who cannot see or hear well, who is over-active, sick or whose natural perceptual development has for some reason been inhibited, may not be ready at the expected time (despite adequate
opportunity) to develop normally. This child requires professional or other aid to further the normal process of preparation for school.

2. LEVELS OF DEVELOPMENT
De Jager (2012b) postulates that school readiness develops on four different levels and in the following order: physical development, emotional development, social development and cognitive development. A multitude of skills are being developed in each level.

**Physical development** (0 – 14 months) forms the foundation of a child’s development and occurs through concrete objects and multisensory experiences.

This occurs with the child’s initial need to be independent – to move unaided, to dress and feed himself and leads to a sense of self. A feeling of confidence and independence is a direct result of well-developed physical skills and a positive awareness of his own body (de Jager, 2013).

Skills developed on the physical level

- **Sensory development:**
  - Touch
  - Near senses (movement and balance)
  - Taste and smell
  - Listen
  - See

- **Motor development:**
  - From head to toe (cephalo-caudal)
  - Near to far (proximo-distal)
  - Primitive reflex reactions
  - Muscular strength, coordination and muscle control
  - Movement and cessation
  - Rhythm

- **Gross motor skills:**
  - Sit, roll, crawl, stand, walk, run, jump, skip, gallop, climb, clamber, hang, pull up
  - Balance – static and dynamic
  - 3D midline crossing
  - Laterality
  - Spatial orientation

- **Fine motor skills:**
  - Fingers – paint, draw, cut and paste.
  - Toes
**Emotional and social development** (14 months to 4 years) forms the foundation of a child’s need to belong and be accepted. Emotional development is vital as it is the link between the physical body and the developing mind. A feeling of independence facilitates emotional development. The child first needs to develop a sense of ME, before he can develop a sense of WE (relating to others in an appropriate manner) (De Jager, 2013).

This occurs through the introduction of semi-concrete representations such as books and pictures as well as through parental involvement.

**Intellectual development** (4 – 11 years) refers to the ability to make sense of what has been experienced, as well as to act on or talk about them. This occurs through expansion of vocabulary and abstract concepts. Cognitive development relies heavily on the development of speech and language skills (De Jager, 2013).

**Skills developed on the emotional and social level**
- Development of body consciousness
- Self-concept
- Working alone
- Co-operation
- Fantasy
- Role play
- Songs
- Reading and listening to stories

**Skills developed on the intellectual level**

**Speech and language:**
- Vocabulary
- Object recognition
- Identification
- Alphabet recognition (sound and picture)

**Perception:**
- Kinaesthetic
- Smell and taste
- Auditory
- Visual

**Categorizing:**
- Colour
- Shape
- Number
- Abstract concepts

**Logic:**
- Differences
- Similarities

**Memory:**
- Short term memory
- Long term memory

**Creative problem solving:**
- Applying knowledge gained

De Jager (2012b) postulates that each level should develop fully, in order to form a stable foundation for the next level.
3. HOW DO I KNOW IF MY CHILD IS PHYSICALLY, SOCIAL AND COGNITIVE READY?

3.1 Physical readiness

According to De Jager (2012b), the following would indicate that a child is not physically ready:

- Exhibits a great need to play
- Tires easily
- Postural fatigue
- Cannot handle his pencil with ease
- Fine motor or gross motor movements accompanied by tongue thrust and/or mouth movements
- Not yet able to take care of own physical needs, i.e. dressing, toilet routine, feeding himself, etc.
- Clumsy
- Cannot sit still for 10 minutes
- Cannot concentrate for long enough
- Not yet work orientated
- Avoids pen and paper activities or educational games
- Often refuses to carry out instructions, reacting emotionally in order to hide his inability to complete a task which is too difficult for him or he is unable to complete. Typical behaviour includes crying, yelling or clowning about.

If the child is physically ready and is able to meet the demands placed on a Grade One learner, it will be indicated by the following (De Jager, 2012b):

- Can skip and gallop
- Skip using a skipping rope (boys and girls)
- Tie his/her shoe laces
- Comfortable with the use a pencil or scissors
- Can sit still for long enough to learn
- Able to listen the first time and follow instructions.
- Can look after himself physically, e.g. dressing himself, using toilet, spreading his own sandwich and eating on his own.

3.2 Emotional and Social readiness

De Jager (2012b) states that emotional and social readiness develop simultaneously. When the child is able to function independently, he starts developing a positive self-image, self-confidence and the ability to assert himself. These skills create a feeling of security, which fosters a willingness to take risks, as well as an eagerness to learn. Eagerness to learn implies more than just academic learning and includes the ability to discover through playing and making friends.

Healthy emotional development results in the unfolding of social skills such as the ability to wait, accepting NO as an answer and a willingness to share. Emotional and social skills are the link between physical development and intellectual development.
These skills form the foundation for concentration, memory and motivation.

In addition to physical and emotional/social development, the child needs to develop on a perceptual and intellectual development.

3.2 Cognitive readiness

Furthermore cognitive readiness implies that the child has acquired an adequate vocabulary to communicate his feelings and thoughts clearly to other people. A child who is school ready at a cognitive level can:

- Distinguish between left and right.
- Understand spatial concepts such as above/below/in front of/behind/in between.
- Make sense of Mathematical concepts such as more/less/bigger/smaller and numbers.
- Make sense of what he sees and hears/can think about it/can make a plan and can react in a meaningful and appropriate manner.
- Can answer “Why?” questions, e.g. Why are wheels not made from glass? Why can’t we touch the sun?

4. THE DEVELOPMENT OF SCHOOL READINESS

According to De Jager (2012b), school readiness is developed by:

Concrete experiences

Concrete experiences imply that the child discovers his own body and bodily abilities through all his senses, followed by the environment and everything in it through touching and feeling. The more the child is able to discover at a sensory-motor level, the more the brain develops.

Semi-concrete experiences

The child is then gradually introduced to paper, books, the computer and television. Real-life experiences are ALWAYS better for a child’s development. These things are merely representations of the real thing and therefore second best. Although paper activities are an important bridge which help the child to progress from playing to working, it should not become the focus of development too early on.

Reading stories together and playing board or dice games are excellent ways of developing a child’s semi-concrete skills. Parents should be encouraged to ask the child to “read” his picture to them. Drawing and painting are primitive forms of writing; “reading” the artwork is primitive reading.
Abstract experiences
This implies that the child has stored a vast variety of experiences in his memory, has learnt to represent his thoughts on paper using paint, crayons, glue, etc. and can use language as an aid. The child can now demonstrate that he or she is ready for abstract learning by using colours, shapes, number, months, days of the week, left and right, position in space and mathematical concepts appropriately and with ease and speed.

Raising a child is about shaping a life.
It is about a journey with a clear goal in mind - becoming redundant as a parent

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