



Kindergarten Readiness: An Overview of Issues and Assessment

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Assessing school readiness is important to the education of young children. Assessments help measure the current state of children's development and knowledge and can be used to guide classroom and individual kindergarten programming. This report outlines key readiness and assessment issues and offers summaries of common assessment tools.

What Is the Definition of School Readiness?

School readiness is a combination of readiness in five key dimensions of a child's early development and learning as well as readiness in school, family, and community supports.

Although different state and project definitions may stress various aspects of child development, environment, and school involvement in their definitions, the National Education Goals Panel (NEGP) definition seems to encompass these variations and be the most complete and widely accepted definition. The NEGP Goal 1 Resource and Technical Planning Groups identified five dimensions of early development and learning that are important for school readiness: physical well-being and motor development, social and emotional development, approaches toward learning, language development, and cognition and general knowledge. In addition, Congress defined three key elements of school readiness in their Goals 2000: Educate America Act. Specifically, readiness in children (includes the dimensions listed above), readiness in schools (includes smooth transition between home/early childhood programs and school), and family and community supports (including access to high quality programs, parents who support children's learning, and communities that support and train parents).

What Predicts Academic and Social-Behavioral Success in Grade School?

Although many factors influence a child's success in school, parental education seems to be the best single predictor.

Parental education seems to be the best predictor of academic and social-behavioral success in grade school. More parental education is associated with a home envi-

ronment that is more favorable to education, better financial security, and fewer social or environmental risk factors for children.

What Types of Readiness Tests Are There?

Assessment procedures stem from four broad theories or conceptions of readiness: idealist/nativist, empiricist/environmental, social constructivist, and interactionist. Based on these perspectives, readiness tests come in four types: skill tests, developmental assessments, quick samplings, and performance-based assessments.

The *idealist/nativist* view asserts that readiness is determined by the level of maturity that develops within the child, not from external influences. Those who embrace this view often feel that repeating kindergarten or attending pre-kindergarten programs is appropriate for children who do not seem to be ready for kindergarten. These programs are thought to bide the child time to mature enough for kindergarten. The *empiricist/environmental* perspective defines readiness as characteristics of the child's behaviors that encompass skills which lead to mastery of goals like knowing colors, shapes, how to spell one's own name, etc. Readiness, in this theory, is something that lies outside the child or something that can be changed by an intervention. The *social constructivist* view shifts the focus of readiness from the child to the community and believes that whether a child is ready or not is determined by the community standards of readiness, which are relative. The *interactionist* perspective is that readiness is a bi-directional concept in which children must be internally ready for schools and schools must be ready for children. This view emphasizes that a child must be capable of learning and that schools must be ready to support and teach children, regardless of the skills the child carries to school with him.

Readiness tests come in four types: skill oriented tests, developmental assessments, quick samplings, and performance-based assessments. *Skills oriented tests* are usually paper and pencil tests which are given to the class as a group test at the beginning or the end of the kindergarten year (e.g., Metropolitan Readiness Test). *Developmental assessments* rely on evaluating children in terms of set expectations for development at a particular age (e.g., Gesell

School Readiness Screening Test). *Quick samplings* are used to assess children's language skills, motor ability, number skills, body awareness, and auditory and visual discrimination (e.g., Brigance K & 1 Screen for Kindergarten and First Grade). *Performance-based assessments* use learning portfolios including teacher records and samples of a child's work that provide a description of a child's progress over time (e.g., Work Sampling System).

Which Specific Assessments Are Used Most Frequently?

Some assessment instruments are used because they have been recommended by national experts, and some are more likely to be used because they were included in national evaluations or studies.

A national panel of experts recommended to the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation the following assessments of school readiness by category:

- **Language and Literacy:** Social Skills Rating System (SSRS), Early Screening Inventory (ESI), Project Construct Literacy Assessment, and Reynell Language Development Scales.

- **Social-Emotional Development:** Social Behavior Ratings, Social Skills Rating System (SSRS), Howes Peer Interaction, and Personal Maturity Scale.

- **Numeracy:** Woodcock-Johnson Revised (WJ-R) and Project Construct "Flip" Math Assessment.

- **Overall Child Development:** Child Assessment Profile (Chicago Longitudinal Study), Kindergarten Assessment (Chicago Longitudinal Study), Bracken School Readiness, IRT Assessment, and Project Construct "Pretend Party" Conventional.

- **General Teacher/Classroom:** Arnett Caregiver Interaction Scale, School Readiness Rating Scale, Head Start Teacher Survey, Kindergarten Teacher Survey, Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS), Home Observation for Measurement of the Environment (HOME), and Observational Record of Caregiving Environment (ORCE).

Some assessment tools have become more commonly used because they have been included in national evaluations or in batteries of large-scale projects. Others are more popular because of greater use in the fields of psychology, education, and early childhood education.

What Can Readiness Tests Predict And How Should They Be Used?

Readiness tests provide information on the current state of children's development and knowledge, but they do not predict school success two or three years into the future. Therefore, scores should be used for programming for the current year only.

None of these types has a strong research basis to demonstrate validity or prediction of school readiness. However, some are reliable and probably do represent a child's current or very short-term status, but they do not tend to predict long-term success in school. Therefore, good readiness tests probably do reflect a child's readiness for kindergarten, but not beyond. Thus, they can be used to indicate the skills a child possesses and those needing more attention in kindergarten. But children learn so much in kindergarten and develop so fast during this age period that they need to be reassessed at the end of kindergarten or the beginning of first grade. Also, if the assessments can show the current state of children, then the results can be used to inform teachers and administrators of how to match the kindergarten program to the particular group of children or individual children.

Readiness tests can be used for accountability of early childhood programs.

Readiness tests can measure the extent that early childhood programs prepare children for school. Quality early childhood programs in terms of developmentally appropriate practice, physical environment, teacher qualifications, and director qualifications are critical to adequately prepare a child for school. Quality programs ensure that children (especially low-income children) are getting the experiences needed to succeed in kindergarten and the early school years.

What is the Effectiveness of Repeating Kindergarten or Delaying Entry?

Repeating or delaying entry into kindergarten is often inappropriate.

Repeating kindergarten or delaying entry to kindergarten does not seem to help children and may actually be detrimental. Kindergarten curricula and classroom space are established for children of a certain age and are inappropriate for children older than 5-6 years. Some studies have found that holding children out of kindergarten for a year may be associated with negative effects, such as increased behavior problems attributed to being older than their peers and problems in social and emotional development. On the other hand, if the kindergarten curriculum is adjusted to match the needs of the older children, younger children in the class may experience problems.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- Encourage the Pittsburgh region and the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania to formally adopt the national definition of school readiness (*a combination of readiness in five key dimensions of a child's early development and learning {physical well being and motor develop-*

ment, social and emotional development, approaches toward learning, language development, and cognition and general knowledge}, as well as readiness in school, family, and community supports) so that the region and state can move forward in developing a state-wide plan for school readiness assessment.

- School readiness assessments should be used to guide classroom and individual kindergarten programming but not for holding children back, tracking them into different classrooms, or placing them beyond kindergarten (children should be reassessed at the end of kindergarten or the beginning of first grade).

- Developmental screening tools should only be used to screen children for developmental delay and referral for more intensive developmental testing if necessary. They should *not* be used as the sole measure for school readiness.

- Children who do not score well on readiness tests should be given more individualized attention and an individualized education plan rather than delaying or repeating kindergarten. Resources should be invested in smaller class sizes or more teacher aides in the early grades for more individualized instruction.

Assessment Instruments

Below is a brief overview of some common assessment tools that have been used in batteries of large-scale projects or on their own, as well as a description of an integrated assessment method.

Batteries

► **Family and Child Experiences Survey (FACES)** – University of North Carolina’s FACES consists of a variety of measures to perform individual assessments and observations of children, interview parents and teachers, and observe the classroom. Some of the more widely used measures within the battery include:

- **Social Skills Rating System (SSRS)** – The SSRS measures social and emotional development. It has been used by Smart Start and other Frank Porter Graham Center studies, as well as the Pittsburgh SPECS Evaluation of the Early Childhood Initiative Demonstration Project (ECIDP).
- **Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test III (PPVT-III)** – The PPVT-III is a very-well established tool that measures a child’s receptive/listening vocabulary. It was used by the New Jersey Abbott Schools Project, Smart Start and other Frank Porter Graham Center studies.
- **Woodcock-Johnson-Revised (WJ-R)** – The WJ-R measures children’s achievement. It was also used by the NICHD Study of Early Child Care and was recommended by national experts to the Ewing Marion Kauffman

Foundation to measure numeracy.

► **Smart Start Battery** - North Carolina's Smart Start Program is a comprehensive, community-based initiative for North Carolina children 0 to 6 years old and their families. The program’s overarching goal is to prepare children to enter school healthy and ready to learn. One of the more widely used measurement tools contained in the battery is:

- **Arnett Caregiver Interaction Scale** – The Arnett is a rating scale of teacher behavior toward children in the class. It is also used in some of the Head Start evaluations and was recommended by national experts to measure general teacher/classroom quality.

► Scaling Progress in Early Childhood Settings (SPECS) Evaluation of the Pittsburgh Early Childhood Initiative Demonstration Project (ECIDP) –

The Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania SPECS evaluation measures the outcomes of children participating in ECI child care programs in the Pittsburgh area. Widely used measurement tools include:

- **Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS)** – The ECERS is a standardized measure of preschool classroom structure and process. The revised version is ECERS-R. It is used in a Head Start Evaluation Battery, the New Jersey Abbott Schools Project, the NICHD Early Child Care Research Study, and by the Smart Start evaluation team.
- **Infant Toddler Environmental Rating Scale (ITERS)** – The ITERS is similar to ECERS except it is for use with infant care and education rather than preschool classrooms. It is recommended by Philadelphia’s Early to Rise Report.
- **Family Day Care Rating Scale (FDCRS)** – The FDCRS is used to measure global child care quality in the family care setting. It is also used by the Smart Start team.

Individual Assessments

► **Developmental Indicators for the Assessment of Learning (DIAL)** – The DIAL is a screening tool that provides a general assessment of children’s developmental readiness in motor, concepts, language, self-help, and social development. The revised version is DIAL-R. It is used by some school districts in Indiana, Minnesota, Missouri, Montana, and South Carolina and was approved by the state of Louisiana as a Kindergarten Developmental Readiness Screening Program assessment tool.

► **Early Screening Inventory (ESI)** – The ESI measures visual-motor/adaptive, language and cognition, and gross-motor/body awareness skills. The revised version

is ESI-R. It was used with the Developmental Profile-II in the New Jersey Abbott Schools Project, and by some school districts in Minnesota and Missouri. It is recommended by national experts to the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation for measurement of language/literacy.

Performance-Based Assessment

► **Work Sampling System (WSS)** – The Work Sampling System is a curriculum-integrated performance-based assessment system stemming from the interactionist perspective. WSS documents and assesses children's knowledge, skills, behavior, and accomplishments based on daily activities in the classroom over the course of the school year. Teachers continually and systematically record and evaluate student's work using three elements: 1) developmental guidelines and checklists, 2) collections of children's work in portfolios, and 3) summary reports that integrate the information from the checklists and portfolios. WSS is used in Maryland and in Connecticut.

Recommended by National Experts to the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation

► Language and Literacy

- Social Skills Rating System (SSRS)
- Early Screening Inventory (ESI)
- Project Construct Literacy Assessment
- Reynell Language Development Scales

► Social-Emotional Development

- Social Behavior Ratings
- Social Skills Rating System (SSRS)
- Howes Peer Interaction
- Personal Maturity Scale

► Numeracy

- Woodcock-Johnson Revised (WJ-R)
- Project Construct "Flip" Math Assessment

► Overall Child Development

- Child Assessment Profile (Chicago Longitudinal Study)
- Kindergarten Assessment (Chicago Longitudinal Study)
- Bracken School Readiness
- IRT Assessment
- Project Construct "Pretend Party" conventional knowledge

► General Teacher/Classroom

- Arnett Caregiver Interaction Scale
- School Readiness Rating Scale
- Head Start Teacher Survey
- Kindergarten Teacher Survey
- Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS)
- Home Observation for Measurement of the Environment (HOME)
- Observational Record of Caregiving Environment (ORCE)

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