

Are there Things I can do at Home to Prepare my Child for Starting School?

Parents and families are preparing their children for school from the day they are born and not just before the September when they start school! From the moment children are born, and even before that, children are communicating with, and absorbing information from the environment around them.

Your child has benefited from being in a secure, loving and safe environment, where she or he has been supported to pursue her/his interests, grow, learn and develop. By providing a positive environment with lots of opportunities for your child to express herself/himself, whether verbally or allowing her/him to engage in activities that she/he is interested in, you are preparing your child for starting school.

Remember that Play is the Work of the Child

We now know that allowing children to pursue their interests through play, is one of the most powerful ways to help children learn and develop. Professor Peter Gray at Boston College in the United States, describes play as a motive or attitude, that enables children to develop autonomy; foster imagination and cultivate an active non-stressed mind-set. Professor Gray believes that play and curiosity are the foundations for learning so it is really important that as parents, we allow our children lots of time for play, as this is the way young children learn and develop. You may be interested in following Professor Gray's Psychology Today Freedom to Learn Blog.

Dr. Lisha O'Sullivan further advises that children with autism can engage in, and benefit from all types of play, but that they may need specific support to participate fully in play experiences.

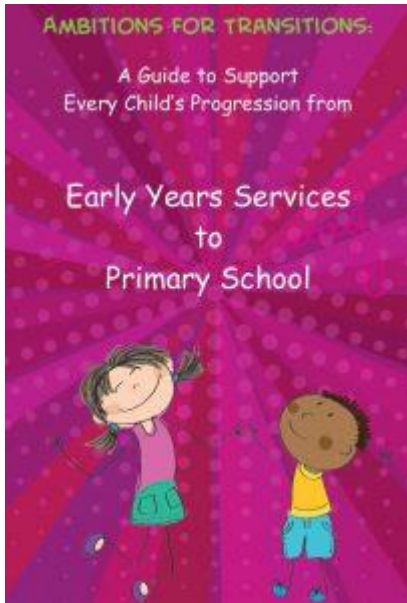
The School Readiness Myth

We hear a lot about 'school readiness' and it is important to understand that 'school readiness' means different things for different children. It is very important to understand that 'school readiness' for a child *does not* mean knowing letter names, sounds, numbers, being able to join-dots, writing his/her name; being able to tie his/her shoes or put on his/her coat. You will see a lot of school readiness checklists. Please remember that these are pointers only and it is not necessary for your child to be able to do everything on these lists.

We need to remember that there is no school readiness checklist that your child or any child has to score 100% on.

There are some useful pointers in the Area Based Childhood (ABC) Start Right Project's in Limerick 'Family Transition Resource Pack'.

Adapted from: <https://asiam.ie/are-there-things-i-can-do-at-home-to-prepare-my-child-for-starting-school/>



School readiness is about the school being ready for every child and about your child being happy to move on to the next exciting phase in his/her life. Remember every child develops differently and asking each child to be at the same stage of development as they start school contradicts all of the research on children's early learning and development. You will see a lot of school readiness checklists. Please remember again that these are guides only and it is not necessary for your child to be able to do everything on these lists. The main message is to meet your child where your child is at and join them on this new and exciting journey ahead.

You can read some interesting ideas about school readiness in the 2016 research report conducted by researchers from the Dublin Institute of Technology. Start with the Executive Summary, that will give you some good signposts in relation to understanding what school readiness really means rather than the myth it has become in terms of creating an expectation that all children score 100% on some checklist.



Tapping into the Power of Stories to Prepare your Child for Primary School or Moving on to Another Stream

Very often in the digital age, we can forget about the power of stories for children's learning and development. Stories are opportunities to teach, motivate, delight and help your child understand the world in which they live. For children with autism, stories are a powerful and enjoyable method of engaging them with the world and helping them understand what is going on in their lives.

Remember that Temple Grandin (1995), who herself has autism, has told us that very often children with autism think in pictures and that words are like a second language for children with autism. Children with autism are often excellent visual learners and using real objects, photographs, and drawings when telling children stories assists children's understanding and helps them better understand.

Reading stories is also a valuable opportunity for you to connect with your child emotionally and build on that very special relationship you have with your child. It doesn't matter if your child communicates differently and doesn't use words but rather points, eye-movements, gestures and/or vocalisations, your child will benefit from, and enjoy listening to a story.

There are lots of different ways to tap into the power of story with your child:

- Tell your child a story about your own first day at school and how you felt. If you have photographs of yourself on the day you started school, show your child the photographs when you are telling the story.
- Read your child stories about starting school. There are lots of story books about starting school. You can get these in your local library and they are also available at Amazon.

Remember you can also make your own story book with your child about starting school, using photographs and/or drawings that are familiar to your child, such as the family; the house; walking/driving to school; your child's school bag and the various areas at your child's school.

Read a social story to your child about starting school. Social Stories™ were developed by Carol Gray to help children with autism understand social situations.

It is important to remember that children with autism don't 'automatically' understand social situations and therefore they can often experience anxiety and become overwhelmed in coping with a world we all take for granted. Social stories can help a child with autism to cope with this anxiety.

More recently in Ireland, Avril Webster has developed a range of stories focused on social situations, which you may find very useful for reading to your child and helping them to cope with situations such as going to the supermarket; dentist; doctor; hairdresser; restaurant; swimming; a birthday part; buying clothes; buying shoes; going to the cinema; going to the optician and going on a plane.

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