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## School Readiness Begins At Home, Not the Same for Everyone

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# COLLEGE OF EDUCATION & HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

## *Selected News Releases*

### **School Readiness Begins At Home, Not the Same for Everyone**

ORONO, Maine -- A child's perceived readiness for school is locally based and varies in accordance with community culture, resources and expectations, according to a University of Maine researcher, who says preschool screening should be an instructional starting point for a teacher, not a placement tool to label children or keep them out of kindergarten.

The traditional practice in many schools in Maine and other states, consisting of a single screening or testing session does little to prepare children for school or to establish long-term parental involvement in their children's education, says Lieve Brutsaert, a researcher in the Institute for the Study of Students At Risk. "Screening is just a test of what one little child can do on a not-too-perfect day," she says. "It should be used to determine the different instructional strategies teachers will need to meet the diverse skill levels of kindergarten students, not as a measure of what a child can or cannot do at some point in time."

But that preparation for learning should begin long before preschool screening, ideally as soon as parents take a newborn home, when both are full of hope and promise, Brutsaert emphasizes. "We have a window of opportunity during the first three years of life to stimulate children when brain development is more rapid and extensive than we previously realized. Communities must encourage and support the role of parents as that crucial first teacher," she says.

In a recent study of school readiness, Brutsaert examined the influences of early family/ preschool community experiences as viewed and interpreted by a group of parents in two small, rural Maine communities. The prevailing interpretation of a child being ready for school meant socially ready. This initial concept did not change as the 31 children of the 12 participating families moved through the primary grades.

All of the parents took for granted that readiness training begins at home, and all were involved in two types of readiness activities -- pre-academic skill training and social skill training. They all clearly placed a greater value on training their preschoolers in the observable, every day social skills of getting along with other children than they did on pre-academic skills, which most considered to be in the school's domain.

Parent involvement in pre-academic skills activities, such as reading, learning the alphabet and colors, or counting, tended to be incidental, occurring if and when opportunities arose, or were considered "what any good parent would do." But extensive forethought and deliberate action went into social readiness development. All of the parents sought out and created opportunities both in and beyond the extended family circle to enhance social development.

As a group, they anticipated that their children were not as well prepared socially as were those who grew up in less rural settings, and consequently, they made concerted efforts, as resources permitted, such as forming play groups and enrolling their children in preschools to engage them with other youngsters in social situations.

The findings in the rural Maine study are consistent with national research indicating that parents emphasize social and emotional maturity over school-related academic skills when deciding whether or not a child is ready for kindergarten, according to Brutsaert.

The local school and community volunteers included in Brutsaert's study also acknowledged the importance of social readiness and the need to promote a school environment where social development, prior to academic development, can continue.

Without exception, the families had a clear perception of the attributes -- abilities and needs -- of each child, and there was no indication that parents felt any pressure from teachers to prepare the children for anything but a generally defined social readiness. Very few entertained the idea of keeping a child back a year, indicating that most felt secure in the knowledge that their children could enter kindergarten regardless of their level of social and pre-academic skill development.

This community consensus was reinforced by the kindergarten transition program at the elementary school that serves the two adjacent communities. The innovative program is tailored to help forge connections between home and school and remedy the lack of social opportunity. In addition to home visits by the kindergarten teacher, the program brings parents, preschoolers and teachers together to get acquainted with the school and one another during weekly informal sessions during the spring before the children officially enter school.

"By virtue of living in the community, these parents had internalized a cultural message about the meaning of school readiness as well as their specific role as parents in preparing children for school," Brutsaert says.

In these communities, the local meaning of readiness was effectively conveyed and reinforced from teachers to parents, increasing understanding instead of setting the stage for conflicting expectations.

Brutsaert's pilot study of two other Maine communities -- one rural, working class and the other more diverse and affluent -- provides an example of how different expectations can evolve and conflict. In the rural community where preschool and recreational activities require travel and financial resources, helping children socially interact and fit into a group is a priority for parents.

But in the more prosperous community where socializing and cultural activities are part of the middle class lifestyle, most parents are more concerned about their children, who sometimes can already read, being bored during the primary school years. As a result the kindergarten program in some communities is accelerated, assuming an enriched home environment and preschool experiences as the norm, and placing unrealistic expectations for children who have not had the same advantages as their classmates.

Given the importance of parental involvement to student achievement and the influence of community consensus on policy, programs and resources, it is essential that schools establish collaborative links, says Brutsaert. She offers some suggestions and implications for developing effective collaboration between parents and schools.

- Give explicit attention to parents of preschoolers, especially first-time parents, before their children enter school. Research on parental involvement indicates that the closer a parent participates in the education of a child, the greater the impact on a child's overall development and later achievement. Well-designed projects and programs are needed to directly train and support parents of preschoolers.
- Accept parents as worthwhile partners. Studies have found that parents rarely or never receive requests from teachers to engage in learning activities with their children at home, yet these parents report that they are willing to spend time helping their children if they are shown how to do specific learning activities.
- Make parental involvement an integral part of the definition and mission of the school community. Research clearly suggests that the school's practice to involve parents is more important to school readiness than other factors such as the education of parents, the size of the family and parents' marital status.

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