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KansasChild

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**KINDERGARTEN
READINESS**

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READINESS GAP DURING A
CHILD'S EARLIEST YEARS

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FACES, HOPES FOR
KANSAS CHILDREN

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**"The goal of early childhood
education should be to activate the
child's own natural desire to learn."**

- Maria Montessori



This quote from amazing early childhood educator Maria Montessori is a great reminder that children come to us ready to learn. In the first three years of life, their little brains develop 80% of the connections they will use for the rest of their lives! Our job is to lay the path before them, to give them what they need to make those connections and blossom.

So many people play a role in a child's development, from totally dependent infant to independent (or so they like to assert) toddler, to inquisitive preschooler, to wondrous school-age learner. It takes families, communities, and for more than 160,000 Kansas children, it takes early childhood educators to lay the path for each child.

I think we can all agree that families serve as the primary foundation for children's learning. Families provide the necessary space for young

children to experience, learn, and develop the basic ingredients that will help their child be ready for school. Ideally, they provide a loving, safe, stable and nurturing environment that promotes healthy development.

Communities also play an important role in the development of children. The community's role is to build stable environments that allow children and their families to live in safe neighborhoods. Welcoming and supportive communities provide access to public libraries, parks, quality schools and resources to support families who need extra help or might experience a crisis. In short, a healthy community provides a variety of experiences and resources so children and their families can flourish.

And finally, families who need child care should have access to quality programs where



their children will learn both skills and socialization. At Child Care Aware of Kansas, we work every day to ensure children have access to high-quality educational services. These can and should include home-, center-, and school-based settings.

Children come into this world with the tools to be productive adults. It's our job as families, communities, educators and advocates to ensure they get every opportunity to do just that. Tomorrow's Kansas workforce is waiting for us to help them flourish. Let's make it happen.

Spadell



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Closing the Kindergarten Readiness Gap During a Child's Earliest Years



KRISTIN NORELL
CEO, Children's Reading Foundation

Kristin Norell is CEO of The Children's Reading Foundation. She formerly worked in children's book publishing and served on the foundation's board from 2011-2017. The Children's Reading Foundation engages families, schools and communities in children's learning from birth through third grade to cultivate early literacy and school readiness skills.

....but for those who enter kindergarten behind, around 70 percent are still behind their classmates in the fifth grade.

It is an annual ritual. Parents flock to stores around the country to gather everything their child needs for the wondrous first day of kindergarten. Aisle by aisle, colorful options of every tool imaginable attract parents and children alike. But there is something every child needs for kindergarten that cannot be purchased in any store: early learning opportunities.

When children have limited access to relevant learning opportunities from birth to age 5, the results are clearly evident on the first day of kindergarten. Of the four million students who begin school in the United States each year, 40 percent show up on the first day with the language and literacy skills one to two years ahead and 20 percent have the readiness skills of a typical kindergarten student. The remaining 40 percent arrive with skills one to three years below the kindergarten level.

This five-year range of skills is called the school readiness gap — or the preparation gap. It manifests itself in all learning areas: language and literacy, math, and social and emotional.

Some parents believe children who start school without the necessary skills will catch up within a year or two, but that is not the reality. Research shows that children who are one to three years behind when they start kindergarten usually make a year's worth of growth every school year — just like all students — but for those who enter kindergarten behind, around 70 percent are still behind their classmates in the fifth grade. These students form the largest group of high school dropouts, and they have less than a 2 percent chance of attending a four-year university.

While there are exceptions, children who start behind tend to stay behind, and children who start ahead tend to stay ahead. This means the learning opportunities a child has at home, long before kindergarten, determine his or her academic trajectory and have lifelong consequences.



Families, Schools and Communities Must Work Together to Ensure Children Are Prepared for School on Day One

Children who start kindergarten with the language and literacy skills of a typical 5-year-old are well on their way to a successful and satisfying education.

While schools don't create the multi-year readiness gap children exhibit on the first day of kindergarten, it is crucial for



20%

have the readiness skills of a typical kindergarten student

40%

begin with the language and literacy skills one to two years ahead

Four million students begin school in the United States each year

districts and communities to collaborate to close this gap by engaging parents and caregivers during a child's earliest years.

Once students start school, those who need skill-building interventions, including additional work time and assistance from teachers with specialized training, present a tremendous challenge. Children who are behind must achieve their

normal year of growth plus another year to catch up by even a single grade level. This attempt, called catch-up growth, takes a toll on economic and human resources for the school districts and socially and emotionally for the students themselves.

The effects of the readiness gap have far-reaching consequences for

students and communities. Students who do not graduate from high school face both a grim economic future and cost the country millions of dollars each year. Basic reading, writing and math skills are also a prerequisite for most adult employment and continued personal achievement. Needless to say, the readiness gap is not very different when it comes to math and social and emotional skills.

Continued on page 6

Children who are behind must achieve their normal year of growth plus another year to catch up by even a single grade level.

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The future for all children is brighter when schools and communities prioritize early learning and engage families long before children start school. Empowering parents and caregivers to help nurture a child's development from birth through third grade considerably increases the child's potential to learn and enjoy school year after school year.

Reading is Essential for Learning

Although children in all cultures instinctively learn language from their parents and caregivers, the brain must be taught to read.

The Children's Reading Foundation® encourages parents and caregivers to *Read Together 20 Minutes Every Day™* with their children, starting at infancy. When children are exposed to the language in books, they are developing significant brain connections for language development and for learning to read when the time comes. Children are also learning sounds, vocabulary, prereading and multiple skills that will be reinforced day after day at home and school.

Both educators and the medical community recognize the vital importance for all children to be exposed to books. The American Academy of Pediatrics states:

Reading regularly with young children stimulates optimal patterns of brain development and strengthens parent-child relationships at a critical time in child development, which, in turn, builds language, literacy and social-emotional skills that last a lifetime.

90% Reading Goal

From kindergarten through third grade, children are learning to read; after third grade students are reading to learn. Although reading is paramount to learning, about 75 percent of struggling readers in third grade won't catch up to their classmates.

To help reverse this trend, the Reading Foundation encourages school districts and communities to adopt a *90% Reading Goal*. This means 90 percent of third-graders will read at or above grade level by the end of the school year. The goal is not easy, but it can be done with a long-term, committed effort.

The 90% Reading Goal is how The

Children's Reading Foundation was formed. In 1996, a group of community stakeholders with the Kennewick School District in Washington state came together to increase reading skills districtwide and set this goal. At the time, only 55 percent of the district's third-graders were reading at grade level.

Our *Read Together 20 Minutes Every Day* message was spread far and wide and reinforced in local media interviews, public service messages, employee newsletters, community presentations, libraries, bookstores, professional organizations and by business leaders throughout the area.

As a result, reading scores improved. However, it became clear that unless the district engaged parents and child care providers during children's powerful early learning years the district would be perpetually reacting to the new wave of entering kindergartners — 40 percent with readiness skills one to three years below grade level. The solution was READY! for Kindergarten, a program of The Children's Reading Foundation.

After implementing the READY! program, the reading achievement scores of Kennewick School District students increased substantially. Nine of 13 Kennewick elementary schools reached the 90 percent goal by 2003, and the goal was achieved districtwide in 2006. The district continues to offer free READY! workshops to parents within its district, and throughout the years reading levels have remained near 90 percent.

The READY! for Kindergarten approach encourages parents to read with their child 20 minutes every day and Play With a Purpose for 10 minutes each day. Through a series of annual parent workshops, offered in English or Spanish, participants explore how to create a home environment where learning happens in a fun and purposeful way. The READY! Age Level Targets® are the framework for developmentally appropriate lessons and activities using take-home materials and tools that help develop skills commonly associated with school readiness in three domains: language and literacy, math and reasoning, and social and emotional development.

What You Can Do

Parents and caregivers: You are your child's first teacher. Read with your child for 20 minutes every day; five minutes now, five later and 10 at bedtime. No matter their age, when you spend 20 minutes every day reading, children are learning.

You don't have to be a good reader to help nurture literacy skills in children. The most important thing is the time spent together around books — even wordless books — where stories are made up, and each time the book is opened a new story is told.


Having a two-way interaction while reading not only strengthens the child's prereading skills, it also develops solid foundations for critical thinking.

Sharing a book with a child has significant additional benefits. Reading together develops socially and emotionally confident children who have strong bonds. It also empowers parents and caregivers to become their child's first and most influential teachers. If that isn't enough, reading with a child also reduces the school readiness gap and lowers remediation expenses by helping children start and stay at grade level.

If you are a parent of a newborn to 5-year-old and are in a community that offers READY! for Kindergarten parent workshops — attend. You will learn the readiness skills that will prepare your child for a successful and enjoyable kindergarten experience. You will also leave with new ideas about how to guide your child's language and literacy, math and reasoning, and social and emotional learning, with respect to their individual stage of development.

Schools, child care and preschool programs, foundations, community organizations: You are the direct link to parents. Invest in early learning to help close the readiness gap. This focus on children before they start school will also engage families in their essential role in raising a reader and getting their child ready for kindergarten.

It will take all of us to ensure every child starts school prepared and eager to continue learning to reach his or her full potential in school and life. ■



Read with your child for 20 minutes every day; five minutes now, five later and 10 at bedtime.



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