

# School Readiness: Ready for What?

by Janet Thompson, M.A., ECL Director

## “Are you an academic preschool program?”

This is a question many parents ask when inquiring about their children’s possible ECL enrollment. Those of us who regularly field these questions often want to respond with a firm “No!” This is because, in its current usage, an “academic preschool” is one that “teaches” children the alphabet, numbers, colors, shapes and how to write their names through a formally structured program of teacher-directed instruction, including plenty of worksheets and large group drills. Its primary goal is to make sure they are ready for the rigorous academic challenges that await them as they enter elementary school, by acclimating them early to a similarly structured environment. **To this approach, we do say a firm “No.”**

**We are an academic program in the original sense of the word: a part of academia, a place of learning, used scholars studying all aspects of early childhood development.** In such an academic campus setting, we base our program on child development research and theories that inform us about everything from early brain development to individual temperament, emotional regulation and emergent language and literacy. When we are doing our jobs well, every element of our program is planned and executed with purpose. One of our goals is to prepare children to meet future educational challenges, but we pursue this in ways consistent with what we know about how young children learn best, and about the qualities that are essential to their eventual school success.

## **What all of the current research tells us is that young children are active learners who bring a powerful drive to learn and understand what is around them.**

They learn best when offered interesting **materials**, ample **time**, and **opportunity to investigate, transform, and invent**- without an unreasonably rigid schedule (Carter & Curtis, 2003). Our role as adults entrusted with facilitating their learning is to provide them with a secure but stimulating environment in which they can make activity choices that will help them grow in all domains: cognitive, motor, social, emotional and linguistic (National School Readiness Indicators Initiative, 2005). By designing an early education program that respects young learners’ needs, rather than merely

“miniaturizing” the typical primary school environment, we increase children’s motivation to become lifelong learners.

**Intellectual skills** are, of course, a crucial part of school readiness. A strong vocabulary, knowledge of how printed letters relate to sounds and words, mastery of basic mathematical concepts and the ability to express one’s ideas and emotions in through language give a child a good head start on the academic challenges of kindergarten. Meaningful interaction with peers and adults during our daily routine of singing songs, reading books, conversing over snacks, engaging in science and art investigations and exploratory play of many kinds builds children’s skills.

**Play is especially important.** There is substantial evidence linking symbolic play skills with language development (McCune, 1995). Play settings that provide choice, control and appropriate levels of challenge appear to facilitate the development of self-regulated, intentional learning (Bodrova & Leong, 1998, 2007). This learning, particularly through dramatic, or pretend play, takes place most effectively when play sessions are at least 30 minutes long, to allow children enough time to create the elaborate scripts that contribute to language and literacy development. The players plan, decide what items they need, and establish objects to represent those items. They need book readings and related life experiences to develop their background knowledge for the play setting.

At times, children also need adult guidance to develop and enrich their play narratives. With adult support, they often incorporate emergent language and literacy skills, as well as mathematical concepts into their activities. When program adults encourage this kind of elaboration, we see young children make signs to add to their block structures, write shopping lists in the house area, read to dolls and stuffed animals and estimate the number of dump trucks full of sand it will take to complete a sandbox mountain. They regularly encounter unexpected challenges in carrying out their play plans and begin to develop the kinds of critical thinking and problem solving skills needed to address them. This kind of contextual learning is much more effective than formal drill and practice sessions in helping children to internalize and generalize new information and skills

(California Department of Education, 2010).

Another element of school readiness is **motivation** – sometimes called “approaches to learning.” Children who are excited about learning, curious about the world, able to persist on tasks and confident that they will succeed are a kindergarten teacher’s dream. They are receptive to the learning opportunities a program provides and approach them as invitations to become actively involved by posing questions, offering ideas, and trying out their own theories. They have experienced the pleasure of mastering things important to them, and have also observed significant adults and peers in their lives enjoying the process of discovery and embracing new ideas.

The remaining foundational aspect of school readiness is **socio-emotional**, a developmental domain to which our program gives special emphasis. “Learning [in school] is not an isolated activity but occurs among peers with the guidance of an adult teacher. School success requires that children are capable of understanding other peoples’ feelings and viewpoints, cooperating with adults and peers, exercising emotional and behavioral self-control, and resolving disagreements constructively. These qualities ensure that children can participate in learning alongside others.”(Thompson, 2002) They are also much more challenging skills for many children to master than are learning the “ABCs.” They are heavily dependent on the “executive functions” governed by the brain’s prefrontal cortex, a brain region not fully mature until a person’s early twenties. Thus, the self-regulation (i.e., attentional, behavioral, and emotional control) that school requires is especially challenging for children in their early years. Academic skills are what primary grade teachers are trained to teach. By contrast, kindergarten teachers report that they have much more difficulty working with children who lack the motivation and socioemotional maturity appropriate for their age (Rimm-Kaufman, Pianta, & Cox, 2000; Santa Clara COE, 2008). Those who are not curious, confident, capable of cooperation or self-control are already behind even before story time begins.

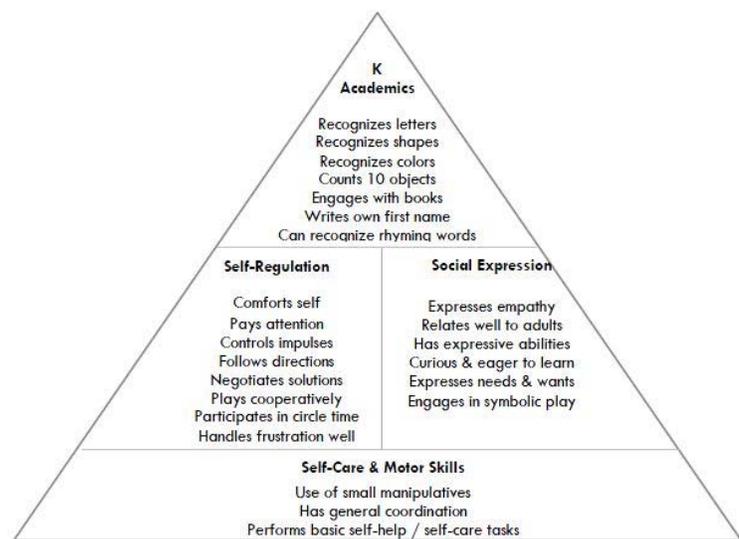
**Yes, our classrooms have alphabet charts, shelf labels and LOTS of books.** Children count, point out familiar letters, and practice fine motor skills and scientific inquiry methods during their lab school activities. But most important to us are the interpersonal skills and relationships they are building in these first years of life. These nurturing relationships have been described as the “active ingredients” of healthy psychological development in the early

years (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2000). They provide the lens through which young children experience everything else in their world, a secure base from which to explore and responsive mentoring to scaffold and enrich those explorations. The relationships we develop with your children in the context of their early learning experiences build on and support the relationships you already have with them.

**Yes, your children will be ready for school,** a school we all hope will continue to provide them with opportunities to follow their interests, develop their strengths and respect their individual temperaments and learning styles. They will leave here having had experience with large and small group projects, gatherings and activities. They will have developed negotiation and problem solving skills, and well as the ability to translate their ideas and emotions into language. They will know that print has meaning, and will probably be beginning to express themselves through writing in their own way. Their enthusiasm, curiosity and motivation to learn more will be intact.

Our jobs at the point when our children move from this familiar place to a new educational setting is to provide them with emotional support in the transition and to advocate for educational practices that respect them and guide their learning in ways we know are appropriate to their stage of life. The transition from preschool to “real school” is a big change, but by staying involved in your children’s school experiences-at whatever stage-you can have an impact on the shape that they take.

### Basic Building Blocks of Readiness



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