Preparing Boys for Starting School

Parents are, and should always be, considered the first teachers of their child. From the time the child is born, some say even whilst in the womb, parents teach their children a whole host of things.

But, as parents know only too well, boys and girls are different! They think differently, they learn differently and they have different strengths. As a generalisation, girls will learn to read more quickly than boys while boys will have stronger spatial skills. They will have intellectual growth bursts at different times. This is because their brains are wired differently. By their early 20s it equals itself out but these intellectual growth spurts mean we need to be very careful about comparing the progress of our children against each other.

So how do we prepare our boys for the first stages of formal schooling?

Firstly, there are no hard and fast rules in order to prepare your son for school. We need to remember that boys’ learning needs to be real and relevant and that their learning will probably be more loud and active than a girl’s learning. Verbal instructions should be short and concise as boys tend not to be as verbal as girls. Boys are often very visual so reinforcement with visual cues is extremely helpful for them. Therefore engaging them in the day to day activities we already do such as cooking and shopping, sharing our reading and wrapping gifts can become a great learning experience. Most early skills require lots of repetition in order for the boys to learn and practice.

Play

Play is essential – it is a child’s way of making sense of the world around him. As your son grows he will engage in different types of play as his social skills and confidence develops. Young children usually absorb themselves in solitary play and can play for long periods on their own. As they grow they will steer toward parallel play which is when they play next to but not necessarily with other children. As they become more confident in their language and social skills children will play in a co-operative situation with other children and will interact throughout the play. Helping him to play harmoniously with others and by sharing and taking turns is very important.

To develop social skills, remind your son to use please and thank you, to answer when spoken to and encourage him to engage in conversation with both adults and peers. These are all valuable social skills which will serve boys well throughout school and throughout their lives in general.

Independence is developed by providing opportunities for boys to develop self-management skills. An example of this is independent eating which would include opening and closing of lunch boxes and wrappers; and being independent in dressing and toileting. Ownership and responsibility of belongings are also valuable life long skills which should be encouraged early by having him put things away or be responsible for certain toys.
Reading

Pre-literacy skills begin as soon as you begin reading to your child and sharing books and other literature together. Teaching your son Nursery Rhymes and actions songs will help develop language both in speech and reading. Through these experiences they are learning to play with and beginning to understand the rhythm of language. They are also beginning to understand rhyme which will assist them in their reading development.

When children look at pictures and words they are beginning to read. Keep reading lots of picture books and ask him to find things in the pictures or talk about the story. Looking for letters which are the same as the first letter in his name is a great way to begin the formal skills of reading. Letting him help in write the shopping list or posting a letter or picture to someone special will help to develop an interest in reading and writing.

Other everyday language activities would include, crosswords; word puzzles; scripting a story for his pictures; looking at street signs when driving; reading a map when visiting; showing and reading birthday cards together; writing cards together; looking at his name in print; pointing out words for familiar objects; looking at language in computer games; as well as looking at newspapers and magazines. This is a small sample of the everyday language experiences you can participate in with your child.

Writing

There are several stages your child will progress through as he begins to learn to write. Allowing your child time to experiment with a variety of writing implements including chalk, textas, pencils and paints will all assist his writing ability. Fine motor tasks should be encouraged as this will help him to be physically ready physically to write. Playdough, goop, finger painting, digging and planting, buttering bread, cutting with both knives (plastic is fine) and scissors; playing in shaving cream; picking up things with fingers; and threading are all excellent for developing the small muscles need for writing. Tired or underdeveloped muscles will not cope with holding a pencil for a sustained period of time in a classroom setting!

Most parents will be aware of the time it takes to hear your baby’s first utterances and the milestones associated with developing his speech. Encourage conversations but remember that some speech sounds may not be developed until your son is in Year One. If you have concerns about your son’s speech development, you should contact a speech pathologist for an assessment.

Maths

Pre-Numeracy experiences can be approached in the same manner. Talking to your child about everyday numbers is easy and does not require any special skill or materials. Learning his age and holding up corresponding fingers, rote counting and playing number rhymes and games are all early pre-numeracy activities. Looking at number in his environment is a great way to encourage a
connection between the rote numbers he has been learning and the written numerals. Letter box numbers, addresses with numbers, cooking and measuring, street signs and road maps, building instructions and assembly instructions are a few of the everyday activities which will help build your child's numeracy skills.

Other areas of mathematical concepts which should be explored and experimented with are estimating, measuring and patterns.

In general, boys should be allowed to be boys and climb and balance as these skills also assist in the development of reading, writing and social play.

So will he be prepared?

Parents should look at overall development when considering if their son is ready to engage in a Preschool program. Some considerations would be:

- Does he know his own name and age
- Does he recognize his name in print
- Can he name one or more letters in his name
- Does he know his primary colours
- Can he count to 10 by rote
- Can he play harmoniously with others
- Does he share and take turns
- Does he interact with adults and peers
- Does he use manners and answer when spoken to
- Is he self managing in eating and toileting
- Has he had lots of exposure to language activities
- Is he co-ordinated in balancing and climbing
- Does he have more that one interest area (blocks, collage, sand play etc)

This is not, nor is meant to be a prescriptive list of readiness skills, rather some points to consider. If you are unsure about your son’s progress, talk to his current day care or Kindergarten or speak to the Preschool with which you intend to enrol.

In finishing there are two important things to remember. Repetition is the key to most learning and allowing time for experimenting and practicing is essential. If you remind yourself that learning takes time both you and your son will become less frustrated. And don’t forget all boys are individuals and that they will develop at their own pace. It is not a race – enjoy them!

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