



Community Paediatric Review

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School Readiness

Some parents are concerned about whether their child is ready to start school and they start to seek advice from a range of professionals to support them in making a decision. Often the preschool or kindergarten teacher may raise concerns with the parents, because of observations of the child while in this setting.

For the majority of parents the idea of "school readiness" is not an issue. Their child will be the "age" specified by the education system, have been at preschool or kindergarten, will be curious and show an eagerness to learn, will have no social interaction difficulty with peers, and will be developing independent skills such as dressing and toileting that will increasingly allow them to function with a minimum of adult supervision.

However, for some children parents will ask the question "Is my child ready for school?". The doubt in their minds may be due to a number of factors, including:

- The child may be chronologically young.
- The child may be perceived as "immature".
- The child may be physically small for their age and appear younger.
- There may be concerns about the child's social skills and the way they interact with other children.
- A child's language and communication skills are not as well developed.
- There may be delay in other skills such as gross or fine motor.
- There may be concerns about the child's behaviour or they may become easily tired throughout the day.

- The parent may not be ready to let go of their child.

The challenge for professionals when discussing this issue with parents is to be able to provide a wholistic view of the child taking into account the family and school environment.

What is school readiness?

All school systems set a chronological date for when the child is ready to enrol in school. In Australia, this varies from state to state, but most children have to turn five years of age within a few months of actually commencing school. This is the age when children are regarded as being "ready to learn". However, there is great variability internationally in school starting age; in the USA for example children start school at the age of 6, and in the Scandinavian countries the school starting age is 7 years. These differences reflect different cultural beliefs about childhood and when children are ready to begin formal learning, but are also a function of the different learning environments that children are placed in.

The differences in school starting age reflect different attitudes towards what constitutes learning. It has been held traditionally that children do not begin to learn until they begin formal schooling. However, research indicates clearly that children begin learning from birth, and that experiences in the early years before children begin a structured preschool or school experience are vital in establishing the base for future formal learning.

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Influences on school readiness

There are a series of developmental and environmental factors that impact on school readiness, consistent with the transactional model of development that postulates that children's development is influenced by a complex series of transactions between biological factors within the child and environmental events. Thus development at any one point in time is influenced by normal biological and maturational processes common to all children – the child develops through predictable stages with individual differences being defined by their particular genetic makeup. Environmental factors are also extremely important. A child's development and subsequent readiness for school will be influenced greatly by the sort of environment the child is exposed to from an early age. Recent brain development research documents how powerful are the influence of environmental factors. Research indicates that early experiences can affect the structure and functioning of the brain and set a child's developmental trajectory that can have consequences far beyond the early years.

Family and socio-cultural influences are paramount. Children who grow up in a stimulating, language-rich environment where great value is placed on learning are at a significant advantage as they approach school entry. They are likely to have been read to from a young age, have been exposed to picture and alphabet books, will have had their curiosity stimulated by their parents, and will have had a variety of structured play and learning experiences that make them eager to learn more.

On the other hand, children who come from disadvantaged environments are at risk even in the early years. The environment would have few or none of the characteristics described above, so that by the time these children are chronologically ready for school they may already be lagging behind their middle-class peer group.

What characterises school readiness?

In considering a child's readiness to begin school, there is a consensus that they will have needed to have reached a number of developmental competencies.

- *Language and cognitive skills:* Children who are bright and intellectually inquisitive are likely to adapt more quickly to a learning environment. Mild intellectual disability is often first detected when children begin school, and it is noticed that they have

difficulty in learning basic concepts and are slower than their peer group. Language competence is an important aspect of school readiness. Children need to be able to follow instructions and understand what teachers are saying, as well as being able to communicate effectively with teachers and their peer group.

- *Physical well-being:* Physical well-being is an important attribute to consider for school readiness. Children who have a disability or a chronic illness may have difficulty with some aspects of school, and any physical or functional limitations need to be considered when making a decision about whether a child is ready for school.
- *Motor co-ordination and skills:* Children at school will need co-ordination skills to allow them to dress and undress, unwrap lunch, use a pencil and scissors, and participate in other activities that require eye-hand and motor co-ordination.
- *Concentration and emotional adjustment:* Children need to be able to socialise and play with their peer group, and be comfortable in an environment without the support of their parents. The structured nature of a more formal learning environment that a school represents necessitates them being able to focus on tasks, follow directions and instructions from teachers, cope with transitions, and understand the rules of the school and of social interaction.
- *Independence:* Children beginning school need to have a range of skills so that they can function essentially independently of adult supervision. This includes going to the toilet by themselves, dressing, and being able to follow a structured classroom routine.

The importance of preschool experience

Research in many countries has shown repeatedly the benefits of a preschool experience for all children, but especially for those from disadvantaged environments. In the preschool setting children are exposed to a variety of learning experiences that prepare them for the more structured and formal learning that takes place once they begin school. They learn to interact with peers and understand the rules of social interaction, to follow the daily structure of the preschool setting, and are exposed to stimulating learning opportunities that they may not have experienced before.

How can parents help make their child ready for school?

- Encourage them to participate in activities around the home, such as helping put away dishes or putting dirty clothes in the laundry basket.
- Encourage the use of crayons and pencils so they begin to draw and then write.
- Ensure that children have regular contact with other children so they learn to interact appropriately with them.
- Encourage children to try things and praise their efforts, so giving them the confidence to continue to experiment and learn.
- Introduce books and reading to your child from an early age; parents can and should begin reading to their young child on a regular (preferably daily) basis from about the age of four months.
- Join a library and encourage books to become part of young children's everyday lives.
- Talk to children and sing songs with them, and encourage them to talk to you about anything and everything. Shopping expeditions or a walk in the park can become the basis of a rich conversation.
- Teach them to dress themselves and ensure that they can manage the toilet by themselves.

How is the decision about school readiness made?

Consideration of whether a child is ready for school needs to take into account the complexity of child development, the often uneven maturation rates of children at that age, family factors such as parental expectations, whether the child has had previous experience in a preschool setting, and the educational setting into which the child will be going. In many instances the decision to start school will be straightforward, and occasionally the decision that a child is not ready for school is also reasonably clear. However, in many cases the decision is made following careful consideration between the parents, the child's kindergarten teacher (if the child has attended kindergarten) and the school.

An experienced kindergarten teacher is usually in a very good position to assist the parents in making the decision. If the teacher feels strongly that the child is not ready for school, then this needs to be taken seriously. Generally this decision should be deferred as late as possible because of the rapid and uneven maturation

seen in children of this age. There can be very rapid changes in developmental achievement and socialisation skills over a few months; a child who in mid year is considered immature and perhaps not ready for school can develop rapidly over a course of a few months. An assessment done just prior to the child beginning school can often be dramatically different from the results of testing done six months previously.

There is a plethora of school readiness tests available, and professionals will often use them to assist in making the decision about whether or not a child is ready for school. These tests need to be used with great care, and only as part of a more comprehensive review. It can be very misleading to use a test result as the sole basis for making a decision about school readiness because of the complexity of development and all of the other factors that have been described previously that influence a child's performance in the school setting. If readiness tests suggest that the child has significant developmental delays or signs of emotional behavioural problems, then the child needs a comprehensive assessment by an experienced professional used to working with children of this age.

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Reflection Questions

- 1. How do you react when a parent asks you about the issue of school readiness?***
- 2. What advice do you currently provide to a parent when they ask about school readiness?***
- 3. Are you familiar with any programs run by the local primary schools to assist children make the transition to school?***
- 4. Do you routinely raise the question about whether a child attends kindergarten/preschool?***

Overweight and Obesity in under 5's

Prevalence

Overweight and obesity have become by-products of the modern lifestyle and affect even the youngest in our population. Rates of overweight and obesity in children under five have doubled in the last decade and continues to increase. This was shown in statewide surveys among preschool children in South Australia, and more recently, in the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC) where 15% of 4-year-olds were overweight and 6% obese (Figure 1). Following current trends, in twenty years time, half of all young Australians will be overweight or obese. This has grave implications on the future health of this generation.

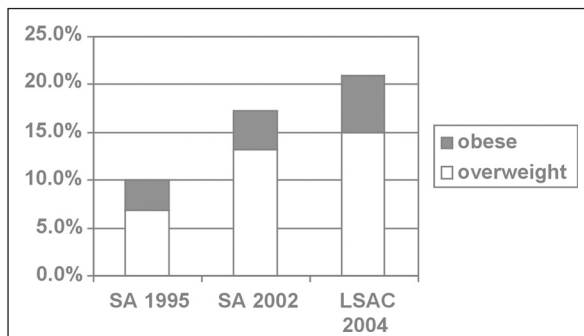


Figure 1 Prevalence of overweight and obesity in South Australian (SA) and LSAC studies

The patterns for health and lifestyle are set in motion from a very early age. The preschool period offers a window of opportunity to influence the child's environment and lifestyle behaviours before they become entrenched and much more difficult to reverse. Because parents still have a large amount of control over the child's environment at this age, and exert much influence as role models, they can be very powerful partners in the fight against childhood obesity. Community Child Health Nurses and other health professionals have a unique opportunity to engage with young families at this important stage in life.

Causes and Consequences

The current epidemic of obesity in children reflects a chronic energy imbalance, resulting from interactions between common genes and our modern environment, with its ready availability of energy dense foods and increasingly sedentary lifestyle. Medical causes of

obesity, such as endocrine disorders, Prader-Willi and other genetic syndromes are extremely rare, although they should be considered when obesity is accompanied by short stature, developmental delay or an unusual history, such as poor feeding and hypotonia in early life.

Obesity tracks strongly over time and many obese youngsters will remain obese as adults. Even from an early age, overweight children often suffer psychological distress and social isolation. The incidence of both type I and II diabetes in children is rising and obese children have an increased risk of suffering from a range of conditions including asthma, sleep apnoea, gastrointestinal and orthopaedic problems. Precursors of atherosclerosis and blood fat abnormalities are not uncommon in obese children, putting them at increased risk of heart disease and stroke. Indeed, the time to intervene is well before these consequences set in, however, prevention and early intervention in childhood remain a formidable challenge.

Approaching the issue with parents

While much of the advice about weight management for children is similar across the age groups, several issues are particularly relevant to young children.

- **Growth patterns in early life**

After infancy, children experience a decline in body fatness that reaches an all time low some time between the ages of 4 to 7 and a steady increase thereafter, as shown in the Body Mass Index (BMI) for age percentile charts. Many parents of preschool children worry that their children are too thin and too picky with their food when this is developmentally to be expected. Parents of overweight children may also anticipate an ability to shed "puppy fat" long past this early period of decline.

As BMI is changing over time in children, appropriate age- and sex-specific references should be used to identify overweight. Australian health professionals are encouraged to use growth charts published by the Centre for Diseases Control, available online at www.cdc.gov/growthcharts/. Because young children still have a lot of growing to do, the aim of weight management is to slow the amount of weight gain whilst they grow in height, rather than weight loss.

- **Nutrition and feeding practices**

The ability to provide adequate nutrition is seen as a very important part of parenting. The toddler and preschool period can present some trying situations for parents as they attempt to ensure an adequate diet while children seem more intent on exerting their own independence, often with food refusal. Some commonly adopted feeding practices have been shown to have counterproductive effects on children's eating and food preferences. Therefore instead of forcing or bribing or severely restricting certain foods, parents are encouraged to be good models in terms of their own eating and to provide a wide variety of nutritious foods in a well-balanced diet. The child should be allowed to decide whether to eat and how much will be eaten.

- **Physical activity and sedentary activity**

Modern families are characteristically time-poor, and opportunities for children to be active are becoming increasingly compartmentalised. The environment in which children are in determines the type of activity to a large extent, and children are most likely to be active when outdoors and in the company of other children. Active adults are also more likely to encourage activity in children.

While preschool children are probably at their most active time in life, modern preschoolers still do not move enough. They are also increasingly exposed to indoor and sedentary forms of entertainment. Current recommendations are that young children spend no more than 2 hours a day in front of the television and other electronic media, especially in daylight hours, and should be encouraged to have at least 1 hour of moderate to vigorous physical activity a day.

- **Raising the issue of overweight**

Many parents do not recognise overweight in their children, especially when they are young. In an increasingly overweight community, most overweight youngsters do not stand out from their peers, appear to eat well and to be just as active and happy as any other child. At this age, overweight children may be seen to be better-nourished and "better eaters" than their thinner counterparts. Social and cultural values relating to body size also play an important role in the amount of concern parents have for their child's weight.

For many families, the issue of overweight will not be easy to confront, for a variety of reasons. Firstly, the condition is highly stigmatised and parents may feel

blamed for their child's weight problem. Some parents may have had long term struggles themselves with weight control, and feel powerless to change their family's "genetic" fate. Many feel that as long as children are happy and healthy, a little excess "puppy fat" is not harmful. For others, fears that over-emphasising the child's weight may lead to negative self-concept could prevent them from acting on their concerns about their child's weight. Some parents are genuinely concerned, however they may feel they are ill-equipped to tackle it themselves.

Community Child Health Nurses and other primary health care professionals have an important role to play and can provide parents with accurate information about their child's weight status and engage them on a personal level about their concerns, their fears and their preparedness to take action. An emphasis on early prevention of future weight problems and setting up patterns for healthy living may be more effective than trying to convince parents that their preschooler has a "weight problem". An open and non-judgmental approach is suggested, realising that most families with overweight young children may not see their child's weight as an issue or feel they are in any immediate health danger. At this early age, many lifestyle and nutritional changes can be done in a family context without singling out the child and making their weight an issue. This may also involve education and advice about common concerns, providing information about local activities and resources specifically aimed at young children, and supporting them in an ongoing relationship to make sustained healthier choices for their families. It may be as simple as making oneself available even if parents decline to discuss these issues initially.

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Further information

A number of excellent resources and parent tip sheets are now freely available on the web. These include:

- www.healthyactive.gov.au
- www.goforyourlife.vic.gov.au
- www.nutritionaustralia.org

For health professionals, the following website contains the NHMRC guidelines for the management of overweight and obesity in children and adolescents.

- www.obesityguidelines.gov.au

Reflection questions:

- 1. Do you feel comfortable broaching the topic of overweight/obesity with a parent?*
- 2. How would you raise this issue?*
- 3. Do you currently use age and sex specific BMI charts?*
- 4. What advice would you give about nutrition and feeding and physical activity?*

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Title	Author	Edition
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