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Kindergarten: What to Expect from This Important Year

By [Judy Koutsky](#)

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Kindergarten is very different from when we went to school. Back then it was primarily play-based, but now kids are learning so much: not just ABCs and 1,2,3s but reading, writing and math. It's an important year for both you and your child. "Kindergarten sets the tone for your child's love of learning; it's the foundation for all the future years of schooling," Amy Kieckhefer, a kindergarten teacher in Chicago, says. Your child will be hitting amazing milestones, both developmentally and academically and excelling in ways you may not have predicted.

Plus, this year your child will be having many firsts: first field trip, test, homework assignment, project, report card, parent-teacher conference, and ride on a school bus, Lisa Shechtman, a kindergarten teacher in Chester, PA, says. Take photos to remember these moments and talk positively about each one. The first of anything can be scary or exciting depending on the way it's presented.

Kindergarten is an exciting time and a year filled with social and emotional growth. Parents will see their little ones take big steps such as dressing themselves in the morning, getting their own breakfast, organize their book bags, and remembering things such as library books on library day. "Students will begin to experiment with letters, sounds and sight words and some children will begin to read simple books," Caitlin Talan, a kindergarten teacher in Grosse Pointe Woods, MI, says. Kids will also begin to experiment with different ways to express their knowledge and understanding of a topic through pictures, words and art. During play and choice times, kids learn to express their feelings in positive ways and learn appropriate strategies for working through conflict.

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Goals for Kindergarten

While your kids will certainly learn a lot academically, what's equally wonderful about kindergarten is the social and developmental component. Learning routines, making friends, finding their voice and speaking up in class are all things they will start to become

comfortable doing. Here, some of the key goals your child will master.

Independence. From beginning through the end of day, your child will learn to take ownership of his every step. “From hanging up their backpacks and jackets, to independent activities like reading from their book boxes until announcements begin, to cleaning up supplies after center time, to going to the bathroom and washing hands by themselves, your child is managing his every move throughout the day,” Koie English, a kindergarten teacher in Lewisville, Texas, says.

Collaboration. Working in small groups is the cornerstone of kindergarten classes. “We focus on how to have a discussion with a peer, how to agree and disagree in a positive way and how to take turns to work collaboratively,” Natalie Bice, a kindergarten teacher in Chicago, says.

Confidence. This is a big one. Students learn to set goals and work towards them. Getting stickers for a job well done or reaching the highest color level on a behavior chart, encourages your child to work hard and feel good about their successes.

Literacy. Reading behaviors take center stage this year. From reading pictures, to learning sight words and retelling stories, your child is gaining the foundation of reading and writing behaviors that will be used throughout his life. It’s an exciting launching off point.

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How Your Child Learns Throughout the Year

“The developmental progression in kindergarten is huge, even compared to what takes place during the school year at other grade levels,” says Tim Lightman, an academic administrator and former kindergarten teacher in Bryn Mawr, PA.

Here, an overview of what’s happening in the classroom throughout the year.

Fall:

Learning new routines: “Students are expected to learn the morning routine— entering the classroom quietly, hanging up book bags and coats, turning in homework folders and

coming to the carpet,” Shechtman says. “In my class, students earn a pom-pom ball every morning they remember to turn in their homework folder. Pom-poms are then used to choose a prize at the end of the week.”

Kids are not only learning the ropes, but they’re getting rewarded for it, so confidence is being built. Positive reinforcement—including verbal praise and getting stickers for following directions—is constantly used in kindergarten classrooms. “We also practice listening rules at the start of the year: eyes watching, ears listening, body still, and lips quiet. We have a motion that goes with each rule. Practicing and reinforcing these rules helps students build up listening stamina,” Shechtman says. Responsibility is also very important at this time. “They choose their own food in the cafeteria and are responsible for cleaning up their own mess when they are finished. Also, each child is given a classroom job such as line leader, door holder or teacher’s assistant,” English says. It makes the child feel important and an integral part of the class.

Finding their voice. In kindergarten, many teachers encourage kids to talk to their partners as well as participating verbally in class. The purpose of this is to get kids to be active, not passive, participants in their learning. “During our morning meeting, each child gets to share their answer to our daily question, such as What did you do over the weekend,” Shechtman says. In other classrooms kids greet each other by name each day and then talk to their partner about the question of the day. “In our class we might ask, can you think of a word that begins with a ‘w’ or did you eat something for dinner yesterday that starts with a ‘t’? Then we encourage kids to look their partner in the eye and really listen to their answers,” English says.

During reading time, a big part of the beginning of the year is retelling a story. “Retelling story events is a common theme and used for listening comprehension skills,” Shechtman says. The teacher will then ask the kids questions: How did Goldilocks feel? How did the story end? Teachers encourage kids to raise their hands and speak up, so that each child feels included in the conversation.

Discovering how to get along with other kids. Socialization is also a big part of the beginning of school. Your child will start to develop friendships, but will also learn one of the most important skills in kindergarten: conflict resolution. In fact, dealing with issues like

hurting another child's feelings are a big part of kindergarten. "In our class, we use the peace table as a safe place for kids to work out their issues," Kieckhefer says.

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If a child break's his promise, hurts someone's feelings or leaves out another child, the two kids go to the peace table. "At the beginning of the year we make a class promise, we talk about how we all make mistakes, but how's it's important to recognize other's feelings and say I'm sorry," Kieckhefer says. At the peace table, the one child explains how he feels and the second child must listen and the repeat back what was said ("I heard you say") and then say I'm sorry. It's a quick conversation, and then there's a high five at the end. "It teaches respect, the importance of owning your feelings and admitting that you were wrong,"

Kieckhefer says. Conflict resolution clears the air and ultimately builds friendships. After spending time at the peace table, the kids get to know and appreciate their peers and are often boosted by a well-intentioned apology. "At the beginning of the year, we have kids at the peace table several times a day, by the end of the year, it's several times a week. In the beginning the teacher may be involved to model behavior, by the end of the year the kids

are doing it themselves.”

Winter:

Actively reading and writing. “In the fall, a good portion of language arts instruction focuses on letters and letter sounds. After winter break, more emphasis is placed on utilizing the students’ knowledge of letters to read decodable words, so blending the sounds c-a-t to read the word ‘cat,’” Shechtman says. Additionally, while sight words are introduced in the fall, the amount of sight words a student is expected to learn increases throughout the year.

“Word families are also introduced after winter break, so words that end with the letter ‘n’... hen, pen, men,” Shechtman says. Also, while writing in the fall consist of sight words such as “I, like, the” and using phonemic awareness to write the first letter of words, after winter break students are expected to use a wider variety of sight words (only, dear, what) and to use phonemic awareness to write the first, last and some other letters within the word. “Additionally, kids move from completing open-ended sentences (I like...I drink...) to writing their own thoughts and ideas in 3-5 word sentences (I rode the school bus),” English says. Inventive spelling improves, too.

Working on longer projects. A big part of kindergarten is creating longer and longer attention spans and focus. “In the fall we start with two minutes of reading and by winter it’s 20,” Kieckhefer says. Often times in the fall, teachers are reading to the kids, but by winter, there are more options. “In my classroom kids can choose from several different options—read to themselves, read to a friend, listen to a friend read—so it’s 20 minutes of their choice.” Kids are gaining more independence and confidence in their reading and they are also moving up in their reading levels. “I test kids at the beginning of the year and then regularly throughout the year including after winter break,” Kieckhefer says. When they move up a level (from A to B, or C to D), they are so excited. I let their parents know, too, so they can be reading the appropriate level books at home.”

Exploring math concepts. “In the spring, simple math is introduced—recognizing numbers, knowing how many objects are five—but by the winter, you start moving to combining sets,

with addition,” English says. So while in the beginning it often involves blocks (so they can touch, feel and comprehend the math and not memorize the concept), by winter teachers are moving into more complicated math concepts. “We teach them how to read a calendar, how to read a clock, how to do simple measurement,” English says. By spring, the most complicated part—subtraction—is tackled.

Spring

Taking the lead. At the beginning of the year, teachers are the ones doing most of the talking: asking the questions, telling the kids what to draw, trying to illicit responses from kids. But by the end of the year, kids are comfortable not only participating in class, but taking the lead. In Kieckhefer’s classroom they do a unit on passport around the world. In the beginning she picks the destination and explains the people, places and things. By spring, it’s the kids. “It’s great to see the transition, in the beginning I’m telling them everything (draw the American flag), but by spring, they are asking the big questions.” Are there lions in the Serengeti? What kind of food do people eat in France? How many languages do they speak in India? “They’re itching with curiosity, eager to learn more. By the end of the year, I let them present, as a group, and they are excited to show off their knowledge.”

Becoming a competent reader and writer. “At this point, emphasis is placed on conventions of writing, like starting a sentence with a capital letter, leaving spaces between words, putting a period at the end of the sentence,” Shechtman says. Plus, students move from blending and segmenting phonemes to manipulating phonemes--what word do you get if you switch the first sound in “bake” to “c”? The spring season through the end of the year brings a sense of understanding and recognition. Kids can really begin to see themselves and how much they've grown. They are very aware of what they can and cannot do. “We expect them to be able to work independently, read at a first grade level, create telling sentences and questions, write their name, letters, numbers and ideas on paper and use math concepts for problem solving,” English says.

Putting it all together: “While many people think about kindergarten in terms of academics, I really believe it’s 50-50 between academics and socialization,” English says.

“So by the end of the year we want kids to be ready for first grade reading, to be sure, but also and equally important to know how to be responsible for their behaviors, to know how to say they’re sorry, to learn how to work and play well with others.”

By the end of the year, it’s great to hear kids talk about “their school.” From working in the school garden, to helping create international day where food and dances from around the world are explored, kids feel like they belong, to their classroom specifically and their school in a larger sense. The last week of school often culminates in a picnic or fun day and the energy and excitement of a great year of kindergarten gives way to enthusiasm of the year to come: first grade.

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