

6-30-2013

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Recommended Citation

Brotherson, S. E., Query, S., & Saxena, D. (2013). Parental Learning and School Readiness in the Gearing Up for Kindergarten Program. *Journal of Human Sciences and Extension*, 1(1), 2.

<https://scholarsjunction.msstate.edu/jhse/vol1/iss1/2>

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Parental Learning and School Readiness in the *Gearing Up for Kindergarten* Program

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Entering kindergarten is a key moment in a young child's life, and parents are a child's first teacher. What can guide parents as they assist children with school readiness? Gearing Up for Kindergarten is an intensive parent education and school readiness program designed to help parents and children prepare for school. Gearing Up for Kindergarten is a parent education program that combines early learning opportunities for pre-kindergarten children with parent education opportunities for adults. This study presents findings from evaluation efforts conducted with 59 Gearing Up for Kindergarten adult participants during the 2006-2007 school year. Participants in the program demonstrated (1) high satisfaction with program quality and experiences, (2) impacts on parental knowledge and confidence, and (3) significant and positive changes in parental practices related to school readiness. Implications for parent education and programs intended to strengthen school readiness among pre-kindergarten children are explored. Parent education on school readiness can provide a substantive resource as parents help their children develop and become ready for the school years.

Keywords: parent education, parenting, school readiness, young children, program evaluation

Introduction and Background

School readiness for children entering kindergarten has become a topic of substantive interest and attention in early childhood care and education (McLanahan, 2005). As a child's first teacher, parents play a vital role in understanding the readiness of their children and what they can do as parents to prepare their children for a successful school experience (Sheridan, Knoche, Kupzyk, Edwards, & Marvin, 2011; Zill, 1995). Child advocates contend that children will be less likely to enter school ready to learn unless families, schools and communities work together to provide environments designed to support the growth of children across all areas of development (El Nokali, Bachman, & Votruba-Drzal, 2010; Merkowicz, Jelley, Collins, & Arkin, 1997; Walsh, 2005).

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Parent education tends to be more successful when it responds to specific family concerns and meets the developmental priorities of children at specific points in time (Duncan & Goddard, 2005; Kettner, Moroney, & Martin, 2013; Mulroy, Goldman, & Wales, 1998). With the increased emphasis on school achievement fostered by the No Child Left Behind Act and greater global competition in education, American schoolchildren are being asked to enter school more prepared and ready to learn than ever before. Further, a child's early years offer an excellent time to intervene with parents and children to foster school readiness (Kock, 2003; Sheridan et al., 2011). Research on children and school achievement clearly has shown that parental involvement is among the best predictors of a child's readiness and performance in school (Henderson & Berla, 1994). Patterns of parental involvement directly affect student achievement and promote academic success (Hill & Taylor, 2004).

School readiness has been defined as "the skills, knowledge, behaviors, and accomplishments that children know and can do as they enter kindergarten in the following areas of child development: social and emotional development; approaches to learning; language and literacy development; creativity and the arts; cognition and general knowledge; and physical well-being and motor development" (Minnesota Department of Education, 2007, p. 1). To meet the needs of children preparing for school and their parents at a key developmental and social time period, the *Gearing Up for Kindergarten* educational program was developed and piloted.

A Brief Overview of *Gearing Up for Kindergarten*

Gearing Up for Kindergarten is a prevention-focused parent education program designed to facilitate parental involvement, child development and school readiness. The program was developed and piloted by the North Dakota State University (NDSU) Extension Service, in collaboration with local public schools in eastern North Dakota. Initial funding for program development and implementation was received through the United Way Foundation. The program was developed in response to a competitive grant opportunity designed to facilitate early childhood education and school readiness, which was undertaken by the United Way as part of its Success by Six strategic initiative. The initial year of operation was the 2006-2007 academic year. The program has operated primarily in the state of North Dakota during a period of pilot testing and refinement since its inception.

The *Gearing Up for Kindergarten* program consists of two eight-week sessions that run for 90 minutes to two hours each time. The program is designed for families and children to participate during the year prior to entering kindergarten, typically scheduled for eight weeks in the fall and then for eight weeks in the spring of the pre-kindergarten year. The sessions begin with 45 minutes of parent-child interaction activities focused on math, reading, sensory awareness, science, art, and imaginary play. Parents then separate for parent education on topics related to child development and school readiness (e.g., child guidance, media, temperament, reading and

children, nutrition, parenting styles, and other issues). The children join with an early childhood facilitator and classroom assistant to engage in circle time and other early learning activities. The child-focused activities center on a variety of developmental tasks, such as getting along with others, listening, taking turns, responsibility, and literacy skills.

Parents are a child's first and best teachers, but many parents want and need support in their role of preparing their children for success in school (El Nokali et al., 2010; Hall, 2007). *Gearing Up for Kindergarten* is designed to provide the needed support for parents and children by improving access to information; providing a school-based setting and parent education class; and building relationships among children, parents, and school personnel.

Purpose of the Study

Parent and family interventions targeted at younger ages have great potential to generate cumulative benefits by altering a child's future developmental trajectory (Heckman, 2000; Schweinhart et al., 2005). Parents and their knowledge and involvement have a key role in preparing children for a successful transition into school (Epstein, 2001; Sheridan et al., 2011). Assessment of educational programs meant to assist parents and children can provide needed insights on how individuals perceive a program and what aspects of the program are working (DeBord, Roseboro, & Wicker, 1998; Kettner et al., 2012).

The purpose of this study was to gather information on basic demographics of program participants and parent perceptions of the general value and impacts of the program. In addition, the study examined parent perceptions on the value of specific topics in the program, as well as perceived outcomes for parents who participated in the program. Parents were asked to rate:

- Overall value of the educational program,
- General impacts of the program on overall parenting and knowledge,
- Value of specific class sessions to parents, and
- Perceived impacts of the program on parental knowledge and behavior in areas related to school readiness.

This process facilitated the assessment of how *Gearing Up for Kindergarten* affected parents of pre-kindergarten children in its pilot year.

Methodology and Sample

Gearing Up for Kindergarten operated in its pilot year (2006-2007) at five sites, which included four elementary schools and one Head Start program. Recruitment brochures were distributed through a variety of cooperating agencies, including schools, Even Start and Head Start, child care programs, social services, and public libraries. Sites operated with an enrollment limit of 15

families per site, and total enrollment for Fall 2006 was 69 families. Families were enrolled into the program on a first-come, first-served basis. All families were welcome to participate, and enrollment was not restricted to a particular family context. Due to limited funding in the program's pilot year, only one session of the program operated at each program site in North Dakota. Parents and their pre-kindergarten children participated in two eight-week educational sessions, one each in Fall 2006 and Spring 2007. Parents completed a self-report retrospective pretest questionnaire twice, once at the end of the first eight-week session and again upon program completion.

The retrospective pretest completed by parents was developed as a specific program evaluation instrument based upon the objectives and content of the *Gearing Up for Kindergarten* program. The questionnaire included 8 questions on demographic characteristics of participants, 10 questions on perceived value and general impacts of the program, 2 questions on the perceived value of specific class sessions, and 33 questions focused on parent knowledge and behavior linked with areas addressed by the program content. The questionnaire was pilot tested with two small focus groups of four to five parents each and also reviewed by two university faculty members and three early childhood educators. This review process demonstrated the face validity of the instrument.

A total sample of 59 participants from all program sites completed the questionnaire, resulting in an 85.5% response rate to the survey. Seventy-eight percent of respondents were women, and 22% were men. The mean age for parents in the study was 33.8 years ($SD=7.12$ years). The average number of children these parents reported having was 2.29 children ($SD=1.23$). The majority of respondents (96.6%) reported themselves as Caucasian, followed by Native Americans and African Americans (1.7% each). The majority of respondents (93.2%) reported being currently married, followed by single and never married (5.1%) and cohabiting (1.7%). Nearly half (47.5%) of participants reported having a 4-year college degree or higher, followed by a 2-year college degree (22%), some college (22%), high school degree/GED (6.8%), and some high school (1.7%). A majority of participants (64.4%) indicated they held full-time employment, with most others working part-time or remaining at home with children. Seventy-eight percent of parents lived in an urban setting, followed by 22% in a rural setting. Finally, 89.9% of participants indicated involvement in 6 or more sessions of the program during Fall 2006, which was also similar in the Spring 2007 session (88%).

Study Findings

The primary focus of the program evaluation centered on the overall value and perceived impacts of *Gearing Up for Kindergarten* on adult participants. The two retrospective pretest questionnaires had the same questions on overall value and general impacts of the program, while questions on specific class sessions and parent impacts were specific to the particular

session of the program. Overall value of the educational program was assessed with four questions using a 5-point scale from *not useful* to *extremely useful*. General impacts of the program on overall parenting and knowledge were assessed with six questions using a 5-point Likert scale. The perceived value of specific class sessions to parents was assessed with eight questions (for each session) using a 5-point Likert scale. Perceived impacts of the program on parental knowledge and behavior related to school readiness was assessed with 16 questions for the Fall 2006 session and 17 questions for the Spring 2007 session, using a 5-point Likert scale from *hardly ever* to *almost always*.

Overall Value of the Program

Participants were first asked about the program in general and the quality of their experiences. Asked about the overall value of the program, 73% of parents in the first program session (Fall 2006) indicated it was very or extremely useful to them, with 76% responding similarly following the Spring 2007 session. Among participants in Fall 2006, 78% said the handouts and learning activities in the program were very or extremely useful to them, while 76% responded similarly following the Spring session. All participants agreed or strongly agreed that the information in the program was presented to them in a clear and helpful manner. Similarly, 78% of parents in the Fall session strongly agreed that they were treated in a respectful manner, which then increased to 88% of parents following the Spring session. These responses indicate that participants expressed positive feelings about the overall value and experience of the *Gearing Up for Kindergarten* program in its initial pilot year.

General Impacts of the Program on Overall Parenting and Knowledge

Parents described largely positive general impacts as a result of participating in the first year of *Gearing Up for Kindergarten*. Parents were asked six questions about overall, how much the program, if at all, affected general aspects of their parenting knowledge and experience. Each question was answered on a scale from *not at all* to *very much*, with higher scores indicating a more positive impact of the program. For parents who completed the overall program evaluation for each session in Fall 2006 and Spring 2007, the average mean scores for each question are as follows: (1) increased knowledge of child development ($M = 3.46$ in Fall; $M = 3.56$ in Spring); (2) increased knowledge of healthy parenting ($M = 3.53$ in Fall; $M = 3.50$ in Spring); (3) increased confidence in being a good parent ($M = 3.51$ in Fall; $M = 3.62$ in Spring); (4) increased parenting skills ($M = 3.36$ in Fall; $M = 3.46$ in Spring); (5) changed behavior as a parent ($M = 3.22$ in Fall; $M = 3.28$ in Spring); and (6) influenced the relationship with your child ($M = 3.42$ in Fall; $M = 3.46$ in Spring). There were no significant differences between participant average scores on each item between the two sessions. Table 1 on the following page presents a descriptive analysis of the statistical frequencies for each question, with two sets of responses for each question (one for each session of the program).

Table 1. General Impacts of Gearing Up for Kindergarten Program

Overall, how much, if at all, did this program:	A Little				
	Not at All (1)	Bit (2)	Somewhat (3)	A Lot (4)	Very Much (5)
Increase your knowledge about child development	--	6.8% (Fall)	49.2% (Fall)	35.6% (Fall)	8.5% (Fall)
	--	12% (Spring)	36% (Spring)	36% (Spring)	16% (Spring)
Increase your knowledge of healthy parenting	--	6.8% (Fall)	40.7% (Fall)	45.8% (Fall)	6.8% (Fall)
	--	14% (Spring)	40% (Spring)	28% (Spring)	18% (Spring)
Increase your confidence in being a good parent	--	6.8% (Fall)	44.1% (Fall)	40.7% (Fall)	8.5% (Fall)
	--	14% (Spring)	36% (Spring)	24% (Spring)	26% (Spring)
Increase your skills as a parent	--	10.2% (Fall)	49.2% (Fall)	35.6% (Fall)	5.1% (Fall)
	--	14% (Spring)	44% (Spring)	24% (Spring)	18% (Spring)
Change your behavior as a parent	1.7% (Fall)	15.3% (Fall)	45.8% (Fall)	33.9% (Fall)	3.4% (Fall)
	--	20% (Spring)	48% (Spring)	16% (Spring)	16% (Spring)
Influence your relationship with your child	--	11.9% (Fall)	39% (Fall)	44.1% (Fall)	5.1% (Fall)
	--	16% (Spring)	42% (Spring)	22% (Spring)	20% (Spring)

In general, participating parents indicated very positive impacts from being involved in *Gearing Up for Kindergarten*. Of significant interest was the fact that the percentage of participants indicating that the program *very much* impacted their parenting in different areas generally increased substantially from the Fall 2006 session to the Spring 2007 session of the program. This increase may have represented either increased comfort level with the program or maturation of the program facilitators in working with participants.

About half of the participants (44% in Fall and 52% in Spring) indicated the program increased their knowledge of child development *a lot* or *very much*. Similarly, 52.6% of parents noted it

increased their knowledge of healthy parenting *a lot* or *very much* (46% in Spring). Forty-nine percent (Fall) felt it increased their confidence in being a good parent *a lot* or *very much*, and 41% (Fall) said it increased their parenting skills *a lot* or *very much*. Additionally, 83% (Fall) felt it changed their parental behavior at least somewhat, and 88% (Fall) indicated that it influenced their relationship with their child positively.

Value of Specific Topics to Parents

Participants were asked to rate the usefulness of different class topics on a scale ranging from *not useful* to *extremely useful*. The perceived value of specific sessions provides insight into what topics may be most helpful to parents or may need further attention.

In Fall 2006, the most highly rated session was on reading with children ($M = 3.90$), while the least valued was on the importance of sleep ($M = 3.10$); however, all were rated as at least somewhat useful for participants in the program. In Spring 2007, the most highly rated session was on child safety ($M = 4.04$), and six of eight topics were rated quite highly with a mean score of 3.75 or above. It seems clear that participants valued the specific topics they learned about and gained value from the learning experience. The mean score ratings for each specific topic covered in the Fall 2006 and Spring 2007 program sessions are listed in Table 2.

Table 2. Value of Specific Class Topics in Gearing Up for Kindergarten Program

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Class Topic – Fall 2006 Session		
School Readiness Orientation	3.51	1.02
Parenting Styles	3.76	1.02
Brain Development	3.58	1.10
Raising a Reader	3.90	1.03
Choosing Effective Discipline Techniques	3.80	1.16
Media Wise	3.66	1.29
Developing Responsibility and Self-Help Skills	3.59	1.31
Importance of Sleep	3.10	1.72
Class Topic – Spring 2007 Session		
Learning Styles and School Readiness	3.86	1.14
Child Temperament	3.38	1.58
Early Literacy and Math Skills	3.62	1.32
Social and Emotional Development	3.86	1.25
Guidance and Discipline Tools	3.78	1.31
Nutrition and Children	3.88	1.29
Child Safety	4.04	1.43
Parent's Role in School Success	3.82	1.35

Perceived Impacts of *Gearing Up for Kindergarten* on Parents

Participants were asked to provide a retrospective assessment of their specific knowledge and activities as parents in a number of areas, both before and after participating in the *Gearing Up for Kindergarten* program. These activities by parents are linked with assisting children toward school readiness in a variety of areas and with program content. By assessing the parents' perceptions of their activities with children both before and after the program, it is possible to gain a sense of their perceptions regarding how the program may have impacted them.

Parents were asked to rate themselves on a 1 to 5 scale, with answers ranging from *hardly ever* to *almost always*. Parents were asked 16 retrospective pretest questions in the Fall session evaluation, and 17 retrospective pretest questions in the Spring session evaluation. The average mean scores for each area of parenting before participation were compared with the scores after participation, allowing a statistical comparison of significant differences using a paired-sample *t*-test analysis.

Findings presented in Tables 3 and 4 on the following pages represent both sessions of the program. The summary tables are followed by a brief discussion of the findings. The findings show, based on the statistical analysis for the Fall 2006 session, that participants experienced significant differences in 15 of the 16 parental practices related to school readiness, as a possible result of their participation in the *Gearing Up for Kindergarten* program. For the Spring 2007 session, participants experienced significant differences in 16 of the 17 parental practices related to school readiness. As an example of such a difference, parents rated themselves after the Spring session on usage of "appropriate techniques in dealing with my child's temperament." The average postprogram score ($M = 4.08$) significantly exceeded the parents' assessment of their preprogram behavior in this area ($M = 3.16$), $t(49) = -7.624$, $p \leq .05$. To simplify presentation of the findings, Tables 3 and 4 include the average mean scores for each item both before and after the program, the mean difference score, and an indicator of whether the difference between scores is statistically significant at a $p \leq .05$ level.

Participants in the Fall 2006 session noted small to moderate changes in 15 of the 16 parental practices, with all changes showing positive increases in a particular practice (e.g., more actively discussing a story with children, helping a child find other activities besides watching TV, etc.). Following the Spring 2007 session, they noted moderate to large changes in 16 of the 17 parental practices related to school readiness that were measured, again with all changes showing positive increases in a particular parental practice (e.g., using appropriate techniques in dealing with a child's temperament, providing healthy food choices to a child). Of interest is the fact that the magnitude of the changes reported by parents became more pronounced in the second session of the program, which may indicate increasing program effectiveness. These changes included ten

substantive increases of between .40 and .70 in a specific practice, and six large increases of .75 or higher in specific parental practices.

Table 3. Perceived Impacts on Parenting of Gearing Up for Kindergarten (Fall 2006)

As a Parent, I:	Before Participation (Mean Score)	Now, After Participation (Mean Score)	Mean Difference Score
1. Deal well with the personal impacts of being a parent.	3.95	4.12	.17*
2. Pay attention to factors that affect my growing child.	3.98	4.37	.39*
3. Avoid anger or harshness in the parenting style I use with my child.	3.58	4.05	.47*
4. Hold, hug, and snuggle with my child.	4.75	4.80	.05
5. Give my child a variety of activities and learning experiences.	4.12	4.49	.37*
6. Talk, laugh, sing, and converse with my child.	4.46	4.64	.19*
7. Read with my child each day.	4.41	4.56	.15*
8. Discuss contents of a book or story with my child.	3.90	4.34	.44*
9. Am patient in realizing my child tests limits as he or she grows.	3.73	4.24	.51*
10. Focus on using positive discipline or guidance with my child.	3.75	4.25	.51*
11. Set and enforce rules to guide my child's use of media.	3.81	4.22	.41*
12. Help my child find other activities besides watching TV or using a computer.	4.00	4.39	.39*
13. Assist my child in practicing self-care skills (like using the toilet, zipping coat, etc.).	4.08	4.32	.24*
14. Give my child choices in small areas and guide those choices.	4.12	4.32	.20*
15. Understand the link between my child's sleep and behavior.	4.15	4.32	.17*
16. Set and follow a structured bedtime routine with my child each night.	4.20	4.41	.20*

* $p \leq .05$

Table 4. Perceived Impacts on Parenting of Gearing Up for Kindergarten (Spring 2007)

As a Parent, I:	Before Participation (Mean Score)	Now, After Participation (Mean Score)	Mean Difference Score
1. Know my own and my child's learning style.	3.14	4.28	1.14*
2. Explore issues to consider related to my child's school readiness.	3.12	4.30	1.18*
3. Understand how my child's behavior is affected by his or her temperament.	3.18	4.10	.92*
4. Use appropriate techniques in dealing with my child's temperament.	3.16	4.08	.92*
5. Engage my child in learning in "everyday" activities.	3.64	4.32	.68*
6. Encourage development of math skills in my child in daily activities.	3.38	4.12	.74*
7. Am attentive and understanding with my child's social and emotional abilities.	3.68	4.34	.66*
8. Practice social skills with my child, including sharing, taking turns, and not interrupting.	3.92	4.44	.52*
9. Encourage my child to think on his or her own.	3.70	4.34	.64*
10. Use natural and logical consequences with my child during discipline.	3.78	4.32	.54*
11. Support my child in eating healthy foods.	4.00	4.40	.40*
12. Take steps in providing healthy food choices to my child.	3.98	4.46	.48*
13. Have my child use booster seats while driving in the car.	4.76	4.88	.12
14. Teach my child at home to understand fire escape routes.	2.54	3.78	1.24*
15. Have my child wear properly-fitted bike helmets.	3.98	4.38	.40*
16. Understand my role in my child's success at school.	4.04	4.56	.52*
17. Plan on getting involved in my child's school.	4.04	4.50	.46*

* $p \leq .05$

In the Fall 2006 session, the largest differences occurred in the following areas: being patient with a child who tests limits (.51), focusing on using positive discipline (.51), avoiding anger with a child (.47), discussing contents of a story with child (.44), setting and enforcing rules to guide media usage (.41), helping child find activities besides use of TV or computers (.39), paying attention to factors that affect child development (.39), and giving child a variety of learning experiences (.37). After the Spring 2007 session, the six largest differences reported by participants were teaching child to understand fire escape routes (1.24), exploring issues related to school readiness (1.18), knowing one's own and a child's learning style (1.14), understanding how temperament affects a child's behavior (.92), using appropriate techniques in dealing with a child's temperament (.92), and encouraging the development of math skills (.74).

Discussion and Applications

Children who are growing and preparing for entry into the school years benefit from parents who are knowledgeable and active in helping them to prepare (Epstein, 2001; Hill & Taylor, 2004). Parent education can be a positive vehicle for helping parents to feel confident, informed, and supported in their activities and decisions (DeBord et al., 1998; Duncan & Goddard, 2005). This study suggests that the parent education component of the *Gearing Up for Kindergarten* program provides significant and positive benefits for parents.

The findings were generated as a result of parents' involvement in the initial pilot year of the program. These findings indicate that the program has made a good first step in assisting parents and influencing them in a positive manner, guiding them to behave in ways that will help their children toward school readiness and positive development. The significant increases that occurred in parents' efforts with their children in specific areas were typically greater than would be expected to occur due to random chance. These findings seem to indicate that the *Gearing up for Kindergarten* program is having a positive impact with parents.

While indications are positive, limitations in the study should also be acknowledged. The sample population was largely homogeneous, being significantly Caucasian, urban, and currently married, with most participants also working part- or full-time and being quite well educated. Thus, further research with a broader population will be necessary to see whether such outcomes may be found with more diverse samples. Additionally, the use of a retrospective pretest design has been critiqued in some circles, so assessment using other evaluation methods is also recommended. While it was somewhat unusual to conduct paired *t*-test analyses for each question utilized in the retrospective questionnaire rather than simply using a summative scale for the collective set of questions, this approach was used due to the pilot nature of this project and the interest in assessing patterns of response among program participants. Although the chances of finding a "false positive" difference in mean scores that is statistically significant increases with this approach, the authors evaluating the program felt that the value of exploring

the specific questions in the assessment process outweighed the limitations of using such an approach in the statistical analysis.

Key findings that deserve further consideration, and which can be applied in parent education and school readiness efforts, include the following:

- The findings showed significant differences in nearly all parental practices for participants before and after their participation in *Gearing Up for Kindergarten*. The period of time prior to a child's entry into school may be a key learning opportunity for engaging parents and increasing their knowledge and efforts regarding child development and school readiness.
- High levels of satisfaction with the overall value of the program suggest that parent education and programming efforts that are well-designed and well-implemented, even in the first year, may be more likely to yield positive gains for parents and their children.
- Parental practices that showed evidence of change over time provide insight into areas of opportunity and growth for parents. Practices that showed greater evidence of participant change may be areas in which parents have the most opportunity to grow or to which they are more likely to respond in an educational setting. An awareness of these areas can help in planning parent education content and delivery.
- The combination of parent-child interaction time and a parent education session may provide parents an increased motivation to be involved, greater understanding of their child, and an opportunity to take concrete steps to guide a child's school readiness.
- Parents of pre-kindergarten children have the opportunity to focus on their parenting and child development because entry into school is a key step during the developmental years. Parents are likely to be responsive to parent education offerings that highlight this step and provide them with knowledge and skills to assist their children with school readiness.

These and other implications that arise from the implementation and evaluation of the program furnish a set of useful findings to consider in refinement of the program design and its development in the future.

The evidence suggests that the *Gearing Up for Kindergarten* program has made a good first step in developing a parent education program that assists parents and influences them in a positive manner. Parents in the program tend to indicate changes that may help them behave in ways that will help their children toward school readiness and positive development. Furthermore, the program has the potential to make an impact on children as they prepare for kindergarten entry and school success. Such an approach can make a difference for parents seeking to understand the expectations for children entering the school environment and also to provide a supportive atmosphere for making a successful transition to the kindergarten experience.

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