

Guidelines for Observing School Readiness

Discerning a child's readiness to begin grade school is an important responsibility for early childhood educators and the child's parents. The age at which the child begins grade school has implications and consequences for the rest of life. The decision is not only about beginning first grade alone but of embarking upon an educational path that will last for the next twelve years or more.

Age is one factor, which is what most traditional educational settings use as a school entry marker. That is only one of several aspects we look to in Waldorf education, which pledges to consider the whole child. Readiness is the culmination of a developmental process which includes aspects additional to age. We look for signs of physical change and maturation, social and emotional development, language skills, movement coordination for both large-limb and fine motor activities, memory, and ability for inner picturing. The child's state of readiness arises out of a collective picture of these many factors.

There is no "score" that indicates readiness. It is also unlikely that any individual child will show full readiness in all areas. The human being is always in a developmental process, always becoming. We educators strive to see whether the collective picture of the child appears consolidated enough that the evident strengths will carry the child forward.

Below are descriptions of the major areas we may consider in determining readiness to begin grade school. These are observational guidelines to help us appreciate the child's unfolding toward maturity. These are brief descriptions. Full discussion of school readiness is found in the WECAN publication, *First Grade Readiness*. Additionally the new WECAN publication, *School Readiness Today*, is an excellent resource. These presentations on school readiness were shared at an international Colloquium on school readiness held at the Goetheanum, Feb. 2013.

Chronological Age

Mainstream schools generally set a specific date by which the child will turn 6 years old. This is commonly the only criteria considered for school entrance. A survey of public education school entry dates in the US show a range of six years old by August 1 to September 1 in most states, with the outside date in New York of six years by December 1 of the school entry year.

These dates create the backdrop against which Waldorf school entry guidelines have to stand. A common date used in American Waldorf schools is turning 6 by **June 1** in order to be considered for 1st grade the next fall term. Some Waldorf schools have adopted an earlier **May 1** date to allow flexibility in considering May birthdays. May-birthday children, who enter the grade school as the youngest in their class, are often seen to not fare as well as their older classmates. There may be an exceptional situation where readiness is observed in a May-birthday child (most often girls). If this is so, the child can be considered on a case-by-case basis at the suggestion of the child's teacher. It is generally advised that any child with a May or later birthday (if summer birthday children are considered at all) be looked upon with special care.

Parents need time to form and perhaps adjust their expectations around a clearly explained approach to school entry. Parents should not learn of these policies suddenly during the last year of kindergarten. In terms of “best practices,” schools have found it important to inform parents about the school’s grade-school entry guidelines and process when the child first enrolls in the early childhood program. If a child attends an early childhood class for more than one year, this “up front” conversation can be the portal for fruitful discussion with the parents over time. Waldorf caution, as compared with other educational streams, grows out of commitment to each child that he or she enter grade school confidently and experience success and satisfaction academically, socially, and emotionally. In other words, we stand with the parents in wanting what is best for the child for all the educational years ahead. School entry needs to be a carefully considered decision.

Premature Birth—It is important to know if a child has been born prematurely. If so, the chronological date of the physical birth needs to be adjusted. If, for example, the child was born six weeks early, then the physical birth date should have that amount of time added to it. For example, if the child was born March 1 but six weeks premature, then the adjusted “expected date” would be April 15. This adjusted date puts a child much closer to the “borderline zone” calling for special caution with grade school enrollment. Research reports that premature children have a much higher incidence of learning challenges and may also display immaturity in emotional, behavioral, and cognitive domains. In some cases, the developmental age of the child may be younger than even the adjusted birth date suggests. The prematurely-born child has to “catch up” with the growth and maturation that would otherwise have been completed in the womb before physical birth. And there is also the stress placed upon the premature infant to complete this growth under the forces of gravity and sensory stimulation for which their small bodies are not prepared. The prematurity may place added stress upon the child and cause additional developmental delay.

Birth of the Etheric—Signs of Physical Readiness for School

Rudolf Steiner emphasizes again and again that the primary confirmation of a child’s maturity to proceed on to grade school is shown by birth of the child’s etheric forces. During the first 7 years, the etheric forces are used for growth of the physical body and internal organs. These are the same forces that, liberated when the initial phase of growth has been accomplished, the child then uses for thinking and academic tasks in the grade school years. These forces should not be drawn upon before this crucial growth has completed itself, or there is risk that future vitality and life-long health may be jeopardized. In its multi-year study of observing school readiness, the international IASWECE Older Child working group of early childhood educators and physicians has affirmed that this is singly the most essential factor in determining whether a child is well-served by advancing to grade school.

The birth of the etheric is signaled by several physical signs:

- Eruption of the six-year molars. Many physicians affirm that this is the more significant signal of birth of the etheric than loss of baby teeth. Children are losing teeth at younger

ages, which may be more a sign of premature hardening due to societal influences than a signal of maturity for school.

- Loss of milk teeth.
- Lengthening of limbs in relation to head size. The child should be able to reach up over his head and touch his opposite ear without leaning or bending his head to the side. Ideally the elbow makes a 90 degree angle rather than the child leaning his head into the crook of the elbow.
- Facial features individualize; young child roundness fades.
- S-curve appears in the spine.
- Rib cage becomes visible as separate from the tummy region. The child grows taller and seems to “stretch” in height.
- Arch develops in the foot.

Body coordination—The child will also begin to show changes in gross- and fine-motor coordination and integration. The child has the ability to move with increasing coordination and intention. “Throw a ball in the air with one hand and catch it with two; stand on one leg and hop sideways, forward, and backward; walk on tip toe; string beads, finger knit; set the table, wash and dry dishes; dress and undress; tie shoes and button.” (Glöckler) New forces of levity enter into movement. The child can skip more lightly and begin to jump rope.

Resources for study and detailed discussion of birth-of-the-etheric

WECAN publication, *From Kindergarten into the Grades*, elaborates this picture. Editor Ruth Ker has compiled Rudolf Steiner indications regarding the birth of the etheric and school readiness.

Other resources found in *First Grade Readiness: Resources, Insights, and Tools for Waldorf Educators* (WECAN Publication) include the following helpful articles:

- “*First Grade Readiness*” by Joan Almon (also in *The Developing Child: The First Seven Years*)
- “*Some guidelines for First Grade Readiness*” by Nancy Foster (also in *The Developing Child: The First Seven Years*)
- “*School Readiness: A School Doctor’s Perspective*” by Dr. Bettina Lohn
- “*What are the signs that my child is ready for school?*” by Dr. Michaela Glöckler

School Readiness Today is a joint publication prepared by the Pedagogical Section at the Goetheanum and IASWECE (International Association of Steiner/Waldorf Early Childhood Education) now translated into English and published by WECAN. Particularly relevant articles to this readiness topic are:

- “*From Kindergarten to School*” by Dr. Edmund Schoorel
- “*School readiness and the Transition from Kindergarten to School*” by Dr. Claudia McKeen
- “*The School Entry Age from the point of View of Anthroposophy*” by Claus-Peter Röh

Dr. Bettina Lohn’s article gives precise summary of this process of etheric release and the child’s transformation to school readiness. A section is quoted as follows:

“In the first seven years of a child’s life the emphasis lies on growth and development of the body. We never again grow as fast as in the first few years. The physical and ether/life body are especially involved in this, under the guidance of the astral/soul body and ego organization. When approaching the age of seven years the intense interaction between physical and ether/life body, leading to the establishment of life functions and organ maturation, is reduced. One part of the ether/life body activity continues to be involved in life functions, while another becomes available, ‘freed up’ for other tasks. The availability of these ‘free’ ether/life forces is what enables a child to be ‘ready’ for school.

“These formative forces, initially engaged in body growth and organ differentiation, transform to become the forces we use for our thinking. Although this is a gradual process it reaches a decisive point at the age of six or seven, when the child is able to access thought processes more consciously and independently. With thinking, memory also becomes more available. ***The child is, as it were, no longer thinking at the cost of its bodily development*** [emphasis by editor]. Although we are not able to observe these transformations directly, one example is the formation and emergence of the second teeth. Having been formed invisibly in the gums during the first seven years of life they then start to emerge—every tooth the evidence of a completed process. The above-mentioned transformation of etheric/life forces, when taken seriously, puts a new slant on the prevention of health issues. Starting school at the right time, that is, being able to cope with the challenges one is exposed to, can contribute future health in the broadest sense.” (p. 34-35, *First Grade Readiness*)

Other Signs of “Soul Readiness” for School

“These formative forces, initially engaged in body growth and organ differentiation, transform to become the forces we use for our thinking.” With the change of teeth and the other physical signs of maturation toward school entry, the child also begins to show change in capacities for memory, imagination, social interactions, verbal skills, emotional maturity, and drawings. The child will also show how well he or she is incarnating into the physical body through physical coordination in both gross- and fine-motor skills (described above under the section on physical changes.) Perceptual abilities will also show advancement.

When we begin to observe and consider these other areas, we must remind ourselves that we are not looking for a “qualifying score” to demonstrate readiness. Rather we want to observe

the gesture the child is communicating in his or her interaction with the world. How is the child developing from the inside out? How is the child responding to the world? What is the experience for the child in how the world enters into his being? How ready is she to meet the world with growing confidence and competence?

Memory—Access to memory has shifted from needing external reminding or triggering by something in the environment to being accessible at will. “The child is now able to call up memories in response to direct questioning, independent of concrete situations. The child can ‘activate the process of remembering without outside prompting.’” (Glöckler)

Imagination—Impetus for play now arises within the child out of his or her own motivation and inner picturing. Causal thinking begins to awaken. The child starts to see that if one thing happens, another event or result will follow. With this new capacity, the child can begin to plan. The maturing child has an idea of what to play and then looks to the environment to gather the props and materials needed to manifest the idea. Previously something in the environment suggested the idea.

Leading into this new capacity of imagination, the child typically goes through a “fallow” time when the previous, seemingly endless ideas for play seem to dry up. This signals a “crisis of the will” that shows up socially in, “I don’t know what to play.” The child may stand away from play or classmates to follow her own ideas because the flexibility of fantasy has withdrawn to metamorphose into something new. This signals a transition toward the future when the ideas for play and planning play with mates will come from within the child.

Social readiness—The child demonstrates social skills for group interaction. Social readiness “involves learning to align his own interests with those of others (with the teacher’s help) and to be ‘all ears,’ that is to deliberately suppress the activity of his arms and legs. At [t]his stage, listening to what the teacher says must supplant the urge to imitate as the primary stimulus for independent activity. In other words, the child’s intentions are increasingly receptive to being guided by the spoken words of adults as instinctive imitation activity recedes. In general, social readiness appears later than intellectual readiness and is usually fully acquired only around age seven to eight.” (Glöckler)

Verbal skills—Rhyming and changing tempo of speech and song are typical for this age. The older kindergarten child may lag behind or push the tempo of a verse or song ahead of the teacher. The school ready child is able to be directed by speech without needing a model to imitate. “As a general rule, children of school age can sing, pronounce all the speech sounds with clarity, retell stories in complete sentences, and express what they want to say in conversation in a variety of different ways.” (Glöckler) The child understands what is said to her (receptive language) and has ability to expression herself (expressive language).

Emotional maturity / Behavior—The child shows increasing ability to put aside personal desires and impulses in deference to the needs of the group. One can see emerging maturity and independence in the child. Levels of attention, concentration, and listening ability are strengthening. Conversely, in this growing self-awareness, children may also exclude others in play.

Drawings—Free drawings include a representation of a person. There is a sense of “groundedness” of the elements in the picture (person, structures, trees and plant life, etc.) with awareness of above/below and symmetry of right/left.

Perceptual abilities—The child shows awareness of and ability to draw geometric shapes (e.g. square and figures with diagonals). She can reproduce form drawing(s) that an adult has demonstrated.

Grade School Expectations

The emerging capacities described above show a picture of what is happening developmentally within the child—the inside showing itself on the outside. We look to these especially because these are capacities that the grade school will look to be in place so the child can respond to the expectations of first grade and all the grade school years following. How will the child respond to what is coming toward him? What will be the interface of the outside coming in?

This question is considered in “*Carrying the Transition to First Grade*” by Janet Klaar from *First Grade Readiness*. While a child may be settled and accomplished in the kindergarten world, there is the new question of how well he or she will be able to meet the expectations of the grade school. Janet Klaar points out additional factors to consider—stamina, concentration, flexibility, and enjoyment of new things and people.

So what does first grade expect from the child, in order to be able to fully engage in what the class teacher will prepare for her?

The child is:

- Able to attend school regularly and cope with the normal number of sessions
- Happy and able to meet other adults.
- Able to sit at a desk and participate as one of a group; accept authority of class teacher; independently take care of personal needs—clothing, toileting, washing; hold his own in play time.
- Demonstrates the unconscious skills cultivated in kindergarten, such as holding a brush or crayon. The child demonstrates sufficient stamina to last through the school day. She can follow through on craft or task that takes days or even weeks to complete and shows initiative. He asks for work.
- Now is able to bring forth independent imaginations from his or her inner life as impetus for play and social interaction. “He can work through the internal process [of transforming] the wonderful fantasies of his earlier kindergarten years into a conscious imagination.”(Klaar, p. 72-73)

Other Considerations

Gender—Neurological and developmental studies confirm that boys and girls have different maturational timetables. Boys generally require six months more to achieve equivalent maturational levels with girls. “This can make a crucial difference, especially when considering children for school entry who are born between May and August.” (Lohn)

Health—Any known medical issues (such as asthma), vision and hearing, stamina in managing regular school attendance as well as sustaining energy through the school day, constitution, sleeping and eating habits, and relationship to rhythms should also be factored into the complete picture of the child.

Once this comprehensive picture is assembled

It can be helpful to ask more questions. Does the child’s development seem age-appropriate and give an impression of wholeness? Are the different aspects of development keeping pace with one another? Or are there any particular areas of concern or problems suggested?

Are any concerns “development-related or can they be expected to accompany the child into the school years and beyond? Is the child delayed in one developmental area, which may need to be specifically addressed but not necessarily require a whole further year in the kindergarten? Or is the child globally delayed in her/his development and a further year in the kindergarten would give time and opportunity, maybe including additional help, for the necessary developmental steps to take place? Issues could relate to health problems, constitutional challenges or social/emotional struggles. A combination is often the case in reality.” (Lohn, p. 36)

Reaching a Recommendation

The decision about entering grade school is usually straightforward for most children. If the birth date is in within range, signs of the liberated etheric are evident or strongly emerging, the child seems socially secure and resilient—as per expectable for this age—then we can feel confident in sending the child along to the new step of 1st grade.

Yet there are also gray areas where the picture is not clear. Following are situations that commonly arise in our schools.

What about a child who is chronologically old enough but seems young?

There are many questions to ask here. When is the chronological birth date? How close is it to the guideline date? In what domains does the youngness display itself—physical growth, movement, social/emotional development, cognitive capacities, attention, memory, etc.? Do we sense that the youngness will interfere or prevent the child from participating actively in 1st grade? Does the youngness seem something that time will solve or will this likely accompany the child for all the school years? What is the child’s gender? A fundamental question here is whether another year in kindergarten would remediate this situation. The answers to these questions should guide in making the right decision for the child.

We want to be guided objectively in this decision. Grade school teachers express concern that a child who is older than the norm may be out-of-sync with the curriculum. There is also consideration that the older child may enter puberty earlier than the classmates and also be isolated in this experience. While we do not want to send any and all children on to 1st grade without careful consideration, we also do not want to be influenced by a desire to protect a child that is motivated more by sentiment than objectivity.

What if the child is young (birth date beyond our guideline) and shows signs of released etheric?

We encounter many more children these days who have lost teeth at younger ages. Some anthroposophic doctors look more to emergence of the 6-year molars as a sure sign of etheric release. Earlier tooth loss may be due to premature hardening influences of modern life rather than signs of earlier school readiness.

If the child shows the definite signs of released etheric and also shows signs of cognitive development and memory expected in 1st grade, then this child may be the exception and go on. Does the kindergarten teacher think there is more to be offered in another early childhood year? If not, then we should look at this child very individually and not just by calendar guidelines.

Such a child will likely show youngness or immaturity in some domain. A common scenario is to be cognitively capable but lagging in physical development and movement coordination. If the decision is made to send this child on, then there needs to also be acknowledgement of what wants strengthening. An enrichment plan for how we are going to assist this child to develop his capacities will be important. In some cases it may be called for that the child will also receive enrichment support in the early grades.

This last suggestion should not be seen as a programmed approach to “getting the children ready for 1st grade.” It is rather a question of making sure the child has the right opportunities in school and at home for movement, singing, games, hand crafts, and so on through which he readies himself.

What if a child shows uneven development?

This phenomenon is referred to as “discontinuous development” in the book, *Developmental Signatures*. This is what we increasingly see as advanced development in some areas and disproportionate immaturity in others. This can be due to the emphasis upon cognitive skills and early intellectuality which sacrifices attention and opportunity from other areas. It can also be suggestion of future learning disabilities. Unfortunately, this unevenness is only likely to be seen more often with children in the future.

The same questions applied above are also relevant here. If the child is well-situated in terms of age, shows signs of etheric release, and is interested in what 1st grade has to offer, it is reasonable to send the child on. The areas of concern should be noted and shared with the 1st

grade teacher. If the issues are such that some extra support may be called for, discussing what those options are ahead of time will serve the child well.

It is difficult to project whether a child will have actual learning challenges from what we see in kindergarten. We do not want to presume that difficulty will occur. It is essential, however, to objectively and accurately document what immaturities the child has demonstrated. This information can enlighten what may be seen in future development.

What if the child has demonstrated behavior challenges in kindergarten?

This is often a bigger question about enrollment in the grade school than about learning capacity. A child with challenging behaviors will often be found to also have some physical, sensory, social, or emotional issues as well. It will help to observe the child from these other perspectives to see if addressing them will alleviate some behavioral concerns.

If age and physical signs of school readiness are in place, this may fall beyond the readiness question. It will be important to discuss when the moments of difficulty occur and how these could be reasonably handled in the grade school setting where more form and ability to cooperate in a group are expected. Such a child may also need a plan of support to companion him or her into the grade school.

This situation may cause us to have to look deeply into our own attitudes. Rudolf Steiner heatedly responded when teachers complained about difficult students in faculty meetings at the first Waldorf School. He asked, "Are we an institution for the admiration of well-behaved children?" (Quoted in Peter Selg's *The Therapeutic Eye*, p 21-22, from *Faculty Meetings with Rudolf Steiner*.)

A **Letter of Introduction** can be helpful for any child with differences. This is usually initiated by the school Care Group or by the kindergarten teachers if no Care Group exists. The child's kindergarten teacher describes the areas of strength and challenge for the child, along with what approaches have been helpful. The child's parents are also asked to describe how they experience their child in moments of challenge and share what works and what to avoid in interacting with him or her. While everyone hopes that things will go well, school and parents agree to a plan of response if the child cannot be held in the classroom. If none of the helpful things work and the child needs to go to a respite room or go home for the day, an agreed-upon plan is already in place. If the child may need special support services as condition for enrollment, this is also agreed to as well.

This letter of introduction is not only helpful to the class teacher but is shared with the special subject teachers. The child can be received with more understanding by the body of teachers with this introduction.

What about a child with differences who had done well in kindergarten but who is questionable for the grades? Can we serve this child in the grade school?

This has to do more with a child with differences who was accepted into the kindergarten. The child has done well in the kindergarten with the flexible approach, reduced stress, and the greater possibility for accommodations in Waldorf play-based kindergartens. Optimism to send the child on to the grade school has grown out of seeing the child's progress in the early childhood setting. Too often this optimism is not grounded in a realistic picture of how well the child can meet the grade school expectations. Disappointed and angry separation of the child and family from the school is sadly the unfortunate outcome if the arrangement does not work out.

There are no clear guidelines here. All the questions described above have to be considered. If the kindergarten recommends such a child for enrollment, there must be freely-given commitment from the grade teacher that she or he will embrace the child in the class. A plan of support also needs to be pictured ahead of time.

What if parents are pressing to enroll a young child we do not think we can recommend for 1st grade?

The most effective approach to this situation is preventative. Clearly explaining the school's 1st grade ready policy best comes when the child first enters the early childhood program. The school's policy should not come as a shock to the parents. It is wise to inform parents that children with birthdays close to the birth-date guideline will be looked upon very carefully; enrollment in 1st grade should not be considered a given. Care taken to gain the parents' trust that we teachers are also on the side of the child will be rewarded if such a difficult time comes.

Conversation with the parents is essential. Hopefully a foundation will already exist from information shared with parents about child development from our Waldorf perspective. The conviction out of which the teacher speaks can be a powerful influence. The teacher can have no ambivalence about this recommendation. It can also be helpful if a family who has faced this same dilemma is willing to describe their experience. Nearly all families whose child has had an extra kindergarten year speak positively about the benefit they ultimately have seen for their child.

What if there is pressure from Enrollment / Admissions to enroll younger children?

The job of the Enrollment or Admissions officer in a school is to fill the classes. This person should not be faulted for that intention. However, not all people in this position have pedagogical experience to appreciate how significant a decision 1st grade enrollment is.

There may be some school settings where the questionably young child is enrolled in 1st grade for practical reasons, such as the financial or social viability of a class. These are practical decisions all schools may face. The pedagogical mandate of the early childhood educator is to make decisions based upon what is developmentally best for the individual child. A child may do well in 1st and even 2nd grade. But often by 3rd grade the distance between the younger child and the rest of the class will begin to broaden. Times will come when it really will matter that a

child is younger. To send a too-young child to the grades out of optimism rather than pedagogical grounding will have consequences in the future. We do well to hold this in consciousness as we consider all the factors.

When is it best to do 1st grade observations?

The time frame of January and February seems common in our schools. This allows the practical needs schools have in sending out enrollment documents to be satisfied. It also allows parents time to consider other options if their child is not offered a space in the upcoming 1st grade.

Some schools wait until March to “give spring birthday children more time.” Shouldn’t these children be allowed more time to develop before a decision is reached? In this question there is an implicit statement that the child is not yet demonstrating readiness for 1st grade or we would not be asking for more time. It is sometimes optimism or a desire to not disappoint the family which drives this decision postponement. Experience in some schools has confirmed that readiness does not suddenly spring forth magically in April or May. Announcement that the child is not school ready late in the spring causes many frustrations and disappointments. It is good practice to screen all the children at the same time. If a child does not show readiness at that time, this can be communicated in an objective statement. It can be recommended at that time that an additional year in kindergarten be considered. All children in a class are continuing to mature and develop through time. Any gap that exists between oldest and youngest children will remain pretty much the same. To expect that a younger child will suddenly “catch up” is not developmentally realistic. The question regarding each child is whether he or she has the maturity and development to meet the expectations of the grade school with enjoyment and a sense of success.

Building a Bridge to the Grades

A final consideration is how can we build a bridge to the grade school teachers for these new grade school children? There too often seems to be a gap between kindergarten and the grades. This may arise out of differing perceptions of what “school ready” means.

The key here once again is conversation. This can be preceded by kindergarten teachers visiting the lower grades, 1st especially, and grades teachers making visits to the kindergartens. Appreciating where the children have come from and where they are going to is important. This also helps us as school colleagues to develop interest in one another’s work. We can discuss what will be useful information to share about the individual children and when the grade teacher would like to receive it.

The book, *You’re Not the Boss of Me*, has articles that describe some schools’ approaches to creating a conscious transition into the grade school. These may provide ideas to inspire your own bridge building.