

Solid Beginnings for Growth and Learning

How does a child gain the skills and attributes that add up to school readiness? As every parent knows, even the smallest children have their own unique personalities: they are truly individuals! Still, there are certain experiences that all children need in order to thrive physically, intellectually, socially and emotionally, and they depend on the adults in their lives to provide these experiences. These foundations for health and growth don't demand a high income or an advanced educational degree, and there are many approaches adults can take to provide them.

No matter where they live or what the circumstances of their families might be, whether they spend their days at home, at school, or in child care, all children need the following types of experiences or conditions:

Category	What to look for	Example
Environment	Safety, including physical spaces, indoors and out, where children can play in safety.	Indoors, electrical plugs are capped and potentially hazardous materials are inaccessible to a child. Outdoor spaces are free of dangerous equipment or auto traffic hazards.
	Nurturing through frequent warm interactions with adults. In a caregiver or school environment, this means there should be an appropriate number of adults for the number of children.	Adults not only respond to the needs children express (as when they cry), but are engaged in conversations with the child at his/her level, teaching activities, demonstrating how to do things and playing learning games.
Caregivers	An adult in every child's life who really, really loves that child!	Showing your love by making time for your child, by doing things together, by listening, by respecting his/her individuality and by hugging and touching.
	Exposure to adults who are curious about the world and have an accepting attitude towards people of different cultures and backgrounds.	Demonstrating a recognition of differences among people and an openness to these differences; a willingness to answer children's questions honestly and without bias; welcoming diverse people into your home and activities.
	One-on-one time with a caring adult who is responsive to a child's world and can interact on a child's level.	Reading a book together, going for a walk, talking and listening, dancing, playing a game.
	Teachers or caregivers who provide opportunities to develop social skills and who model skills such as negotiation and cooperation	Establishing expectations about sharing and taking turns, with adults exemplifying the desired behavior in their interactions with children and other adults.
	People who are sensitive to a child's unique needs and temperaments, who recognize and accept that children develop at different rates, have different ways of expressing themselves and move at their own individual pace.	Planning activities in a way that accommodates a child's need for naps, regular meals, a certain level of stimulation; providing appropriate experiences that help a child develop strengths in areas where he/she may be especially challenged.
	Proper medical attention and care and	Regular medical checkups and follow-through

Category	What to look for	Example
Caregivers	adults who model healthy nutrition and exercise habits.	with medicine, etc.; improving your own health habits and talking with children about why you eat certain things and why you exercise.
	Teachers or caregivers who understand how important it is to communicate regularly with parents and who welcome parents' visits and participation.	Regular conferences, notes, reports; an attitude of openness to parent requests for information.
Activities	Experiences that reflect the many different areas of life, including the aesthetic, the intellectual and the spiritual, and that help the child explore areas such as science, language, art, music, reading and history in an age-appropriate way.	Attending musical performances and puppet shows, visiting nature centers, historical sites and other communities, opportunities and materials for drawing and making music.
	Opportunities for hands-on learning that helps children develop feelings of competence.	Playing with blocks, clay, sand, paint, musical instruments; preparing and cooking food; helping with appropriate chores at home, school or childcare.
	A wide range of physical experiences that are appropriate for the child's age. Physical activity helps children develop strength and fitness, and it also helps them gain confidence in their bodies.	Walking, running, sledding, using playground equipment, digging in the sand, climbing, swimming, and riding tricycles and bikes, along with organized games and sports.
	A rich diet of language-related activities. The language familiarity fostered by hearing, speaking and listening is a basic foundation for more complex skills, such as reading and writing.	Sing songs, read books, recite nursery rhymes, tell stories, talk about what you're doing in the house, the grocery store, etc., share observations on walks and outings, talk about your day and ask your child about his/her day.
	Opportunities to build independence by learning to take care of themselves.	Helping children learn to tie their own shoes, choose what they're going to wear, dress themselves, wash their hands and face.
	Enough time and adult attention so some knowledgeable adult listens to their thoughts; enough space and quiet to have thoughts.	Time that isn't planned, when a child and adult can talk or just cuddle; regular quiet times without television, videos or computers.
	Activities that address not only a child's intellectual development, but his/her physical, social and emotional development as well.	Play opportunities of various kinds, frequent interaction with both children and adults, teaching and demonstrating, modeling of behavior by adults. Also direct guidance and teaching, so that children learn what is appropriate behavior and how to deal with conflicts, frustration and other difficult situations.
	An array of play opportunities, including time spent alone for free play and time for play with other children – both structured play and play that is unstructured but supervised.	Gymnastics and other classes, play groups, games, quiet time alone for fantasy play, supervised visits with a friend or a small group of friends, attending events such as a child-appropriate concert..