



How Are the Children?

The children are learning every day!

Written by Mary Ellin Logue and Sandy Phoenix

Not everyone in the community has a young child or even knows a family with a young child. However, ***everyone in the community has a role to play in supporting families and making certain that young children are prepared for success in school and in life.***

The wellbeing of our youngest children is the bedrock of the health of our community. Our area schools are working hard to meet the needs of children from preK through high school. Our tax dollars support school budgets so our children have access to good teachers and learning services.

Here's the challenge to our long-term goal of having every child prepared for school and life success—***the academic, social and emotional development needed to meet this goal largely happen in a child's first three years.*** Children arrive at school with a very wide range of “readiness” skills and opportunities to see themselves as capable learners. If learning begins before birth and schooling begins at age 4 or 5, it is up to us all, as caring members of the community, to make sure our children enter school physically healthy, and with the emotional and cognitive—thinking and learning—foundation they need to keep thriving.

Early education leaders tell us about four learning goals that combine to shape the learners we become. While we often think about the first two as most important for school readiness, the last two actually set the foundation for how children apply their skills and knowledge in their lives.

Skills—Specific behaviors leading to an observable goal. Being able to count to 10 or recognize the letters in one's name are skills that will help with later schooling. They can be taught directly or through observation or imitation. They get stronger with practice and coaching. **When adults read to children or examine a family photo album, children learn early literacy skills about reading from front to back and top to bottom. They learn that stories are rooted in words and images.**

Knowledge—Facts, concepts, ideas, vocabulary, and stories that help children create patterns of understanding are learned through interaction with older children and adults. Knowledge is created through sharing experiences, exploring, making connections, trying things out, and correcting faulty ideas. **When adults include children in cooking, gardening, or exploring the outdoors, children learn about change and “cause and effect”, and ideas spark about why things happen the way they do.**

Dispositions or habits of mind—It's one thing to ***know*** that letters stand for sounds and words, and to have the ***skill*** to sound-out simple words. It is another thing to ***want*** to be a reader. Adults encourage children's dispositions by encouraging curiosity, persistence, and a willingness to make mistakes and learn from them.

Learned feelings—Children develop confidence and learn about their competence and value by being mirrored by adults. ***We show children they are loved, interesting, smart, and full of potential by delighting in what they can do rather than focusing on how well they do it.*** We strengthen their belief in their own specialness by showing interest in their interests, joining their play and inviting them to help us in simple, daily activities. There are countless ways we can support the foundation of school readiness whether we have direct interaction with children or not.

Ways to support children's skills and knowledge

- **Read to children**—Your local librarians can help you select books that are perfect for the child's age. The Blue Hill Public Library creates videos of community people reading books, available on their website, that appeal to children of all ages.
- **Sing with children**—Children learn about the rhythms of language from songs. Because so many songs rhyme, children learn about patterns of language from singing. Making up songs about how we do everyday tasks helps children follow a sequence and makes the learning fun.
- **Play with children**—Children learn to take turns, develop storylines, practice motor skills and delight in the company of a play partner through play. Pretend play is especially valuable for young children as they create stories, build upon their knowledge of the world, and coordinate their action with others.
- **Take the time to embed skills in everyday life**—Count the steps going upstairs, include your child in simple cooking or cleaning up activities, and let children help turn the pages and fill in rhyming words when reading a familiar book.
- **Talk, talk talk**—Tell stories, use sophisticated vocabulary such as naming the tools you use, the birds you see rather than just generalizing all flowers as “plants” or all mammals as “animals”.

Ways to strengthen children's dispositions to be capable and enthusiastic learners

- **Explore the local environment** together from pinecones in the yard, mud puddles, and worms on the driveway. Help them document what they experience by drawing pictures, taking photos, and telling stories. You may develop a passion for earthworms or slugs too!
- **Show interest in children's interests.** They will increase language and knowledge about their favorite activities and places as you talk and learn together. They will see themselves as partners in learning and be eager to learn more.
- **Call attention to little changes or differences** in the environment as you compare the size of plants in the garden or name the colors or names of birds who visit the feeder.
- **Inquire together.** Rather than mini-lessons, invite open-ended questions or challenges you can explore together. “I wonder what happens when” Children need opportunities to express their ideas too.
- **Encourage effort and persistence with honest and kind feedback**—not just empty praise like, “good job”! but rather, “you kept trying even when it was hard.”

Community Resources to support children's school readiness

- Librarians love questions and are experts at recommending books for children—visit your local library often.
- Children need healthy food to nurture healthy bodies. Become a Magic Food Bus “patron” and bring a child with you. Fix a healthy meal or treat for a busy young family. Invite neighbor children to visit your garden to eat a pea pod or bean off the vine.
- Join a family in taking the hiking challenge with the Blue Hill Heritage Trust. Be the person who documents the discoveries made along the way.
- Build a “little free library” in your community, contribute to one, or take a book to read to a child. Leave your well-loved books so other children can find and enjoy them.

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