Kindergarten Readiness for All
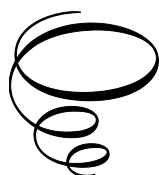
Kindergarten Readiness for All:

Strategies to Support the Transition to School

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CHAPTER 1

THE IMPORTANCE OF SCHOOL READINESS

Children, entering their school for their first day of kindergarten are small, impressionable, and experiencing a variety of feelings. Some children let go of their parents' hands quickly, some enter alone, and some cling and cry. Kindergarten teachers can rate children on their readiness as early as a few weeks into the year, and these ratings are predictive of how children do on important benchmarks such as reading and social skills (Miller & Goldsmith, 2017; Stormont, Thompson, Herman, & Reinke, 2017). Children who do not demonstrate certain skills and behaviors are at a disadvantage and considered low in their readiness for kindergarten (Athanasiou, 2006; Blair & Raver, 2015; Dauber, Alexander, & Entwisle, 1993; Stormont et al., 2017). But what is school readiness?

In general school readiness is "the state of child competencies at the time of school entry that are important for later success" (Snow, 2006, p. 9). There is a prevalent emphasis in the United States, and in many other countries, on getting children ready for elementary school (Athanasiou, 2006; Child Trends, 2010). Numerous initiatives, studies, standards, and practices have been recommended to support readiness (Halle, Hair, Wandner, & Chien, 2012; Huang & Invernizzi, 2012). Even though the need for children to learn specific skills and prerequisites to support their school success is clear, there are no systems in place to ensure every child has access to this preparation. In fact, many children enter elementary school with experiences that have impeded their development of essential readiness skills. These are the children that kindergarten teachers can help the most (Dauber, Alexander, & Entwisle, 1993; Little, Cohen-Vogel, & Corran, 2016).

Children who enter kindergarten without needed skills need a strong teacher to change the likelihood of their success in the short and long term. Strong teachers meet all children where they are and teach them what they need to know. They do not question why some children do not have certain skills or background knowledge, or blame the child;

they always strive to do all they can to teach each child. Strong kindergarten teachers can level the playing field for children at risk for failure. Theresa Reinkemeyer, a wonderful kindergarten teacher, discusses the importance of readiness and her role in preparing children for school.

> *Kindergarteners come into the public school system with a large range of experiences. Some kids have gone to preschool while others have spent their early years at home. Some kids have an academic background while others are more of a blank slate. Some kids are independent and have learned self-help skills while others are used to their family and friends providing for them. Because of these things, it becomes important for kindergarten teachers to close the gap in child experiences and provide opportunities for all kids to learn, grow, and develop in a variety of ways.*

> *The kindergarten year has become increasingly academic and teachers have had to become more creative in how they provide enriching experiences for their students.... Kindergarten is a year of transition for children. It is the bridge between preschool and elementary school. While curriculum, expectations, and daily schedules mirror that of an elementary classroom, the importance of play-based instruction and inclusion of free-play complement preschool experiences. As kindergarten teachers, it is important to remember these things as we plan for our students and gradually prepare them for elementary school.*

Theresa's perspective reflects the history of kindergarten and its original purpose. At the same time, she acknowledges the current pressures for kindergarten to become more academic. Kindergarten, which means "children's garden," was originally developed to support children's development through the use of play and exploration of the world around them (Diamond, Lee, Senften, Lam, & Abbott, 2019). In the United States, half-day kindergartens with this emphasis were introduced to support children's development and help them become more accustomed to elementary school routines. However, with the push for standards and increased accountability for schools, kindergarten has changed. Many educational professionals conclude that kindergarten doesn't exist anymore as a safe and supportive introduction to elementary school; rather it is a time when children are evaluated as to their readiness than as a yearlong acclimation for school. Preschools have increased pressures to prepare children for the expectations and demands of kindergarten (Halle et al., 2012). Overall, in the United States, the original concept of kindergarten no longer exists. Kindergarten has become an outcome assessment that

many children are failing. It is not fair or appropriate to introduce children to their 12-year school career expecting them to have lived and learned specific things in their preschool years. Statistics show that as many as 1 in 5 children, on average, are not succeeding in our current system.

Consider the following

- Kindergarten teachers rate 15% of kindergarteners as poor in their overall readiness for kindergarten (Stormont et al., 2017).
- The success of children in their transition to kindergarten is an important early marker for future success in school and life (Little, Cohen-Vogel, & Curran, 2016; Zins, Bloodworth, Weissberg, & Walberg, 2007).
- Ten percent to 30% of children are deemed not ready for first grade and are retained or not promoted to first grade, although research does not support the practice (Elkind, 2008); child development experts stress that a lack of understanding of developmentally appropriate practices is a contributing factor to retention of children (Elkind; 2008; Hong & Raudenbush, 2005).
- Research on retention clearly show that retention practices are not associated with positive outcomes for children and are associated with extensive negative outcomes including, for example, increased personal and adjustment problems, lower achievement, and elevated risk for dropping out of school (Aldridge & Goldman, 2007).
- As many as 1 in 4 children enter kindergarten with social and emotional difficulties (Lee, Brooks-Gunn, Zhai, Han, & Waldfogel, 2014).
- Many children enter kindergarten without prior knowledge or experience with books and rich early language experiences (Stormont, Espinosa, McCathren, & Knipping, 2003).
- Approximately one in 5 children live in poverty (Child Trends Databank, 2019); in single mother households 43% of children live in poverty, which is a striking difference compared to two parent families (10% poverty rates).
- Almost half of homeless children are under the age of five years (Child Trends Databank, 2019).
- The number of children entering schools with cultural and linguistic diversity is increasing yet, unfortunately, educators

continue to lack preparation for culturally responsive practices (Green, McKenzie, & Stormont, 2019).

These data indicate many children enter kindergarten with factors that place them at risk for negative outcomes. Therefore, the significance of having caring, prepared kindergarten teachers is profound. Sadly, children who enter kindergarten with limited social and emotional language, and other readiness skills may begin school at a disadvantage that only grows greater. This is why it is important to understand risk factors, interactions among risks, and outcomes in order to leverage the opportunity kindergarten teachers have.

Kindergarten teachers can work to understand all the factors that impede children's readiness including characteristics within their families, preschools or child-care centers, and communities. Research on youth with very negative outcomes, including drop out and incarceration, has clearly identified early problems in school as one stepping stone to a bleak future. Schools need to be prepared to support children regardless of their preschool environments; one way to do this is by understanding the major factors that influence readiness for kindergarten through the lens of a good theoretical framework.

Social Ecological Theory and School Readiness

Social ecological theory can be used to understand the dynamic nature of risk and readiness for the transition to kindergarten. Within this theoretical lens, learning and development are influenced by multiple factors including what children bring to each context based on their own characteristics. Child characteristics include temperament, intelligence, prior knowledge, language and cognitive skills as well as biological states (e.g., enough sleep, food). These within-child systems interact with multiple other systems including parents, siblings, and other relatives in the home setting. If children have school and community experiences (church activities, play groups) before kindergarten they will also have learned from these interactions. When children enter kindergarten, they will interact with their teacher, school staff, and peers. These interactions may be positive and serve as a buffer for within-child deficits or, if these interactions are negative, they may exacerbate their risk. The positive interactions children have with others are the most important factors that can support them. In order to thrive, children need to experience positive, warm relationships.

In the United States, kindergarten is children's first structured experience within the public school system. Thus, what we expect children to know should be viewed in this context. For example, children may not have had positive interactions with others in their preschool settings. If this is true, then changing the way they view school is an important place to start when supporting their transition. This is done through ensuring that kindergarten is a positive experience. Learning is very challenging if children do not feel safe. When schools use more transition support activities, children do better in kindergarten (Little et al., 2016). The effect is stronger for children from low-income backgrounds when compared to children from affluent backgrounds. Therefore, schools and teachers need to spend time supporting a safe and supportive school environment. After this foundation of a caring community is laid, teachers can then begin the year-long process of determining how to ensure that every child learns. For social behavior skills, it is <u>always</u> best for teachers to take the position that if children are displaying inappropriate behavior, they may have not been taught the appropriate behavior or been supported in using skills. Stated a bit differently—in the absence of instruction—teachers should not assume children possess specific social skills and should focus on teaching when social errors occur. Supporting children by meeting them where they are is the best approach for teachers.

Overall, transitions are stressful. For children and their families to positively adjust to the transition to kindergarten it is imperative that this time is marked with attention and support. This is not always easy. Research has found that teachers feel less comfortable with some families and may have less contact with them; children who are at risk are the most likely to have teachers who feel less comfortable and have less contact with their families (Stormont, Herman, Reinke, David, & Goel, 2013). Being aware of such discomfort is a first step in addressing it. This book will include practical ways teachers can provide support for children and their families.

A Framework for Supporting READI ness

The transition to kindergarten marks a critical opportunity for early intervention. Extensive research supports the premise that children with problems in academic and or social behavior in early elementary school are likely to continue to manifest problems over time; children with problems across both academic and social behavior domains have

the worst long-term outcomes (Darney, Reinke, Herman, Stormont, & Ialongo, 2013; Stormont, Reinke, Herman, & Lembke, 2012).

It can be challenging to know where to begin to ensure that every child is supported in being successful in school. Informed by research, the following framework for supporting kindergarten readiness was developed and is compatible with any pre-existing efforts adopted by a school. For example, the framework could be integrated with multitiered systems of support, such as response to intervention (RTI) or positive behavior interventions and supports (PBIS; Bohanon, McIntosh, & Goodman, 2011). The READI framework includes the following interrelated and integral components:

Relationships: ensuring that teachers build relationships with children, their families, other individuals within the school, and the community.

Every child is supported with universal strategies that are developmentally appropriate.

Access to resources is provided for families and children to help meet their basic needs.

Data informed and systematic approaches are used to support children.

Individualized supports are provided when children need more than universal level supports.

The framework presented in this text is based on prevention science, social ecological theory, behavioral theory, and evidence-based best practices for providing supports to children and their families. In the following paragraphs, I elaborate on the elements listed above.

Relationships. As mentioned earlier, relationships provide the foundation from which children feel safe and secure in their learning environment. Research shows that a safe learning environment is vital for children's development. When teachers have more positive relationships with children's families, those families are more likely to support children's learning at home. Practical strategies for building positive relationships with families are discussed in Chapter 3. Positive relationships with families also allow teachers to connect them with needed resources. When key family needs are met, children are in a better position to learn. Chapter 4 discusses these issues.

Every child is supported. For every child to be supported, *teachers have to understand* the characteristics children have that could make lessons and settings challenging. This includes knowledge of the

children's developmental levels. If they do, the right kind and level of support can be provided so children (*and teachers*) can be successful. For example, most young children will benefit from teachers providing verbal prompts and picture cues to remind them of setting requirements (e.g., raise your hand, listen while friends are sharing). For children with specific characteristics that put them at risk for struggling in school, the provision of verbal prompts and reminders is especially important. Thus, the supports in this book are considered to be universal supports or supports teachers should use with all children. Strategies discussed in this book are particularly helpful for children who are vulnerable for failure or demonstrating early academic or social problems. Given the teacher's role in meeting all children where they are, regardless of their preschool experiences, the supports and strategies in this book will aid in teaching all children according to their diverse characteristics.

Access to resources. Many children and their families need support in meeting their basic needs. Chapter 4 is written with this in mind and provides ways that teachers and other professionals in schools can work to connect families and children with needed resources.

Data based and systematic approach. Teachers need to collect information on what children know and then use this information when planning lessons and selecting content. As explained in Chapter 5, data are just pieces of information. There are practical ways to assess children and collect data for decision-making. For example, how many times does David interrupt during group time? If he interrupts 10 times in 15 minutes then the data describe a fairly severe problem in need of support. By contrast, if he interrupts only once, it is not a problem in need of support. Academic examples are perhaps more familiar for most teachers given assessment needs for reports and academic monitoring. Simple and quick assessments are also provided in this book to help teachers gauge children's academic skills and mastery of lessons. Teachers can use brief assessments at the end of lessons like "exit slips" (see Chapter 6) to ensure children have mastered key content. Children who struggle in academic or social behavior areas can be targeted for more teacher support.

Individualized supports. Individualized supports are provided when children need more than universal level supports. After universal support strategies, which are appropriate for all children, are implemented consistently some children will need more support. Such children will likely need and benefit from additional strategies and these are presented in Chapter 8.

The READI framework components are reflected in prevention-based multitiered systems of support (MTSS). MTSS are very prevalent in the U.S. and include employing systematic, evidence-based interventions and data-based systems to be able to determine children who do not respond to foundational practices and need more support. Data-based decision-making is an evidence-based practice in itself and important for ensuring that children benefit from instruction (Stormont et al., 2012).

The use of the READI framework reflects a more appropriate system for supporting children and introducing them to their first structured experience in the public schools system in the United States. Currently, the practices surrounding kindergarten readiness, retention, and a push for children to "catch up" reflect a one-size-fits-all approach that does not match what is known about developmental and individual differences. Professor Emeritus David Elkind (2008) succinctly describes the need to change such practices stating "At the heart of this mistaken and destructive retention policy is the assumption that education is a race and that the earlier you start, the earlier and the better you will finish. But education is not a race; it is a journey that takes us through all of the stages along life's way. How we school our young children will very much determine the kind of lifetime learners they will be."

For whom is this book written?

This book is written primarily for kindergarten teachers and individuals who work with teachers. It is also appropriate for all professionals who work with young children including early childhood administrators and teachers, school psychologists, behavior consultants, and school counselors. It is my goal for readers to learn simple, practical strategies for working more effectively with kindergarteners and their families. The text provides *practical* ideas for support to increase the likelihood that children will be successful in their transition to kindergarten.

The next chapter, Chapter 2, discusses why many children struggle in the transition to kindergarten. As suggested by the earlier review of social ecological theory, the reasons are often an interaction among specific child characteristics, family challenges, and school factors. Chapters 3 and 4 focus on the personal relationships needed to meet all children where they are and monitor growth. Building relationships

with and among children and with their families is essential to create high expectations and support for success. Positive relationships with families and children as well as with school personnel allow teachers to be a bridge linking families with school and community resources.

Chapter 5 is a user-friendly primer on data and how it can be used for decision-making in the classroom. The chapter offers a basis for understanding and working with education specialists who use standardized assessment measures. Screening options are discussed and the information that can result from different options is presented. Chapter 6 presents simple and effective interventions for supporting academic growth in a classroom. Chapter 7 provides multiple classroom management and social behavioral support strategies for supporting positive social and emotional behaviors. The interventions from these chapters will also be connected to Chapter 5 with examples of goals and ways to link these strategies to quick assessments to monitor growth.

The final chapter, Chapter 8, will look at the process of selecting interventions for students with more significant needs. School-based teams should be designated and trained to address the characteristics of children in school today. Meeting the needs of children who struggle significantly and determining assessments to inform screening and monitoring systems will be the focus of this chapter. A problem-solving approach to working with children within a team structure is presented to guide decision-making. This chapter will also highlight practical ways teachers can support kindergarteners in their transition to first grade. Continued partnerships with families and a systematic approach for working with children are imperative for sustaining positive outcomes into first grade.

Chapter 2

Child Characteristics that Signal Need for Support

In early childhood children need to develop and learn specific skills across multiple domains including social, emotional, physical, cognitive and language (Hair, Halle, Terry-Humen, Lavelle, & Calkins, 2006; Halle, Hair, Wandner, & Chien, 2012). Young children have many developmental challenges to work through as they mature. Tolerance, persistence, and the ability to problem-solve and negotiate are a few essential skills children need to develop to be successful in school and life. The ability to regulate emotions is another necessary skill for children to learn in their early years (Pears et al., 2014). The expectations for self-regulation and other social-emotional skills increase as children get older. For example, throwing a tantrum on the floor when frustrated or angry is not uncommon for 2 and 3 year olds; however, if a 6 year old does this in kindergarten it is not acceptable. Parents and teachers indicate that social-emotional skills are essential for success in kindergarten (Halle et al., 2012; Stormont, Beckner, Mitchell, & Richter, 2005).

Children who transition to kindergarten will have developmental differences in what they have learned (e.g., tying shoelaces, letter-sound knowledge, following directions) and the amount they have learned. Accordingly, they may need more time and adult support in some or all areas. Some challenges that children have may be related to their within-child characteristics, their environments or in their interactions in environments. Research with young children transitioning to kindergarten has found that school readiness is multidimensional and influenced by child, school, and family characteristics (Halle et al., 2012; Konold & Pianta, 2005).

This chapter provides a brief review of factors that are important when considering children's readiness for kindergarten. With increased understanding of the ecological systems at work in children's lives before and during their transition to kindergarten, professionals can

better understand and apply the READI framework and support increased opportunities for growth and success for all children.

Within-child Characteristics

There are many characteristics that children bring with them to kindergarten. The purpose of this section is not to discuss significant developmental delays or disabilities but rather to discuss common characteristics that can create challenges for children, teachers, and parents. The following case examples illustrate challenges that kindergarten children may have that will make their transition more difficult if they are not provided with the supports that they need.

Case Examples

David

David was excited about kindergarten. He had only been to one community day care when he was 4 years old but was expelled due to behavioral concerns. After that he stayed at home with his mother and grandmother and spent time playing games, watching television, and running errands with his mother. He had very few experiences with books or other children his age. He seemed overly excited and confused, didn't follow directions, and didn't ask for help when he needed it. He also got distracted easily and was often in places he was not supposed to be. For example, he would go to the bathroom down the hall, get distracted, and not return. He wandered around the classroom and touched and played with materials not being used at the time. He blurted out when the teacher was talking and when another peer was speaking. He did not seem to know how to take turns.

Juan

Juan was the oldest child in his family that included his mother, father, grandparents, and three other young children. He entered kindergarten speaking little English. He was very friendly, kind and helpful but lacked basic preacademic skills such as recognizing books and letters and he didn't know how to count. He seemed to be confused during most activities and lessons. He would often just look out the window

*or play with some object nearby. He followed directions and seemed
to watch his peers when he didn't know what the teacher said.*

Samantha

*Samantha is the only child in her family that includes her father and
paternal grandmother. She is pleasant and tries to follow all
instructions. She is a little impulsive and has difficulty waiting her
turn to talk and move. She has some attention issues and seems to
struggle when working alone and with others. She has difficulty
playing and working with peers and does not seem to know how to
request entry to groups (e.g., asking to join in or asking peers questions).
She also does not participate when working in small groups.*

As evident in the above examples, many young children have
characteristics in kindergarten that make learning more challenging.
Children may have deficits in knowledge because they lack specific
experiences or do not understand English, or due to within-child
characteristics. For example, some children may have no or limited
experiences with books and may have never done a simple book review
before. Other children in class are answering specific questions and
attending to cues from the teacher like "What do you think this book is
about?" But some children may not know what the other children are
doing and how they engage with books, such as looking at the picture
and listening to the title for clues. This is frustrating for many young
children who may then go on to view the classroom as a confusing
setting where everyone else seems to know what is going on. Such
children may feel left out.

With each of the case examples, child characteristics placed children
at risk for struggling in different settings in the classroom. While not an
exhaustive list, the following characteristics make learning more
challenging for children (Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2010; Stormont, 2007;
Stormont & Thomas, 2014; Vaughn & Bos, 2012; Zentall, 2006):

- ❖ **Attention problems**: Attention problems include coming to
  attention, which can occur if children are tired or have trouble
  settling in to listen to class instruction. Children may also
  struggle with selectively attending to specific teacher cues,
  visuals (e.g., steps on a poster or on the board), or verbal
  directions. Sustaining attention to one thing for a specific period
  of time is also challenging for young children who may be pulled

off task or get tired easily. These problems can significantly impact children in the classroom.

❖ **Memory problems**: Children may struggle to remember instructions or directions, or have difficulty in connecting new information to what they already know. Short-term and long-term memory problems affect how children work with new information and how they practice applying information to extend their knowledge. When children have memory problems, they need support to help them work with information.

❖ **Activity needs**: Some children move and talk substantially more than their peers. High levels of activity can be especially challenging with young children who are already more active than older peers. Long periods without movement or talking will be difficult for most young children.

❖ **Impulsivity**: When children are impulsive, they act without thinking of the consequences. Impulsivity influences children's ability to do their work effectively and can jeopardize their safety. Children with problems related to impulsivity also frequently interrupt during instruction and may make careless errors due to a quick response.

❖ **English language deficits**: Children who are learning English as their second language often experience a lot of confusion in school settings; often they hear the teacher and peers' speech as noise or unintelligible words in the classroom as they try to learn the language.

❖ **Motivation**: Most young children enter school with high levels of motivation; however, their success or failure in early grades often determines their motivation as they continue in school. Kindergarten children need to be supported in their motivation to learn.

❖ **Knowledge deficits**: Children enter elementary school with different learning experiences. For example, some children will have limited experiences with letter-sound combinations and literature. Teachers need to determine what each child has learned to date in order to create appropriate learning experiences.

❖ **Language:** Children have various language needs early in their school years. Some children have limited vocabulary knowledge; others have pragmatic, oral expression, or language processing problems.

❖ **Self-regulation:** Self-regulation includes the ability to independently manage your behavior throughout classroom

activities. It is obvious to teachers when children have not yet developed the ability to self-regulate. Such children need more prompting and support to stay engaged or to follow steps in completing tasks or transitions.

❖ **Persistence:** Following through to completion and sustaining effort on challenging tasks are hard skills and many children will struggle with these as they transition to kindergarten. The ability to continue when experiencing frustration requires some encouragement from their own inner speech (*I can do it*!) or from the teacher. Many children will need to have their persistence time lengthened significantly over the kindergarten year.

Children may have one or all of these characteristics. Kindergarten teachers need to be flexible in providing different opportunities and supports for children to level the playing field as much as possible. Strategies for providing supports for these are discussed in Chapters 6, 7 and 8. Table 2.1 is an illustration of the specific characteristics of the case examples from earlier in this chapter and their instructional needs that can be matched with appropriate supports.

Table 1

Understanding David's Characteristics and Instructional Needs

David's characteristics	Specific skill needs
Limited experiences with other children	• Interacting with children
Limited literacy experiences	• Exposure to books and literacy activities
Limited social and self-regulation skills	• Following directions
	• Using materials only when it is time
	• Asking for help
	• Blurting out
	• Taking turns

| Safety concerns | • Goes to another location in school without permission |
| Attention needs | • Increase attention to task, selective attention to tasks and routines for safety |

Understanding Juan's Specific Characteristics and Instructional Needs

Juan's characteristics	Specific skill needs
Limited English	• Support learning in primary language • Support learning English
Limited literacy experiences	• Exposure to books and literacy activities
Limited math	• Counting
Attention needs	• Support following lessons and activities • Increase attention to task, selective attention to tasks and routines for safety

Understanding Samantha's Specific Characteristics and Instructional Needs

Samantha's characteristics	Specific skill needs
Impulsivity	• Waiting for turn
Self-regulation	• Working alone
Social skills	• Working with others
Attention needs	• Increase attention to task

Family Challenges

Families experience many challenges that influence their children as they transition to kindergarten. Parents may each work two jobs and have limited time (and money) to attend school activities or run to a store for supplies with little notice. Some parents may not have flexible schedules for meeting with teachers or participating in class activities. They may have little time available for home-based early literacy activities to support learning including reading books to children.

Parents or other main caregivers in families may also have limited personal resources. They may lack the patience or problem-solving skills needed to address developmental challenges and support children in learning adaptive strategies. Sometimes parents may not have fully developed these skills themselves. It is through no fault of parents that they do not use these adaptive skills; they may also need support to learn how to persist and address barriers in their lives.

Families may have limited English proficiency. Educators may need interpreters and translated materials to be sent home to ensure that communication with families is possible. It can be a challenge to find interpreters for meetings and information, but it is essential that families be informed about their children's needs and education. This can only be accomplished through communicating in their own language.

Some challenges, including poverty and homelessness, are associated with insufficient resources for food, housing, health care, and other basic needs. Poverty influences children's resources within their families and also in their schools and communities. Decades ago, Jonathon Kozol described his visit to a kindergarten classroom in a very poor neighborhood in Savage Inequalities and, sadly, the impact of the multiple risks on children could be seen in the outcomes of children in the community.

> *Four little boys are still asleep on the green rug an hour later when I leave the room. I stand at the door and look at the children, most of whom are sitting at a table now to have their milk. Nine years from now, most of these children will go on to Manley High School, an enormous, ugly building just a block away that has a graduation rate of only 38%. Twelve years from now, by junior year of high school, if the neighborhood statistics hold true for these children, 14 of these 23 boys and girls will have dropped out of school. Fourteen years from now, four of these kids, at most, will go to college. Eighteen years from now, one of those four may graduate from college, but three of the 12 boys in this kindergarten will*

already have spent time in prison. If one stands here in this kindergarten room and does not know these things, the moment seems auspicious. But if one knows the future that awaits them, it is terrible to see their eyes look up at you with friendliness and trust—to see this and to know what is in store for them. (Kozol, 1991, p. 45)

Although schools and communities are more prepared today to address poverty, there is still much variability in the resources available for children living in poverty. These challenges can be addressed through increased knowledge of school and community resources, which are discussed in Chapters 3 and 4.

School Factors Associated with Risk

Schools become, for many children, a resource for learning how to be successful in their school careers and lives beyond school. Schools need to meet children where they are and help them progress. In order for educators to do this with young children, they need to be aware of developmental influences on children's cognitive, language, and social-emotional skills. Some of the readiness skills rated highly by teachers and other professionals may be in a developmental domain that has yet to fully develop in all children who are as young as 5 years old when they enter kindergarten. Giving children time to develop attention skills and social-emotional regulation with support and progress monitoring is imperative for fostering success.

Meeting children where they are includes being prepared to support children with limited English language proficiency. In order for teachers to create an environment for supporting all children, it is important for them to create a safe community where children feel comfortable. Box 2.1 includes one mother's story of her experiences in the United States after her children entered school. The story of her son Edgar's experiences in school is a clear example of the interaction between within-child characteristics and school characteristics that unfortunately contributed to an early negative situation for her son and her family. The school was not prepared to support Edgar; he was constantly in trouble and no longer wanted to attend school. Chapter 6 includes simple recommended strategies for teachers to help children with limited English.

Box 2.1 Personal Story of Immigration

Personal Story of Immigration
Myriam Marquez

When my family immigrated to the United States, we believed our children would have greater opportunities for prosperity and success. However, we underestimated the language, cultural, social, emotional, and academic hurdles that we would face.

Edgar was a bright and inquisitive five-year-old when we moved from Mexico to Texas. He had been enrolled in a school since the age of three and could name the planets and every species of dinosaur. His teachers praised his language skills and remarked on his enthusiasm for school and learning.

All that changed when we crossed the border.

His American teachers labeled him "at risk" with "language development issues." He was constantly in trouble due to misunderstood cultural differences and the language barrier. He struggled to make friends. Edgar did not understand what was happening to him and dreamed about moving back "home" to Mexico where going to school was not as difficult and he had a lot of friends and relatives.

We saw our son was sad; he stopped playing and talking at home. Edgar just wanted to sleep. Edgar's life had changed drastically; his world changed around him, language, culture, smells, flavors, and the way to make friends were different. He was not a happy child any more.

One day my husband and I decided to go observe him from a distance at recess time. Sadly, we noticed the other children teasing him. While children were playing soccer; they kicked the ball with the intention of hitting him and then told the teacher it was an accident. My husband took my hand, and we looked at each other with tears in our eyes. That was when we realized how difficult such a big change was for a young child.

Edgar needed an advocate in the classroom. As a concerned parent, I volunteered at school, but communication with his teachers was a problem since I did not speak English and the school staff where my son attended never provided me with an interpreter. A friend of mine who spoke English and I went to my son's school to talk about Mexican culture. We danced a Mexican dance and we offered Mexican sweets in a small bag that I had sewn by hand.

Every stitch in the bag was my hope for a change in my son's life. We wanted the American children and teachers to understand that we Mexicans were just like them inside, that my son had feelings and desires to make friends and feel included and accepted as any other child. Things changed slowly. Having a student like my son who was learning a second language was a problem for the teachers. They did not know how to help him.

After my son had an accident, wetting his pants, because he did not know how to ask permission to go to the bathroom in English, my husband and I decided to create cards with drawings and phrases in English, so that my son could use them in school every time he needed to communicate with teachers and classmates. The sentences included phrases and requests for teachers and classmates such as "I need to go to the bathroom"; "I'm thirsty"; "I'm hungry"; "My stomach hurts"; and "Do you want to play with me?"

Everything was very difficult for us. The teachers told me that my son did not speak English and that they did not speak Spanish and so how could they teach him? The teachers had no idea how to start.

Professionals in schools have a significant opportunity to support children in developing key skills to be successful. According to extensive research, if children develop and sustain problematic behavior patterns into the third grade, the behavior stabilizes and becomes much harder to change, similar to the stability of the IQ (Walker, Severson, & Feil, 2014). The same can be said of early literacy patterns and adjustment to school (Stormont et al., 2012). At the end of the third grade, expectations for social-emotional behavior and academic skills become significantly higher. For example, the focus in school shifts from learning to read to reading to learn, which puts many children at risk for greater discrepancies between their grade and their reading level.

School factors that contribute to children's success include the behavior and classroom management strategies that teachers' use, and the academic and social expectations for children (Stormont et al., 2012). There are many supports available for assisting teachers and schools in implementing more evidence-based strategies. In a survey of working with challenging behavior and staff needs for support, 97% of teachers of young children (early childhood through elementary) reported concerns about disruptive behavior in their classrooms and

wanted training in how to effectively manage these behaviors (Stormont, Reinke, & Herman, 2011). Regular education teachers need to have the skills and training to effectively work with problem behavior instead of using strategies that unintentionally make the behavior worse. Good support systems for teachers are needed to ensure that they have the information and strategies for teaching and supporting all children.

The responsibility for school readiness is one that needs to be shared. Stated differently, *schools should not expect children to come to school more ready than they are; schools should always change to be ready for the children that enter*. Rather than focusing on school readiness, teachers should monitor how much children learn in kindergarten. Teachers can document children's mastery of specific skills and how they have grown in their letter-sound knowledge, vocabulary, and self-regulation by using the strategies in this book.

Connecting to Supports

In this chapter, characteristics of children, families, and schools were briefly discussed to illustrate how the interaction between children and their ecological contexts can signal the potential need for additional supports as they enter kindergarten (Rose, Nickerson, & Stormont, 2015). The remainder of this book will focus on ways to support children's readiness for kindergarten (and elementary school) by building relationships, securing resources, teaching academic and social skills, and working to provide support for all children according to their needs (Stormont, 2007). Developing positive relationships with and among young children and their families is extremely important and the foundation for the provision of other supports. This is why Relationships are the first part of the READI framework, discussed in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 3

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS TO SUPPORT AND SUSTAIN READINESS

A Framework for READI ness for Children
Relationships: Ensuring that teachers build relationships
Every child is supported
Access to resources is provided
Data informed and systematic approaches are used
Individualized supports are provided when children need more

Teachers can teach much more effectively when they foster positive relationships. Building relationships with children and their families is essential for a successful kindergarten transition. Teachers also need to spend time building community and individual relationships with children to ensure the classroom is a safe and caring environment. In order to support their efforts, teachers need to understand practical strategies for working with all families, including families from different cultural backgrounds.

Once relationships are established, connecting families with school resources is a way to sustain positive relationships with elementary schools for years to come. From the front desk staff to teachers, families should feel supported by all school personnel. This chapter and Chapter 4 provide a context for understanding and building relationships with families. In this chapter, family composition, cultural responsiveness, and specific challenges in families are presented. Next, ways to develop strong partnerships with families are discussed. Finally, strategies for building relationships with children are discussed.

Building Relationships with Families

A first step in forming relationships with families is to understand families as a system that serves many roles and functions. Families

work to meet the needs of all of the family members. Family involvement in children's education is only one of the roles families play in supporting the overall health and well-being of members. According to the Turnbulls, who are leading experts in building partnerships with families of children with disabilities, there are at least 8 main functions that families strive to meet (Turnbull, Turnbull, Erwin, & Soodak, & Shogren, 2011):

- Affection: Meeting needs for love and acceptance. This is the number one role for families.
- Daily Care: Attending to day-to-day tasks for specific family members including meeting their basic needs for shelter, food, and clothing.
- Education: Meeting the needs related to academic work, parent education, or extended education for adults.
- Economics: Addressing needs for financially supporting families.
- Recreation: Structuring time to have fun, engaging in activities that family members find enjoyable, including within house (e.g., game night) and out of the house activities (e.g., walks, camping, movies, pizza out).
- Self-esteem: Building on the self-worth of members in the family.
- Socialization: Building time and opportunities for members to engage in socializing with other people.
- Spirituality: Time spent connecting with peaceful, serene activities that enhance one's connectedness to something spiritual (including, but not limited to, religion and art, music, and nature).

Once teachers get to know families better they can understand if other family needs are understandably taking precedence over the completion of homework, paperwork, or other educational activities. Knowing the needs and roles of different family members can also be very helpful for teachers in determining how to help families meet different needs. For example, if a grandparent is temporarily living with the family and they have a great relationship with the child, then perhaps they are available for evening reading activities. As another example, if an older child at school has self-esteem needs for support and their younger sibling is withdrawn in their classroom, using the older sibling as a peer-tutor or support for specific times of the week in their younger sibling's classroom may be a good fit for both children. In

this way the older sibling is not only there for familial support for their younger sibling but also to serve as an older peer in a cross-age peer-tutoring model to support their own self-esteem needs.

The transition to kindergarten marks a time of change in families as children navigate new roles and increased independence. Open positive communication between teachers and families can support successful navigation of these new roles. Family involvement is essential to help children transition to elementary school; just as all children are different, all families are different. In the next section, the importance of educators understanding who is considered to be a family member is discussed.

Family Composition

Educational professionals need to know who is included in a child's family in order to support children. For example, a mother's best friend may be a key family member and someone who shares in her children's education and after school care. Although the school is not required or allowed (legally) to include this individual in educational decision-making, it is good to know she is involved and may be at classroom parties and events if her mother cannot attend. Understanding that each family is different is an essential premise to working effectively with families.

Building relationships with children and their families is also essential for creating a context for high expectations and success for children. There are many ways to get to know young children but perhaps the first is to get to know their families' composition (e.g., size, members, decision-makers) and the cultural beliefs of families. Obtaining this information is an important step for working to engage in relationship building strategies with children who are sensitive to their families' backgrounds. It is through these efforts that families can be more involved in school-related involvement to support children's development within the context of their preferences and beliefs.

The traditional picture of the nuclear family includes a father, mother, and children. In fact, this is how the U.S. Census Bureau defines family. However, families today can more accurately be defined by who is considered essential to the family in terms of assisting with their members' needs. Thus, an individual's family may consist of people who could include extended family, co-workers, close friends, and even neighbors. Furthermore, children could have grandparents or aunts as

main caregivers and cousins in sibling-like roles or could have a single father and grandmother in parental roles. Families also evolve over time and individuals may take more or less prominent roles at different points. It is important to honor the diversity that is present across families.

Family members may have different roles in providing for the children's emotional, economic, and educational needs. In addition, families are affected in various ways by children's social, emotional, and academic needs for support. It is important to understand this and be sensitive when approaching families if children have difficulties in school. For example, if families are struggling to meet a child's daily care needs because a main contributor (e.g., grandparent) recently passed away, it is important to be understanding and supportive. If a child has a negative lunch balance or has not brought back some paperwork with a parent's signature, it is important to show compassion and understanding when communicating with families. Educators should always strive to communicate to families, in both words and actions, that their desire is to work with families as partners on behalf of their children. Implying their children's needs are suffering due to an external factor beyond their control will not be beneficial for strengthening the teacher-family relationship. It is always important to understand potential stressors on families and help them problem-solve around barriers to involvement.

Understanding Potential Barriers

Understanding potential barriers to forming positive relationships with families is very important. Collaboration with others is built on a foundation of trust; teachers should be aware of common obstacles to forming trusting relationships with families (Esler, Godber, & Christenson, 2002; Fantuzzo, Tighe, & Childs, 2000; Harniss, Epstein, Bursuck, Nelson, & Jayanthi, 2001; Hawes, 2008; Henderson & Berla, 1997; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Stormont et al., 2012; Turnbull et al., 2012). These obstacles include perceptions of teachers, opportunities for families and the tone of teacher communication.

More specifically, common barriers for families include:

- Lack of positive experiences with schools (e.g., parents' prior educational experiences)