

*Guidelines for  
Observing*

# School Readiness



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## First Grade Readiness



Photo courtesy of Housatonic Valley Waldorf School

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.

Chronological age, a school entry marker used in most traditional educational settings, 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 in addition 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. Educators strive to see whether the collective picture of the child appears consolidated enough that the evident strengths will carry the child forward.

Following 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 book *First Grade Readiness*. The WECAN publications *School Readiness Today* and *From Kindergarten into the Grades* are also excellent resources.



### Chronological Age

Mainstream schools generally set a specific date by which the child will turn six years old. This is commonly the only criterion considered for school entrance. A survey of public education school entry dates in the US shows 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 six by **June 1** in order to be considered for first 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. The caution surrounding school entry age in Waldorf schools, 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 premature infants 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 seven years, the etheric forces are used for growth of the physical body and internal organs. These are the same forces that, once 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 the single 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. As Dr. Michaela Glöckler describes these abilities: "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." 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 the birth of the etheric:

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

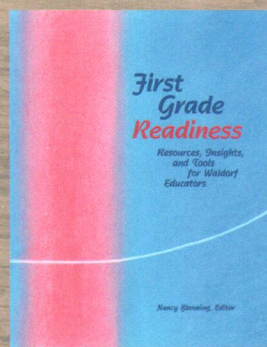
*School Readiness Today* is a joint publication prepared by the Pedagogical Section at the Goetheanum and IASWECE (International Association of Steiner/Waldorf Early Childhood Education) now translated into English and published by WECAN. This booklet gathers presentations on school readiness that were shared at an international colloquium on school readiness held at the Goetheanum in February, 2013.

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

Other resources found in *First Grade Readiness: Resources, Insights, and Tools for Waldorf Educators* (WECAN, Second edition, 2016) include the following helpful articles:



- "First Grade Readiness" by Joan Almon (also found in *The Developing Child: The First Seven Years*, WECAN, 2004)
- "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



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

*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 to future health in the broadest sense.*

## Other Signs of "Soul Readiness" for School

Dr. Lohn writes, "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.



Photo courtesy of Housatonic Valley Waldorf School



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. As Dr. Glöckler puts it, “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.’”

**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 previously endless ideas for play seem to dry up. This signals a “crisis of the will” that shows up socially as “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 the ability to express herself (expressive language).

**Emotional maturity/Behavior**—The child shows an increasing ability to put aside personal desires and impulses in deference to the needs of the group. One can see





Drawing courtesy of Denver Waldorf School

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. squares, figures with diagonals). She can reproduce form drawings 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 will need 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 with the outside coming in?

This question is considered in “Carrying the Transition to First Grade” by Janet Klaar, included in the book *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 children, in order that they may be able to fully engage in what the class teacher will prepare for them?

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.
- Able to demonstrate 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 crafts or tasks that



take days or even weeks to complete and shows initiative. Asks for work.

- Able to bring forth independent imaginations from his or her inner life as impetus for play and social interaction. Janet Klaat

writes, "He can work through the internal process [of transforming] the wonderful fantasies of his earlier kindergarten years into a conscious imagination."

### 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. Dr. Lohn states, "This can make a crucial difference, especially when considering children for school entry who are born between May and August."

**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, so that 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)

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## ***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, and the child seems socially secure and resilient—as expected for this age—then we can feel confident in sending the child along to the new step of first grade.

However, life and development are more individualized than guidelines can encompass. Some situations are complicated and sensitive. Each of these needs careful, thoughtful consideration and honest conversation.

### **What if a child's age is in keeping with public school guidelines but young for a Waldorf program?**

Societal school-admission norms may set up expectations that a capable younger child will be admitted to the Waldorf grade school despite the guidelines described above. Parents may feel strongly that their child is an exception, and they are excited for their child to embark on academic learning. There may be some school settings where the questionably young child is considered for enrollment in first grade for practical reasons, such as the financial or social viability of a class. These are practical decisions all schools may face.

Yet the pedagogical mandate of the early childhood educator is to make decisions based upon what is developmentally best for the individual child. To reach this decision, all of the factors described above are essential to consider. A younger child may do well in first and even

second grade. But often by third grade the distance between this child and the rest of the class will begin to broaden. Academics may progress, but gaps in social and emotional maturity may become more evident. Isolation and bewilderment with social dynamics beyond the child's maturity level may arise. 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 and a confirmed picture of developmental consolidation will have consequences in the future. We do well to hold this in consciousness as we consider all the factors.

Conversation between parents and teachers is essential. As stated above, explaining the school's first grade readiness guidelines is best done when the child first enters the early childhood program. Children with birthdays close to the birth-date guideline need to be considered carefully. Parents will feel assured when they experience that teachers are likewise seeking what is best for their child in the broadest context.

It can also be helpful if a family who has faced this same dilemma is willing to describe their experience. Most families whose child has had an extra kindergarten year speak positively about the benefit they ultimately have seen for their child.

### **What if a child shows uneven development?**

Our modern children increasingly show advanced development in some areas and disproportionate immaturity in others.



This can be due to the emphasis placed upon cognitive skills and early intellectual development, which sacrifices attention and opportunity for development in other areas. It can also be a suggestion of future learning challenges.

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 first grade has to offer, it is reasonable to send the child on. The areas of concern should be noted and shared with the first 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 observe and describe the child's developmental picture. 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 in grade school enrollment decisions than the question of learning capacity. Such a child may often be found to 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 issue may go 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 an ability to cooperate in a group are necessary. Honest conversation between parents and teachers needs to explore fair expectations from all directions and whether sufficient accommodations can be structured to support the child's success. If not, then the child's welfare calls for considering other educational options that will better serve him or her.

### **What about a child with differences who has done well in kindergarten but who is questionable for the grades? Can this child be served 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 with the flexible approach, reduced stress, and greater possibility for accommodations in Waldorf play-based kindergartens. The optimistic wish to send the child on to the grade school has grown out of seeing the child's progress in the early childhood setting. This optimism may not be grounded in a realistic picture of how well the child can meet the grade school expectations and whether the grade school structure can offer the necessary kinds of support for the child's success. How these questions can be answered will vary depending upon the individual child and family, school, and community.

In each of the above situations there are no absolute guidelines. All must look toward what will best benefit the individual child. All the questions described above have to be considered. Clear, honest, respectful, and compassionate conversation among the adults involved will lead to the best decision on behalf of the child.



*From the Waldorf Early Childhood Association of North America, suggestions to help early childhood educators and parents consider the developmental readiness of the whole child for grade school enrollment. Signs of physical and soul readiness are described, and areas of concern identified. These guidelines aim to look widely and deeply at questions of human development, and to honor the individuality of each child, as is the pledge of Waldorf education.*

*For more information about Waldorf Early Childhood Education and resources available from WECAN, please contact us:*



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