



# Readiness: Not a State of Knowledge, but a State of Mind

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 Our Work / For Families / School Readiness / Readiness: Not a State of Knowledge, but a State of Mind

By Dr. Dan Gartrell

People used to think children were ready for kindergarten if they could say the ABC's, count, identify colors, and write their first name. Readiness was always more complicated than that, and new brain research is helping us understand what readiness really is. Readiness doesn't mean just knowing the academic basics. It means a child has a willing attitude and confidence in the process of learning: a healthy state of mind.

How do families help their children gain this state of mind? By being responsive to all areas of their children's development—physical, emotional, social, cultural, language, and cognitive (thinking). Children are born with a great ability to learn and grow—different kinds of abilities, to be sure, but abilities that individually and together constitute the miracle of humanity.

Adults do best for their children when they nurture this unexpressed potential rather than ignore, reject, or try to train it. Healthy development, and with it school readiness, is the result of secure, responsive adult–child relationships. Here are eight parenting practices that nurture children's untold potential and readiness to learn.

**1. Have contact talks with your child each day.** A contact talk is a few moments of shared time between adult and child. Contact talks can happen anytime, day or night—often while reading together, but also while giving a bath, changing diapers (really), taking a walk, riding in a car, or when your child approaches you. When you decide that a contact talk will happen, stop what you are doing. Listen, encourage, and support. Don't “teach, preach, or screech.” Learn more about this little person and help that child learn more about you, as adult and child together in the family you share.

Contact talks build healthy attachment between an adult and child like nothing else can. They support the development of a child's self-esteem, social skills, thinking skills, and language abilities (key capacities for school success). If contact talks take place during physical activities, they enhance physical development.

Preschool child in car at night: “The moon is following us!”

Adult (quietly smiling): “I wonder where it’s going.”

Child: “To our house, of course. Moon likes it at our house.”

Adult: “It’s nice to have a home that’s liked.”

Child: “Yep.” (Smiling, continues looking at the moon).

In a few years, this same child will understand that the moon just looks like it is following the car. But no correction of this perception is needed now. What is important is a shared quality moment around the child’s beginning interpretations of the world and the people in it. Contact talks don’t have to be long, but they do have to happen, every day. They tell your child you value her and what she has to say is worthwhile.

**2. Recognize that children's reasoning skills are just beginning to develop.** Problem-solving and reasoning skills, what some call *executive function*, start to develop in the brain at about age 3. These abilities, including the capacity to understand complex situations, accommodate others’ viewpoints, and stay on task, are a work in progress into early adulthood.

It is important to understand that young children don't think the same ways adults do. Young children do not have the same grasp of reality as adults, and they see things from their own (often charming) viewpoints. Recall the young child who said, “The moon is following us.” The adult’s supportive response was to comment, “I wonder why,” and enjoy the child’s creative thinking. Helping the child make connections, and not fact-checking, builds brains. An older child considers the idea of the moon following the car pretty lame. But in the meantime, “Good night, Moon.”

**3. Think of young children's conflicts as *mistaken behaviors*, not misbehaviors.** A 3-year-old has 36 months of life experience. A 5-year-old has only 60 months. It is an error for adults to think that children misbehave because they “know better” and chosen to do wrong. They are not bad. They are only months old!

Heck, we adults don't always know how to “behave better.” We work on expressing strong emotions in nonhurting ways our entire lives. Young children are just beginning to learn this complex skill. Children have conflicts and strong disagreements with others, because their incomplete brain development and limited experience means they haven't learned yet how to behave more maturely.

Think of behaviors usually considered to be misbehaviors as *mistaken behaviors*. One way to think about a mistake is as an error in judgment that may cause or contribute to a conflict. Like all of us, children make mistakes. Young children make more of them because they are beginners in the learning process. They have yet to develop the personal resources they need to prevent, resolve, and forgive the conflicts all of us tend to fall into.

**4. When children have strong conflicts, adults work to teach rather than punish.** Research shows that punishment—infliction of pain and suffering as a consequence for something a person has done—harms healthy brain development. Punishment results in the release of stress hormones, in particular cortisol and adrenaline, which then “slosh around” in children’s brains.

Especially when stress reactions continue over time, they cause children to feel threatened even in nonthreatening situations. In reaction to perceived threats, children resort to patterns of fight-or-flight behavior. In such situations, children often show aggression (to their minds, they are defending themselves) and get into even more trouble. Children who bully are showing aggression to assert their wills in the face of life circumstances they have come to see as challenging.

Thus, the effect of punishment is to make it harder for children to learn the very social skills we want all children to learn. A cycle of stress, acting out, punishment, and more stress, starting early in childhood, can cause problems for an individual throughout life.

**5. Teach, don't punish. Conflicts do have consequences.** There are consequences for children when they make mistakes and cause big conflicts, and there are consequences for the adult as well. The consequence for an adult is to teach the child another way to behave—how to express strong emotions in ways that aren’t harmful. The consequence for a child is to understand the adult’s expectation that he or she learn a better way to behave.

The goal is to move children from hitting and yelling to using more acceptable methods, like saying, “I am angry!” (Just don't expect your child to learn this skill overnight. Expressing strong emotions in nonhurting ways is an ongoing task even for us adults.)

Always, the first step when children have conflicts is to tend to anyone who is hurt, then calm everyone down, including yourself. Time away from the situation may be important in helping to calm young (and older) family members. This is not time-out, but a cooling-off time so all can calm down, talk about what happened as soon as time can be made, and learn a better way to deal with the situation next time.

It takes hard work for adults to consistently teach rather than punish. Efforts don’t have to be perfect, but they do need to be honest and well intentioned. Adults who use guidance are firm when they need to be—but firm and friendly, not harsh or wishy-washy. To the best of our abilities, we need to model the reasoning and perspective-taking skills we want our children to learn. If children know we love them, even imperfect efforts at guidance can—and do—work. Guidance establishes a foundation children continue to build on, learning how to get along and solve problems as they grow—a foundation for building a healthy state of mind.

**6. Use guidance talks.** Different from the age-old lecture, a guidance talk is talking *with* (not *at*) a child about a conflict. In a guidance talk, the adult acts as a firm but friendly leader, talking with children after all parties have calmed down.

In using guidance talks, first recognize the effort or progress toward emotional restraint your child may have used. For your child to listen to you, you need to convey that you are working with, not against, your child. Work to build your child's understanding of each person's feelings during the conflict. Discuss what your child could have done instead, what can be done differently next time, and how your child could help the other person feel better.

It is not helpful to force an apology. Instead, when he is ready, ask your child how he can make things better. Most children forgive more easily than adults. They just need a little time to settle themselves and figure out what happened. Restitution and reconciliation are important goals in using guidance. They help us remember that every person is a full and important family member, even when they make mistakes.

**7. Hold family meetings to discuss and figure out problems that repeat themselves.** The purpose of family meetings is to teach that differences can be discussed in civil (not disagreeable) ways, and that family members can work together to address difficulties and solve problems.

Be the leader. Know your own mind going into a family meeting and be up front about what you're willing to negotiate and what you're not. (There's got to be something, though, or else why meet?) A key to successful family meetings is this: Everyone has a right to have and express their own viewpoint, but it is important to do so in respectful ways. As with guidance talks, start and end the meetings with positives—thank folks for participating and acknowledge effort, progress, and the togetherness of the family.

Family meetings are not always popular, but when an adult emphasizes mutual respect as a guideline, the meetings can reduce, prevent, and resolve strong emotional issues, even with young children. Family meetings make family problems something to talk about and work on together, rather than let problems be the elephant in the room.

**8. We adults (still) make mistakes.** Being a parent who is a caring and positive leader is the hardest job in the world. (Second place is a tie between being a caring and competent early childhood professional and a middle-school substitute teacher!) When we make mistakes in our own behavior, we need to forgive ourselves, forgive the others involved, and learn from the mistakes.

Note, however, when a family member makes a lot of mistakes, has lots of conflicts—consider this a plea for help. Sometimes families need help from outside. This is OK. This difficult step can open the door to a better life for the entire family and help children make

progress toward what we all want them to learn and to be.

For me the bottom-line question is this: As our kids get older, what do we want them to do if someone bullies them or pressures them to bully someone else, or (eventually) to experiment with alcohol, drugs, sex, or vandalism? If the answer is to come to us for guidance, then we get it. It's hard to know how to respond to life's tough questions, but good relationships with our children, begun when they are infants, will see us through.

## Readiness is a State of Mind

Research shows that the best thing we can do to get children ready for school is to form and keep positive relationships with them. Children who are securely attached to their family members accept themselves as worthy individuals. With ongoing family support, they can handle the frustrations, embarrassments, pressures, and successes that come their way. Securely attached children are better able to make friends, work with others, solve problems creatively, learn, and succeed. The best predictor of children's success in school and life is a brain that develops in healthy ways, as a result of their attachments with their family, and especially their parents.

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**Note:** Many of these ideas first appeared in Dan's four books and his column, *Guidance Matters*, which is published in the magazine *Young Children*. The five children in Dan and Julie's blended family are between 35 and 46 years old. Their 11 grandchildren range from age 8 to 23. (Dan brings photos to all events.)

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**Audience:** *Family*

**Age:** *Early Primary, Kindergarten, Preschool*

**Topics:** *Child Development, Cognitive, Higher Level Thinking, Brain Science*

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