

# AGE OF LEARNING, INC.



## SPECIAL REPORT TO PARENTS: PREPARING FOR KINDERGARTEN

### Introduction

Age of Learning, Inc., creator of ABCmouse.com *Early Learning Academy*, which is considered by many educators to be the most comprehensive online curriculum available for preschool, pre-k, and kindergarten children, recently conducted a nationwide survey of kindergarten teachers on the subject of children's preparedness for kindergarten. This report presents some of the results of that survey, along with recommendations from those teachers and the ABCmouse.com Curriculum Advisor Team about actions that parents can take to help prepare their children for entry into kindergarten.

The survey, conducted in October 2011 with more than 500 kindergarten teachers, revealed that two-thirds of America's kindergarten teachers believe most young children are academically unprepared for school when they enter kindergarten.

These teachers were asked what children should know more of at the point of entering kindergarten and what parents can do to better prepare their children. A summary of teacher recommendations in response to this question, as well as recommendations from the ABCmouse.com Curriculum Advisor Team, is presented below.

### Recommended Approach

One of your most important goals in preparing your child for school is to demonstrate that learning is fun and is a natural part of life. So when you do any learning activity with your child, approach it with an enthusiastic and playful attitude. Also, look for ways to mix learning naturally into family activities, like playing games, getting ready for bed, going to the park, shopping for groceries, and so on.

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The specific topics that are discussed below—developing oral language skills, reading, learning the alphabet and beginning phonics, and counting—are all things that can be done just about anywhere and anytime.

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Increasingly, parents and their children are turning to technology for entertainment and education, and well-designed technology tools and resources can have great value. At the same time, most child development experts agree that young children should spend much of their time in active and imaginative play and involved in interaction with family members and other children and adults. So for a preschooler, 30 to 60 minutes of computer (or other digital device) usage at a time is plenty.

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## Developing Oral Language Skills

### *What Your Child Should Know*

Oral language skills include being able to speak clearly and understanding what others are saying. Upon entering kindergarten, children should be able to do the following:

- Speak in complete sentences
- Have a conversation about a topic that lasts for a minute or two
- Understand requests and instructions
- Describe things in their environment

All of these abilities depend on two fundamental skills: 1) recognizing and using common language patterns, and 2) the extent of a child's oral vocabulary (that is, the number of spoken words that a child understands and can use).

Estimates of the number of oral vocabulary words a child should know upon entering kindergarten vary widely, and there is no easy way to measure this number. Your goal should be that your child is able to do these things:

- Name items in his or her environment,
- Understand and use words for many actions and emotions,
- Use descriptive words well

### *How to Help*

An effective way to build oral language skills is simply to talk with your child about what he or she is seeing and experiencing. As you do, discuss the color, size, shape, or other qualities of the things you are talking about, and encourage your child to contribute to the conversation. For example, instead of asking, "Do you see the dog?" ask, "Do you see that little white dog with the long, fuzzy ears? What is he doing?"

Another highly effective way to build oral language is discussed more fully in the Reading Books section of this report: reading to and with your child. Choose books with interesting pictures, and in addition to reading the words in the book, discuss what can be seen in the pictures (again, look for opportunities to use descriptive words).

Television, websites, and tablet pc's all offer content that can also contribute to a child's oral vocabulary, but there are a few things to be aware of when selecting appropriate content for a young child:

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1. If the *words* of a TV program don't have a clear connection to the images being shown, then they will probably not contribute to oral vocabulary development.
2. The *pace* of a TV program should not be so fast that the child does not have opportunities to make the connections between what he is hearing and what he is seeing.

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Websites and apps are most helpful when they meet these standards:

1. Their content is voiced clearly (ideally, professionally).
2. What your child hears has clear connections to what he sees.

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In all cases, keep in mind that listening is just half of oral language development—the more time your child spends *talking* about these experiences, the more he or she will learn from them.

## Reading Books

### *What Your Child Should Know*

Kindergarten teachers would like to see children enter school having had many, many enjoyable experiences with books. Through those experiences, children should learn that

- books have titles and authors;
- words are read left to right and top to bottom on a page;
- the illustrations in a book can help you understand what you're reading about.

As noted previously, reading books with your child also develops oral language skills, and, as discussed below, such experiences provide opportunities for learning letter names and sounds. But as always, keep in mind that what is most important about reading is that your child enjoys the experience.

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### *How to Help*

Educators who specialize in helping children learn to read point out that there are really two different kinds of reading experiences a parent and child can have together: reading *to* your child, and reading *with* your child. Both are valuable, but there are important differences.

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When you are reading *to* your child, the child will be listening to your words, but he or she might not be seeing the pages of the book as you read. Your words are guiding the child to create mental pictures of the events and characters of a story, and your goal is to read the story aloud in a way that keeps your child's interest and attention.

When you are reading *with* your child (also sometimes described as *shared reading* experiences), you are always looking at the book together, and your goal is to help the child relate what he or she is hearing to the words and pictures in the book. During such a reading experience you can pause every few pages and talk about what you've been reading, asking the child what he or she thinks about a character or event, or what might happen next. You can also stop and look at a picture and talk about what it shows, focusing on oral language skills and oral vocabulary as you do. Additionally, you can point out some of the letters of the alphabet as you read (it's best to start with letters at the beginnings of words), helping the child guess the name of the letter and relating the letter to the sound that it represents.

In general, if you think of reading *with* your child as a conversation that is inspired by the contents of a book, you'll have the right idea.

Whether you choose to read a book to your child or with your child depends on the book and the circumstances. Either way, it's also a good idea (when possible) to connect what you are reading to the child's life experiences—for example, by noticing how a character is similar to someone the child knows, or by comparing an event or situation in a story to something similar that has really happened.

## Learning the Alphabet

### *What Your Child Should Know*

Most kindergarten teachers recommend that prior to entering kindergarten children should already know the names of the letters of the alphabet. This includes these abilities:

- Reciting the letters in order (as when singing the *Alphabet Song*, for example)
- Naming a letter of the alphabet when they see it, whether in uppercase (capital) or lowercase form (*What is the name of this letter?*)
- Pointing out which letter out of a group is the one asked for (*Which one is letter a?*)

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## ***How to Help***

Teaching your child *The Alphabet Song* is a good place to start, because it will help him or her to learn the names of the letters and their order. As the next step, since children are usually interested in seeing their own name written out, it can be a good idea to print their name on things that they own, such as the door of their room, their toy box, etc. Ideally, you and your child can create these labels together as art projects and make them colorful and fun in different media such as fingerpaints, glue and glitter, pipe cleaners, and so on. You will also want to be alert for other opportunities to familiarize your child with the way his name looks when written, for example by tracing it out in the sand at the beach or in the dirt at a park.

From time to time as you do these activities, point out and name some of the individual letters in your child's name, and make a game out of guessing the names of some of the letters. And as you read to your child, choose some books that have just one or a few words in large print on a page, and point out letters in those words that are the same as the letters in your child's name.

To teach your child more letters in the alphabet, you can label other things in the house with printed words, such as by putting your pet's name on its dish, labeling your own bedroom door with "Mom and Dad," labeling things with the names of brothers or sisters, and so on. If, as above, creating these labels is done as a series of art projects, then learning the letter names will tend to occur naturally as one aspect of these projects—this is exactly the kind of natural integration of learning into family activities that makes it fun and meaningful.

You can also continue to point out more and more letters in the books you read (but not so frequently that it distracts from the story being told).

Once your child has seen many examples of letters as parts of words in meaningful contexts, he or she is ready to play some of the many alphabet games that can be found in toy stores and educational supply stores, online, and as apps. When these are well designed and fun, they can be very effective.

## **Learning Beginning Phonics**

### ***What Your Child Should Know***

Each of the 26 letters of the alphabet represents one or more sounds, and learning the sounds that are *usually* represented by at least some alphabet letters will also help to prepare your child academically for kindergarten. This is the first step of phonics.

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*As you read to your child, choose some books that have just one or a few words in large print on a page, and point out letters in those words that are the same as the letters in your child's name.*

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*The first step of phonics is learning the sounds that are usually represented by each of the letters of the alphabet.*



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For the vowels (*a*, *e*, *i*, *o*, and *u*) many kindergarten teachers recommend that you start by helping your child learn the “short” vowel sounds (*a* as in *apple*, *e* as in *elephant*, *i* as in *igloo*, *o* as in *olive*, and *u* as in *umbrella*), leaving the “long” vowel sounds until much later. For the letter *c*, start by teaching the sound of *c* as in *cat*; for the letter *g*, teach the *g* sound as in *gate*; and for *x*, teach *x* sound as in *exit*.

Your goal is not necessarily to teach the sounds for *all* of the letters (though the more, the better). But once you have taught the sounds for at least some letters, your child will have learned the important idea that alphabet letters represent sounds that are not the same as their names, and once that understanding has been achieved, it is much easier for the child to learn more letter sounds.

### ***How to Help***

You do not need to wait until your child has learned the names of all alphabet letters to start teaching sounds. Once your child has learned the names of letters in his or her name, for example, you can start talking about the sound represented by the first letter of the name. If you have labeled items in your house, as suggested above, then you could look for other labels that have the same first letter (and the same sound of that letter), and help your child notice that when the first letter is the same, the first sound is the same.

When reading with your child, look for words in books that start with that same letter and sound as his name. For example, you can play a game of reading a page aloud to a child in which the child listens for a word that starts with the same sound as his or her own name. When such a word is discovered, point out how that word starts with the same letter.

Sometimes you may run into a situation where the same letter at the beginning of two different words does not happen to represent the same sound (for example, the letter *s* in *sock* and *shoe*). When this occurs, just explain to your child that the letter stands for that sound most of the time, but not every time.

As with learning the alphabet, you can find some effective phonics learning activities on websites and in apps. Look for activities that your child wants to do just because they’re fun.

Do not be concerned if you don’t get immediate results on teaching phonics; it could take some months of informal teaching before your child starts to identify the sounds made by some letters. But keep it fun and creative, and sooner or later your child will grasp the basic idea that letters do have their own sounds, and his or her kindergarten teacher will be able to start with more focused teaching regarding what sounds go with what letters.

***Once you have taught the sounds for at least some letters, your child will have learned the important idea that alphabet letters represent sounds that are not the same as their names.***

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# Learning to Count

## *What Your Child Should Know*

Teachers recommend that your child know how to count up to ten items before starting kindergarten. The first step of that is learning to recite the numbers 1 to 10 in order—but that’s just the first step.

Counting is not as easy as it seems—as you are counting you have to be aware of which objects you have already counted, so that each object is only counted once, and you also have to make sure that you don’t leave any out. Mathematics educators call that creating a *one-to-one correspondence* between the objects and the numbers used to count them. Whatever it’s called, it’s a lot to keep track of! So getting a head start at home can make a big difference in school.

## *How to Help*

The fortunate thing about learning to count is that there are always things around that can be counted. When your child is very young, you can start by counting fingers and toes every night. (Count the fingers 1 to 10, then the toes 1 to 10.) This will start to familiarize your child with the sequence in which the words 1 to 10 are said.

Once your child is a toddler, there are many more everyday activities you can do to help him learn to count, such as:

1. Setting the table provides an opportunity for counting as you (1) collect each group of similar items (“We need four spoons”) and (2) lay them out on the table.
2. If your child has a collection (of trucks, teddy bears, or bracelets, for example), you can “take inventory” with your child every so often.
3. When you are grocery shopping, let your child help with such activities as
  - getting five bananas;
  - finding six cans of soup;
  - counting how many people are in the checkout line;
  - counting the number of bags of groceries that go into your cart at checkout, and counting them again as you place them in the car.
4. Play games together. Many games, both physical and digital, involve counting—whether counting aloud as you move along the spaces of a board, keeping score, or in some other way.

These are just a few suggestions—if you look for opportunities, you will find many more.

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*When you are grocery shopping, let your child help.*



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## Summary

The time that you spend helping your child with each of these topics will have many benefits, not only in terms of your child's preparation for kindergarten, but also by establishing a relationship of teamwork for the rest of your child's educational years. But although these learning activities are important and valuable, that does not mean they should be done seriously. Be playful, be patient, be persistent, be positive—and your child will be prepared.

The ABCmouse.com Curriculum Advisor Team



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