

School Readiness:

A Solution-Focused Approach

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Executive Summary

School readiness is more than a checklist of early academic skills, it is a dynamic, whole-child process rooted in relationships, play, and everyday experiences.

This white paper presents findings from a mixed-methods study conducted across the UK and US by FUNdamentally Children. The research engaged over 2,000 families, as well as early years professionals, teachers and child development experts, to better understand how children can be supported in their transition into formal education.

Key findings show that social development is consistently rated as the most important factor for a successful school transition. Familiarity with other children, opportunities to practise turn-taking, and play-based activities that promote communication and confidence all featured highly. Emotional regulation, listening, and independence were identified by teachers and parents as common challenges, particularly for children with additional needs.

Play-based learning was seen as central to readiness. Open-ended, child-led toys and collaborative activities were identified as effective tools for building resilience, curiosity, and communication skills. For families of deaf children and those with SEND, consistent, accessible communication and tailored social stories or confidence-building resources were particularly beneficial.

The study highlights clear implications for educators, families, policymakers, and children's brands. A joined-up, play-rich, and inclusive approach to readiness is not only beneficial, it is essential. By embedding readiness into everyday routines, relationships and playful interactions, we can ensure that every child has the confidence, capability and emotional resilience to thrive at school and beyond.

Acknowledgements

Thanks go to all of those who helped bring this research into being. The parents, children and teachers who took part and especially the professionals who have shared their expertise and insights: Julie Bill, Christina Soriano, Morgan Russo, Ruth Lue-Quee, Jillian Lakritz, Susie Cornish, Suzy Ralphs, Emilia Orviss, Lyndsey Beckett, Stephanie Nourish, Polly Ross.

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We would also like to acknowledge the growing number of play advocates in the field helping shine a light on the need for, and value of, a play-based childhood. Researchers upon whose work this research is founded include Aaron Bradbury, Ruth Swailes, Tim Gill, Amanda Norman, Viki Veale, Fiona Scott, Helen Dodd, Kathy Hirsch-Pasek, Wendy Russell and those championing play and fighting for change in the public arena including Dan Wouri, Paul Lindley, Eugene Minogue, Tom Hayes, Paul Wright, Jess Assato.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Background and Rationale

School readiness has become an increasingly important area of focus for educators, policymakers and researchers alike. It is widely recognised that a positive start to formal education lays the foundations for children's long-term academic achievement, social development and emotional wellbeing. Yet the term *school readiness* itself is often misunderstood and, at times, controversial. While some still equate readiness with early academic ability, such as knowing letters, numbers or shapes, the growing body of literature emphasises the importance of a much broader, more nuanced perspective.

1.2. Aims and Objectives

Building on the evidence in the preceding Literature Review (Gummer, 2025), the active research reported in this white paper seeks to deepen our understanding of what supports children's readiness for school. By listening to the voices of parents, children aged five to eight, teachers and other professionals working with young children and families, this study aims to not only capture diverse lived experiences but go on to identify practical ways to strengthen children's confidence, capability and wellbeing as they move into formal education.

The findings will inform recommendations for families and educators, with a clear focus on ensuring that readiness is understood and supported in a way that recognises the needs of the whole child.

2.Literature Review Summary

True school readiness extends well beyond academic skills; it encompasses cognitive development, physical strength, stamina and coordination, social confidence, emotional regulation and a child's motivation and approach to learning. Transactional and neurobiological perspectives (Blair, 2002; Sameroff, 2009) reinforce that these domains are interrelated and shaped by dynamic interactions between children and their environments, including families, early years settings, schools and the wider community.

Several influential frameworks, such as UNICEF's Three-Pillar Model, the Head Start Framework in the United States and the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) in the UK, support a holistic, multi-domain approach to school readiness. These models recognise that not only must children be ready for school, but schools and communities must also be ready to support children's diverse needs. This is particularly crucial for children with additional needs who may face greater risks of exclusion when rigid academic benchmarks dominate current practice.

The literature also points to significant challenges in achieving equitable school readiness. Social and economic inequalities, family circumstances, and the long-term impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic have all contributed to widening developmental gaps. Studies consistently highlight that disadvantaged children are more likely to enter school without key foundational skills, which negatively impacts their confidence, relationships and attitudes to school, potentially compounding the developmental disadvantage.

An over-reliance on narrow academic assessments in the early years can crowd out opportunities for play and exploration, which are vital for developing self-regulation, resilience and curiosity. The evidence in the literature review consistently supports the critical role of play, responsive adult-child relationships and inclusive community environments in fostering children's confidence and readiness to learn.

3.Methodology

3.1.Study Design

This mixed-methods study was designed to explore perspectives on school readiness among families, educators, and professionals working with children from the United States and the United Kingdom. The study combined quantitative data collection with in-depth qualitative insights to ensure a robust and nuanced understanding of the issue.

3.2.Participants

Families

A total of 2,000 families with at least one child between the ages of 5 and 8 were recruited through an online panel provider (1000 families in both the UK and USA). Quotas were applied to ensure each sample was broadly representative of the national population in terms of region, socio-economic status, and family structure.

In addition to the nationally representative samples, 10 families (parents and children aged 5-8) who participated in an online survey took part in further qualitative interviews.

Teachers and Professionals

To complement the parental perspectives, semi-structured, online interviews were also conducted with 10 teachers and 11 professionals. These professionals work in roles directly supporting children in this age group (e.g., teachers, child development specialists, educational psychologists, or play therapists).

Participants for the professional interviews were identified through purposeful sampling, using professional networks and recommendations to ensure relevant expertise and a range of perspectives.

3.3.Data Collection and Analysis

Quantitative Survey

The primary quantitative data were collected via an online survey administered between 1st May and 30th June 2025. The survey instrument included closed-ended questions covering demographic information, attitudes, behaviours, and experiences relevant to the study aims. The survey was pilot tested prior to launch to ensure clarity and reliability.

Families recruited through the national panels were sent the survey which they completed independently online.

Qualitative Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted online via secure video conferencing platforms. Interview guides were developed to explore key themes emerging from the survey data in greater depth, while allowing participants to share additional perspectives freely. These interviews were recorded, unless the respondent requested not to be recorded, in which case the interviewer made notes during the call.

Data Analysis

To create an accurate picture of parents' concerns and their management strategy the collected data was run through a python code that proportionately weighted responses. First preferences were given 3 points, second got 2 and third received 1. These figures were then collated to create a complete picture.

3.4.Ethical Considerations

All participants received detailed information about the study aims and procedures and provided informed consent prior to participation. Families

and professionals were assured that participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time. Data was stored securely in accordance with data protection regulations in both the US and UK.

4. Findings

4.1. Key Findings

Across both the UK and US, social development emerged as the most important factor in helping children transition successfully into school. The top-rated strategies among families included *knowing other children in the class, attending activity sessions, and playing games that encourage sharing or turn-taking*. UK families placed particular value on toys that boost confidence, while US families prioritised familiarity with classmates. For children with additional needs, books and stories about starting school were felt to be especially helpful, alongside opportunities for cooperative play. Parents dealing with concerns around emotional regulation most often turned to confidence-building toys and games, while those focusing on independence, such as toileting or dressing, found that social familiarity, like knowing peers, made the biggest difference. Teachers and professionals echoed these themes, additionally identifying anxiety, big emotions, and listening as key challenges, and emphasising the value of open-ended, child-led play that promotes resilience, social interaction and communication.

Play with them – especially games that involve turn-taking and talking.”

Lyndsey Becket, Headteacher, Sherrier Primary School

Most educators believe that learning toys can support school readiness especially when used for play-based learning and enhancing communication skills.

75% of the teachers interviewed reported that toys that encourage open-ended, child-led play, especially those that can be played with collaboratively, help build the resilience and confidence needed to start school positively.

4.2. Further results

4.2.1. Findings from Families

Highest rated benefit (all respondents)

- 1st - Knowing other children in the class
- 2nd - Attending children's activity sessions
- 3rd - Games/toys that encourage sharing or turn taking

Highest rated benefit UK

- 1st - Attending children's activity sessions
- 2nd - Games/toys that encourage sharing or turn taking
- 3rd - Games and toys that boost confidence

Highest rated benefit USA

- 1st - Knowing other children in the class
- 2nd - Attending children's activity sessions
- 3rd - Feeling confident with letters or numbers

Highest rated benefit for families with child with SEND

- 1st Games/toys that encourage sharing or turn taking
- 2nd Attending children's activity sessions
- 3rd Books or stories about starting school

In families for whom the biggest concern was 'managing emotions or anxiety', parents most often used 'confidence-boosting games and toys'.

In families where the concerns are around 'making friends', parents most often used 'sharing/turn-taking games'.

Where the biggest challenge was around independence and self management, parents most often found that 'knowing other children in the class' was the most beneficial.

For SEND children with the concern 'managing emotions or anxiety', the most popular strategy was 'books or stories about starting school'.

For SEND children with the concern 'making friends', the most popular strategy was 'confidence-boosting games and toys'.

The most common responses from children to the question, 'What did you enjoy most when you started school?' were 'making friends' and 'playing'

Construction toys were the product that children most commonly reported as something that helped them feel good when starting school.

Children's advice for a young child starting school was categorised into themes. The most common theme was emotional reassurance.

4.2.2. Insight from Teachers and Professionals

Examples of play-based activities to support school readiness skills recommended by the teachers and professionals interviewed include:

Role-play sets to help children rehearse real-life routines and build confidence in new environments.

Turn-taking games such as board games, card matching, or simple team tasks to support cooperation and social interaction.

Storybooks about starting school to spark discussion and reduce anxiety by familiarising children with the school experience.

Loose parts play to encourage creativity, problem-solving and open-ended thinking.

Emotion dolls or puppets to help children identify and express feelings, aiding emotional regulation and vocabulary.

Construction toys to develop fine motor skills, spatial awareness, and collaborative play.

Sound-based activities (e.g. singing, rhythm games, musical bumps) to support listening, attention and early language skills.

Dressing-up clothes to practise self-care tasks like dressing and undressing, while encouraging imaginative role play.

Obstacle courses or soft play setups to develop gross motor coordination, strength, and spatial awareness.

Listening games (e.g. 'Simon Says', 'What's that sound?') to improve auditory attention and instruction-following.

Story sequencing cards to support early literacy awareness, comprehension, and verbal storytelling.

Books with rhyme and repetition to support phonological awareness and early reading skills.

Playdough and fine motor kits for strengthening fingers in preparation for pencil grip and mark making.

Snack-time role play or real-life tasks (pouring drinks, opening lunchboxes) to build independence and practical life skills.

Social stories and photo books for children with additional needs, making transitions and expectations more predictable.

Cooperative building challenges (e.g. building bridges, towers in pairs) to promote teamwork and perseverance.

Sorting and matching games using shapes, colours or everyday objects to support early maths awareness.

Mark-making trays with sand, shaving foam, or salt develop pre-writing patterns in a sensory-rich way.

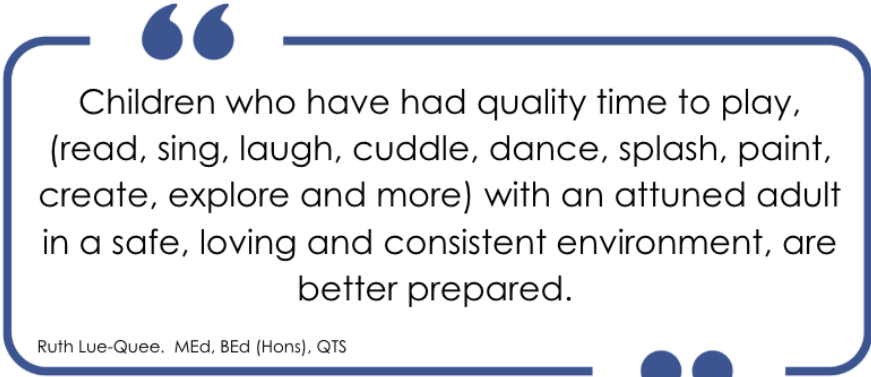
Digital storytelling apps where children create and narrate their own stories, promoting communication and sequencing.

Outdoor nature play such as collecting leaves, making potions, or building dens encourage curiosity, language, and resilience.

5. Discussion

5.1. Understanding School Readiness in Context

The findings from this study build on strong evidence that school readiness is multi-dimensional and best understood as a balance of social, emotional, cognitive and physical skills (Blair, 2002; Sameroff, 2009). Parents, teachers and professionals in both the UK and US consistently emphasised that children's confidence, curiosity, social connections and emotional wellbeing matter just as much, if not more, than narrowly defined academic skills.



Children who have had quality time to play, (read, sing, laugh, cuddle, dance, splash, paint, create, explore and more) with an attuned adult in a safe, loving and consistent environment, are better prepared.

Ruth Lue-Quee. MEd, BEd (Hons), QTS

Importantly, the research underscores that readiness for school is not a single state or something a child achieves in isolation. It develops through everyday interactions at home, in early years settings and in the community, and it is nurtured through play and warm, responsive relationships. Building the foundation for these skills can start from birth and continue to develop throughout childhood.

The research found that the tools most effective in supporting children's preparation for and transition into school tend to have a social element to them. This aligns with parents' reported priorities about making friends, sharing and taking turns, and being able to ask for help when they need it. Toys and activities that promote social interactions, especially with other children are found to be particularly beneficial.

5.2. Developing Communication & Language Skills

A child's ability to express themselves, listen and understand others underpins almost every aspect of readiness. Many families highlighted a desire for more playful resources that boost children's confidence, especially in speaking and listening, from storybooks about starting school to toys that encourage imaginative play.

Spotlight: Role Play

Teachers and other professionals were asked about the value of imaginative role play in helping children develop school readiness skills.

- **Imaginative play is the activity that teachers reported recommending to families most often.**
- **Role play was identified by professionals and teachers as beneficial for communication, imagination, problem solving and emotional regulation.**
- **Teachers and other professionals agreed that a familiar character toy can give children confidence in their imaginative play and may increase a child's motivation to play imaginatively.**

This part of the study was sponsored by Rainbow Designs

Open-ended toys such as dolls (e.g. Baby Born, small world sets (e.g. the Adventures of Paddington range) and construction toys (e.g. MAGNA-TILES sets) provide children with safe, engaging opportunities to practise new words and social scripts.

Parents can build communication skills naturally through everyday conversation, singing songs and rhymes, sharing stories, and giving children space to talk about their feelings or worries.

There is a demand for resources that support making friends, boosting confidence and developing

"My dad plays shop with me. I'm the shopkeeper and he gives me real coins!"
– Mila, 5

Read books about school, kids going to school, pretend play school!

Christina Sorzano M.Ed

approach


July 2025

communication skills. Parents and teachers alike recognised resources that combine confidence-building with opportunities for social interaction are particularly effective.

Games that promote turn-taking, cooperative problem-solving or storytelling are simple yet powerful tools. These include board games designed for young children, role-play sets, or playdates with activities that encourage conversation and interaction.

Community-based activities such as toddler groups, library story sessions or 'stay and play' mornings can also give children opportunities to practise communication in a safe environment while building friendships.

5.3. Building Confidence and Fostering Curiosity



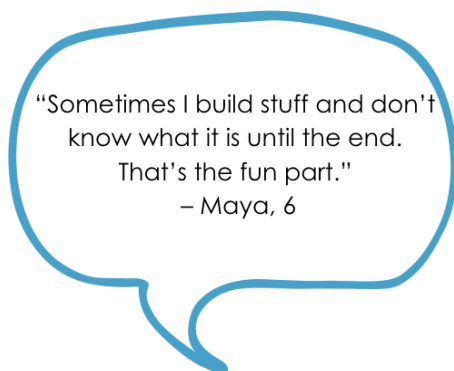
"My MAGNA-TILES are like magic — I can build a tower and it gets bigger each time ."

– Jonah, 6

Children who feel confident to try new things are better able to adapt to the unfamiliar routines of school. Several teachers commented on the virtuous circle effect that comes from children trying new things with a positive/growth mindset and the confidence they get from adapting successfully, which give them more confidence to try new things in

the future.

The study findings highlight that open-ended, child-led play is key for nurturing this curiosity and resilience. Parents can support this by providing a mix of materials including construction toys, craft supplies, or natural loose parts, that allow children to experiment, make choices and learn from mistakes.



"Sometimes I build stuff and don't know what it is until the end. That's the fun part."

– Maya, 6

Storybooks about starting school, dress-up play and pretend classrooms can help children anticipate new experiences, reducing anxiety and boosting self-belief.

Spotlight: Construction Play

Teachers and other professionals were asked about the role of construction toys in general, and specifically MAGNA-TILES sets in helping children develop school readiness skills.

- **All professionals and teachers recognised the benefits of open ended construction play in helping children build confidence, and resilience**
- **Magnetic construction toys such as those in the MAGNA-TILES product range were felt to be particularly beneficial for children with motor control challenges such as dyspraxia**
- **The wide variety of tiles within a MAGNA-TILES set (e.g. the City Centre set) was particularly helpful in supporting creative and collaborative play.**

This part of the study was sponsored by Magna-Tiles

Where parents worry about shyness or big feelings, confidence-boosting games with gentle challenges, such as simple obstacle courses or 'show and tell' at home, can help children develop pride in their abilities.

Children's responses to the question, "What would you tell a younger friend about starting school?", most commonly has an element of emotional reassurance in them, suggesting that children remember feeling nervous about starting school and/or recognising that children starting school now may feel anxious.

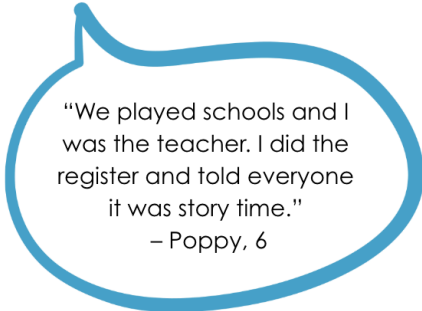
Activities that reassure children and their parents about the transition to school are likely to have a lasting positive impact.

5.4.Nurturing Friendships and Social Skills

Social skills emerged as the strongest predictor of a smooth school transition. Knowing other children, attending activity groups and practising sharing and cooperation were rated especially highly.

Small-group play that rewards teamwork, such as building something together, playing turn-taking card games or making up stories with others, can be invaluable. Families who feel isolated may benefit from accessible community support.

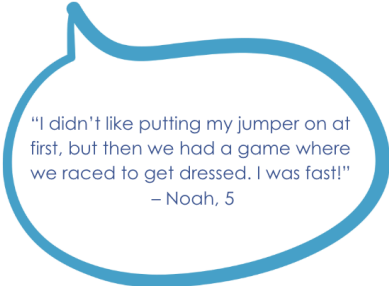
Schools, community activity providers and early years settings can help by offering stay-and-play events, open days, or buddy systems so children build familiarity with peers before term begins. The more playful these events and interactions were reported to be, the more parents and children valued them.



"We played schools and I was the teacher. I did the register and told everyone it was story time."
– Poppy, 6

5.5.Basic Self-Care & Hygiene

Teachers often highlighted that practical independence, from using the toilet, to dressing and managing personal belongings, is a crucial part of school readiness. Families can help by practising these skills at home: dressing up games, using dolls to practise buttons and zips, or simple reward charts for toileting can all build confidence.



"I didn't like putting my jumper on at first, but then we had a game where we raced to get dressed. I was fast!"
– Noah, 5

Visual checklists, fun songs for handwashing and 'morning routine' games were identified by parents to help make daily self-care tasks feel manageable and even enjoyable for young children.

Children who have regular attendance at a nursery/preschool setting seem to be better prepared, having been exposed to some routines and been given some independence prior to reception year.

Polly Ross, Speech and Language Therapist

The finding that children's interactions with other children were beneficial in helping them to develop independence, reinforces the importance of providing young children with multiple opportunities to meet and engage with other children, not just to develop their social skills, but also to learn from them.

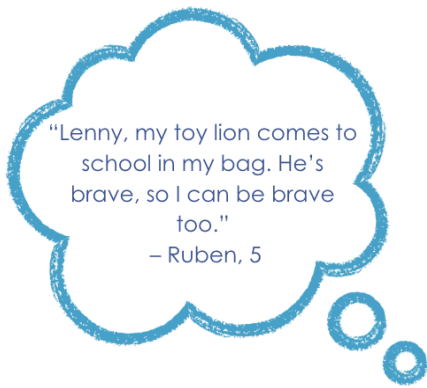
5.6. Emotional Regulation and Resilience

Focus on mental wellbeing. Are they able to develop good friendships? Do they get time to play in or outside? Make sure to value connection and wellbeing over achievements.

Julia Bill Art Therapist AThR

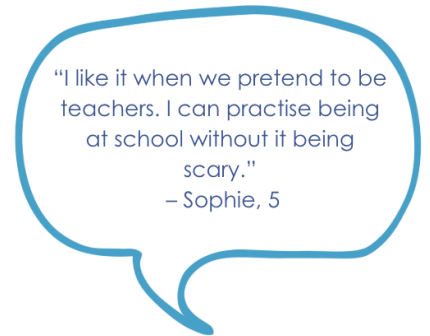
Managing big emotions was a top concern for parents, especially for children with SEND. Research consistently shows that play is a safe space for children to express feelings and learn coping strategies.

Role play, emotion cards and storytelling allow children to 'practise' tricky scenarios.



Families also supported resilience by modelling positive coping strategies, encouraging children to talk about worries and praising small steps towards independence and learning goals.

Mindful breathing games, yoga for children, or calm-down boxes with sensory toys can help build self-soothing skills.



5.7. Independence and Self-Management



School Readiness also means being able to cope with simple routines and responsibilities. Games that encourage decision-making and


problem-solving, such as treasure hunts, simple board games or role-play shops, help children learn to manage tasks, follow instructions and plan ahead.



Giving children small daily responsibilities at home, such as packing their own bag or setting out clothes for the next day, helps build confidence and a sense of autonomy.

5.8. Listening & Attention Skills

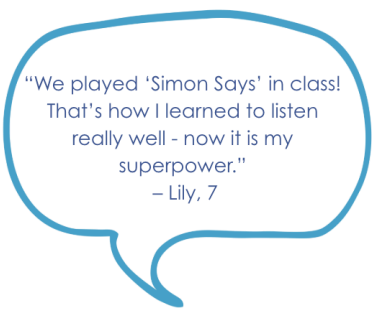
Teachers noted that listening and following instructions were among the biggest challenges for children starting school.



BSL is great. Start with natural gestures and exaggerated movements - use whole body communication. Facial expressions are key.

Susie Cornish, Teacher and Deaf Awareness Advocate

Active listening games, action songs ('Simon Says' or 'Musical Statues'), and storytelling with props and prompts are proven ways to strengthen these skills in a playful way.



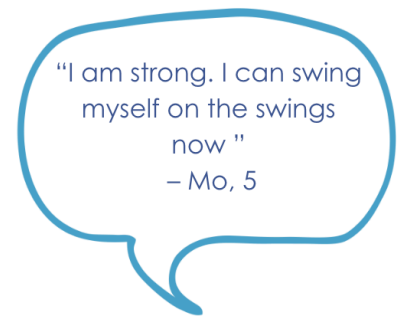
"We played 'Simon Says' in class!
That's how I learned to listen
really well - now it is my
superpower."
- Lily, 7

For children who find it hard to concentrate, families creating calm spaces at home for reading or quiet activities, gradually increasing the time spent focusing on one task was reported by several of the interviewees as a successful approach.

Listening to stories on an audio device such as a Yoto or Tonie box was mentioned by several parents as having a positive impact on children's listening skills and conversely, playing on certain games on a device was seen reported as having a negative impact on children's listening skills and repetitive games were felt by some parents to negatively impact their child's concentration skills.

5.9. Physical Development

Physical readiness, including strength, stamina and coordination, underpins children's ability to participate fully in school routines. Outdoor play, climbing, balancing and ball games help develop gross motor skills. Fine motor activities, such as playdough, threading beads or cutting and sticking, strengthen the hands and fingers for writing tasks.



Spotlight: Playgrounds

Teachers and other professionals were asked about the importance of community playgrounds in helping children develop school readiness skills.

- **Teachers and professionals recognised playgrounds as a valuable resource for helping children develop physically. Several teachers noted the knock-on benefit to children's confidence from being active.**
- **Local playgrounds were identified as a place for families to meet and for children to gain important social skills**
- **Professionals involved with therapy stressed the benefits of inclusive playgrounds for giving children with additional needs valuable play opportunities.**

Parents should feel confident that active, energetic play is just as important for readiness as quiet learning. Many of the respondents in this study reported that active, energetic play was a major factor in developing a multitude of school readiness skills, over and above strengths, stamina and coordination.

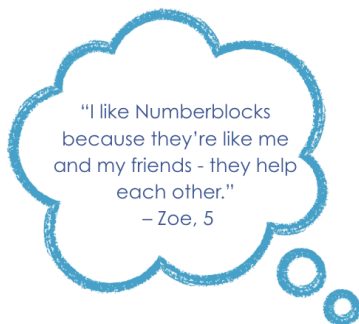
5.10. Early Numeracy and Literacy Awareness

While formal teaching is not necessary before school starts, playful exposure to numbers and letters can build familiarity and motivation. Board games with dice, counting games, treasure hunts with numbers or letters, and spotting print in the environment (shop signs, menus) all help.

Parents reported that supporting early literacy by reading aloud daily, letting children 'read' pictures and make up stories, and talking about letter sounds through songs and rhymes were



the most successful strategies in building early literacy awareness.



Several parents and children mentioned Numberblocks. The TV show and the books, toys and magazine were all mentioned during the interviews by different respondents, and teachers noted how

children who were fans of the show seemed more confident with early numeracy. Other shows (Sesame Street, Miss Rachel, Blues Clues) were also mentioned by more than one respondent as helping children engage with, and feel confident about, their numbers.

5.11. Implications for Policy and Practice

Taken together, these insights show that practical, accessible tools for families, such as books, open-ended toys and local activity sessions, are vital for nurturing readiness across all developmental domains. Schools and early years settings should prioritise welcoming, playful environments and build strong partnerships with families to help embed these playful strategies at home and in the community.

5.11.1. Implications for Children's Brands

For children's brands, there is an opportunity to align products and campaigns with public health goals, offering not just toys, but tools for learning, regulation, connection, and fun.

Children's brands have a unique opportunity and, arguably, a responsibility, to contribute positively to children's development in the critical early years. Whether it's through toys, books, TV shows, apps, or activity kits, the products children engage with can significantly shape their skills, confidence, and attitudes towards learning.

Supporting school readiness doesn't mean replicating the classroom. In fact, it's often the brands that focus on play, exploration, and emotional development that have the greatest long-term impact. Thoughtfully designed products and content can help children develop the foundational skills they need to thrive, while also empowering parents and educators to support learning in joyful, meaningful ways.

5.11.2. Design for Whole-Child Development

The best products for school readiness aren't narrowly academic. They support a range of developmental domains: cognitive, social, emotional, physical, and language-based.

- Include features that encourage problem-solving, memory, and attention (e.g. matching, sequencing, cause-and-effect).
- Build in opportunities for collaborative play, to develop turn-taking, empathy, and communication.
- Design activities that support fine and gross motor development, such as manipulating small parts or moving in creative ways.

Spotlight: Supporting Deaf Children

Teachers and other professionals were asked about how parents of deaf children can support their children in developing school readiness skills.

- **Tools like British Sign Language (BSL) and personalised photo books were identified as helpful tools to support consistent and authentic expression.**
- **Teachers and professionals suggested building social confidence with turn-taking games, emotional vocabulary (signed or spoken), and repetitive play routines.**
- **Several teachers/other professionals mentioned the benefit of teaching sign language to all children to support inclusive communication**

This part of the study was sponsored by The Signing Company

5.11.3. Celebrate and Scaffold Emotional Resilience

Starting school can be overwhelming. Products that acknowledge this transition, and support children's emotional development, can be especially valuable. The Mental Emotional, Social Health (MESH) toy accreditation program identifies toys that develop skills across multiple areas to build resilience. Many of these toys:

- Include storylines, characters, or scenarios that model dealing with worries, sharing, or making friends.
- Use narrative tools to build emotional vocabulary ("I felt nervous too... but then I had a go!").
- Offer calming play options that support self-regulation, such as sensory textures, mindfulness stories, or breathing games.
- Offer opportunities for self-advocacy, conflict resolution and communication.

Brands that prioritise mental health and confidence-building help prepare children not just for school, but for life.

5.11.4.Champion Child-Led, Open-Ended Play

Open-ended toys and resources allow children to be the creators, not just the users. This nurtures curiosity, independence, and flexible thinking, all key readiness traits.

- Avoid overly prescriptive products. Instead, provide props, prompts, or tools that can be used in multiple ways.
- Encourage imaginative and pretend play, which supports storytelling, empathy and executive function.
- Include guidance for adults that promotes open-ended use rather than step-by-step instructions.

When children are in control of their play they are more engaged, and more likely to develop persistence and problem-solving skills.

5.11.5.Be Inclusive and Accessible

School readiness is for every child. Brands should ensure that their products reflect and respect the diversity of children's backgrounds, abilities and experiences. They should:

- Represent a range of ethnicities, family structures, and neurodiversity in characters, content, and marketing materials.
- Provide products at different price points and consider distribution through schools, libraries, or community centres.
- Ensure physical accessibility for children with different fine motor, sensory or communication needs.

Inclusive design isn't just ethical, it improves the user experience for everyone.

5.11.6. Support Parents and Educators with Evidence-Informed Messaging

Many parents want to support their child's development, but aren't always sure how. Brands can play a powerful role in providing reassurance, guidance, and ideas.

- Include tips, conversation starters, or activity prompts with your products, especially those that explain the value of play.
- Share developmentally appropriate expectations (e.g. "Most 4-year-olds are learning to...").
- Align messaging with respected frameworks such as the EYFS, Head Start, or the UNICEF School Readiness model.

By empowering adults as partners in play, brands increase both impact and trust.

Children's brands that invest in thoughtful, research-informed design are not only supporting school readiness, they're building loyalty with families, educators and communities.

6. Recommendations

School readiness isn't about pushing children to meet arbitrary academic targets, it's about giving them the confidence, curiosity, and capability to enjoy learning and thrive in new environments. The evidence is clear: when parents, educators, and brands work together in developmentally appropriate ways, children benefit across all domains.

The following recommendations are designed to guide practice and policy for anyone seeking to better support children from birth to age 6 as they prepare to enter school.

6.1. Parents and Families

- **Prioritise language-rich interactions:** Talk, listen, sing, and read with your child daily to build vocabulary, attention, and connection. It's not about "teaching" them to read, but making language joyful and meaningful.
- **Support social skills:** join a group activity, or arrange play dates at the local playground to help children learn how to interact positively with other children and form mutually rewarding friendships.
- **Encourage independent routines:** Give children opportunities to dress themselves, use the toilet, and manage small responsibilities at home to foster confidence and autonomy.
- **Support emotional literacy:** Talk about feelings, model coping strategies, and help children name and manage their emotions through role play (e.g. with dolls or small world playsets) and fun activities that involve trial and error learning (e.g. construction toys).
- **Take your time with transition:** Use books, role-play, and visits to familiarise your child with the idea of school and reduce anxiety.

6.2. Educators and Early Years Professionals

- **Embed school readiness in play-based practice:** Use child-led, open-ended play to develop the full range of readiness skills, not just academic concepts.
- **Focus on emotional and social development:** Support children's self-regulation, resilience, and ability to form relationships through consistent routines and responsive care.
- **Use observations to tailor support:** Track development holistically, not against rigid milestones, and adjust provision accordingly.
- **Strengthen transition strategies:** Work closely with families and primary schools to ensure a smooth and personalised transition that supports each child emotionally and developmentally.
- **Champion inclusivity:** Adapt environments and teaching approaches to meet the needs of all children, including those with SEND and those from diverse cultural backgrounds.

6.3.Children's Brands

- **Design for whole-child development:** Create toys, games, and media that support physical, cognitive, emotional, and social skills, not just narrow academic outcomes.
- **Promote emotional resilience and confidence:** Include narratives and play opportunities that help children manage worries, build friendships, and try new things.
- **Encourage open-ended, child-led use:** Avoid overly prescriptive play patterns. Let children lead the way with materials they can explore and adapt.
- **Model inclusive and accessible design:** Represent the full diversity of children in characters, packaging, and product design. Ensure accessibility for all abilities and price points.
- **Provide parent-friendly guidance:** Include clear, developmentally informed tips and ideas to help adults make the most of playtime without pressure or jargon.

6.4.A joined up approach

- **Champion play as a right and a school readiness tool:** Whether at home, in nursery, or through commercial products, play should be recognised and protected as the foundation of early learning.
- **Promote emotional readiness on an equal footing with academic preparation:** Confidence, resilience, and relationship skills are just as important as counting or writing names.
- **Invest in joined-up solutions:** Cross-sector collaboration between educators, parents, healthcare professionals, and commercial brands offers the best chance of making school readiness equitable, holistic, and child-centred.

7. Limitations and Future Research Directions

While this study offers valuable insights into the multifaceted nature of school readiness, several limitations must be acknowledged. The sample, while nationally representative in both the UK and US, relied primarily on self-reported data from families, which may be subject to bias or recall limitations. In-depth qualitative data was gathered from a relatively small number of families and professionals, which may not fully capture the diversity of experiences across regions, cultures, or socioeconomic groups. Additionally, although children aged 5–8 were included in the scope of the research, the voices of younger children, particularly those in the immediate pre-school transition, were less directly represented.

Future research should explore readiness through longitudinal studies that follow children across the early years and into primary education, capturing how readiness evolves over time and what factors most strongly predict long-term outcomes. There is also a need for more inclusive research that amplifies the perspectives of children with additional needs, particularly those with complex communication differences, and that evaluates the impact of specific interventions or play-based resources on readiness outcomes in varied educational contexts.

8. Conclusion

This research reaffirms that school readiness is far more than a checklist of early academic skills: it is a dynamic, multi-dimensional process rooted in relationships, play, and everyday experiences. Children who start school with strong social skills, emotional resilience, confidence, and curiosity are more likely to thrive, both academically and personally.

By listening to the perspectives of families, teachers, and professionals, this study has highlighted the vital role of play-based learning, inclusive communication strategies, and positive adult-child interactions in preparing children for the transition to school. It is clear that practical, accessible tools,

from open-ended toys and role-play games to sound-based activities and picture books, can make a measurable difference in helping children feel ready.

At the same time, the findings reinforce that school readiness is not the sole responsibility of the child or family. Schools and communities must also be ready to receive children with warmth, flexibility and understanding. Early years settings, educators, children's brands and policymakers all have a part to play in creating environments where every child, regardless of background or ability, can develop the confidence and skills they need to flourish.

As we move forward, supporting school readiness means investing not only in early learning, but in the social, emotional and relational fabric that underpins it, and in the power of play to connect, empower, and prepare children for life.

9. Glossary

Academic Benchmarks: Expected levels of learning, like knowing letters or numbers, that schools use to see if children are “on track.”

Attachment: The emotional bond a child forms with their caregivers, helping them feel secure and confident to explore.

Behaviourist Approach: The idea that children learn skills through practice, repetition and rewards.

Cognitive Skills: Mental abilities like thinking, remembering, problem-solving and learning new things.

Constructivist Approach: The idea that children learn best by actively exploring and interacting with people and things around them.

Developmental Domains: Areas of a child's growth: thinking (cognitive), moving (physical), feeling (emotional), and social skills.

Deficit Thinking: A way of thinking that focuses on what children can't do, instead of what they can do or how to help them.

Dyspraxia, also known as **Developmental Coordination Disorder (DCD)**: a neurological condition that affects physical coordination and motor skills.

Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS): The UK's framework for caring for and educating young children, covering ages birth to five.

Emotional Regulation: A child's ability to manage their feelings and reactions in different situations.

Executive Function: Brain skills that help children focus, remember instructions, and control impulses.

Holistic Approach: Seeing and supporting the whole child, not just their academic skills.

Loose parts play: An open-ended form of play where children use a variety of movable, everyday objects, such as stones, fabric, bottle tops, sticks, buttons, or blocks, to explore, create and problem-solve.

Maturationist Approach: The idea that children are ready for school mainly based on their age and natural development.

Motor Skills: Physical abilities; *fine motor* means small movements like using fingers; *gross motor* means big movements like running or jumping.

Neurobiological Perspective: Understanding how the brain and nervous system affect learning and emotions.

School Readiness: The mix of skills and attitudes a child needs to thrive in school- not just academic, but also social, emotional, and physical.

Self-Regulation: A child's ability to stay calm, follow rules, and manage behaviour.

Transactional Model: The idea that a child's readiness is shaped by constant interactions with their family, school, and community.

UNICEF Three-Pillar Model: A framework that says school readiness needs: 1) ready children, 2) ready schools, and 3) ready families/communities.

Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD): A concept from Vygotsky's theory: the difference between what a child can do alone and what they can do with help.

10. References and Bibliography

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11. Appendices

11.1. Research Instruments

11.1.1. US parents survey -

<https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLScL4UewUs0R4FQm7U7I26IkAUyBreVbyIV6SS9cXLcq3ScL2w/viewform?usp=header>

11.1.2. UK parents survey -

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLScTNvr_yb0sulBoZQQFxe4lfkVCnoqZToEW2semAtfUWKTHXw/viewform?usp=header

11.1.3. UK Teacher survey -

<https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSe7vjRvIVsNHNwbZgNSN8cnmMUOFZ9IKZKo0aAyntEoTaBpOA/viewform?usp=header>

11.1.4. US Teacher survey

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSfjwqaC2d4cchnaEZII_KzG_P8Ji2D_orD8xcNLneyCN0e0nw/viewform?usp=header

11.1.5. Expert survey

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLScETOIMzPFXCJG6LKqsKOjR_otc-IRGXKqsGXsSfCaXDrYhdw/viewform?usp=header

11.1.6. [Interview Discussion Guide - Teachers/Professionals](#)

11.1.7. [Interview Discussion Guide - Families](#)

11.2. Data Tables

[UK Families n=1000](#)

[USA Families n=1000](#)