



School Readiness: Language is Key

By Tamara Stein
Program Specialist, The Hanen Centre

What does it actually mean to be ready for school? Many preschool programs promote “kindergarten readiness,” which usually involves teaching children a combination of academic and social-emotional skills that will help them flourish in the classroom.

The focus on kindergarten readiness is a result of a wide body of research that has shown that a child’s ability in a particular skill when they enter kindergarten predicts how well that child will continue to perform in that area. For example, a child’s preschool math skills predict his or her school-aged math skills, and the emergent literacy skills a child brings to kindergarten predict their ability to read later on (Pace, A., Alper, R., Burchinal, M.R., Golinkoff, R.M., & Hirsh-Pasek, K., 2018).

While we know that a child’s ability in one kindergarten readiness area prior to school entry is a strong indicator of how well they will continue to succeed in that area, a group of American researchers took a slightly different approach to looking at predictors of school performance. They examined a variety of kindergarten readiness indicators in order to determine which, if any, predicted skill acquisition both within and across domains (Pace et al, 2018). For example, we know that math skills at preschool predict a child’s ability in that subject, but do preschool math skills correlate with success in any other academic or social domain?

The study

This study analyzed data from over 1200 children across the United States who were born in 1991. The children completed a battery of assessments that measured language, cognitive skills, math, reading, behaviour difficulties, social skills, and overall health. These areas were measured before kindergarten entry, and then again in the first, third and fifth grade. The data was analyzed to determine which school readiness skills predicted growth and overall levels of academic and social skills as the children went through school.

The researchers found that the language skills a child exhibited before entering school predicted not only that child’s school-aged level of language, but also their overall level of math and reading skills and was even “marginally” related to overall levels of social skills” (Pace et al, 2018).

Language as a tool kit

The researchers hypothesize that language skills were correlated with so many other areas of development because language serves as a set of tools that helps children acquire other skills. For example, we use our comprehension to understand numeracy and vocabulary concepts, which leads to stronger math and reading skills. We also use our

expressive abilities to connect with others, which may be why stronger language skills support our social skills (Pace et al, 2018).

Clinical implications

Whether we focus on prevention, treatment of language delays or enrichment of language, this research helps explain the critically important role that language plays in a child's development and later academic success. It provides an even stronger case for highlighting the fact that building a child's language has far reaching effects beyond that on the child's ability to communicate and socialise. We are helping children develop a set of tools for learning about and engaging with the world, which will help them academically and socially in the long term.

References

Pace, A., et al. (2018). Measuring success: Within and cross-domain predictors of academic and social trajectories in elementary school. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*.

About The Hanen Centre

Founded in 1975, The Hanen Centre is a Canadian not-for-profit charitable organization with a global reach. Its mission is to provide parents, caregivers, early childhood educators and speech-language pathologists with the knowledge and training they need to help young children develop the best possible language, social and literacy skills. This includes children who have or are at risk for language delays, those with developmental challenges such as autism, and those who are developing typically.

For more information, please visit www.hanen.org.

The Hanen Centre is a Registered Charitable Organization (#11895 2357 RR0001)