

Emotional Maturity: Helping your Child with School Readiness

Emotional maturity in a five year old is quite different from that of an adult. Sound obvious? Still, one common error many parents make is having unrealistic expectations of their young children.

A survey of Alberta parents and adults who interact with children, *The Community Understanding of Child Development: An Alberta Benchmark Study*, by Shivani Rikhy and Suzanne Tough was undertaken by the Alberta Centre for Child, Family and Community Research. It showed that, “there are meaningful gaps in adults understanding of when children between the ages of birth and six achieve physical, cognitive, social and emotional milestones.” Parents need to know what is typical development in the area of emotional maturity, so that they will have reasonable, age-appropriate expectations of their children and can guide them appropriately. This will help a child to to enjoy learning and playing with others, to explore new opportunities, and to be able to take advantage of the many learning experiences offered at school.

Often, people assume that school readiness means knowing ABCs and having other academic skills, but that is not truly school readiness. Many other areas of development have an impact on how a child will do at school. Readiness for school means that a child is able to take advantage of the learning environment and experiences provided in school, and will be able to handle the new challenges and experiences that occur.

Children who start school ready to learn are more likely to continue to thrive. Many studies have shown that children who do well in kindergarten, continue to succeed in the early grades and are more likely to complete high school. They also have better long term outcomes in the areas of health and career success.

In this column, let’s look at the developmental domain or area of “Emotional Maturity”, and how a parent can encourage readiness in this area, with reasonable age-appropriate expectations.

Emotional maturity includes: **Prosocial and helping behaviours and empathy**. Prosocial behaviours and empathy include such things as trying to help someone who is hurt, offering to help others who need help with a task or chore, inviting other children to join in a game, and comforting a child who is crying or upset. Parents can encourage empathy in many ways, one of the most important which is modelling these behaviours. Parents also can recognize and praise helping behaviours when they occur and talk to children about how others may be feeling, and why.

Another part of emotional maturity for a young child is the **ability to think before acting**. Again, the expectations need to be age appropriate. One would expect a five year old to not hit, bite, or kick other children or adults, even if angry. A five year old should be able to become engaged in an activity for more than a few moments, and should rarely act impulsively, without thinking. A child should be starting to deal with his or her feelings in an age-appropriate way. In order to be emotionally ready for school, a child should not be too fearful, anxious, or tense. Parents can help children to think about things, talk about what might happen, help them to slow down, model discussion of choices, show them how to

make simple decisions, and can use logical and natural consequences to teach children about cause and effect and actions and reactions.

There are many resources available to help parents support their children in the area of school readiness. The following websites are a reliable source of information:

www.caringforkids.cps.ca www.excellence-earlychildhood.ca www.rootsofempathy.org

By Laurie Lafortune, Understanding the Early Years Coordinator. For more information on child development, parenting and parent and child play groups, call 403-343-6400 or go to www.fsca.ca