



By Dr. Dominic Gullo

Starting Her Off Right

Preparing your daughter for her first years in school

Ages 3 to 6

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The beginning of the school year is an exciting and anxious time for children—and for their parents. Whether your daughter is beginning prekindergarten, kindergarten, or first grade, she's facing new experiences and challenges every day. How can you help make sure that these early school days are successful ones for her?

Early childhood educators agree that there are certain things that are important for a young child's success in school. Our daughters should be physically healthy, and they need strong social, language, and problem-solving skills. They're also more likely to succeed if they know and believe that they *will* succeed.

Feeling Good

We know that children perform better in school if they eat nutritionally balanced meals. They also need many varied opportunities to be physically active so that they can develop good muscle coordination. Before and after school, provide your daughter with plenty of time for running, jumping, throwing, and moving to music to help her learn to control her large muscles. Help her develop the smaller muscles of her hands and fingers through activities such as coloring, playing with puzzles, manipulating clay, cutting, zipping, and using pencils and paper.

Getting Social

School is a place where your daughter needs to work productively with other children in both small and large groups. She'll feel more comfortable working with others if she has lots of opportunities at home to develop cooperation skills, self-control, and empathy for others. How can you arm your daughter with the social skills she needs?

- Encourage her to play with other children through play dates, sports teams, and family gatherings. These experiences will give her opportunities to cooperate, share, and compromise.
- Encourage her to play by herself, too. Time spent alone will give her a sense of self-confidence and independence.
- Talk with her about turn-taking and waiting. Practice waiting at the dinner table for the food to be passed around to each person, or make a game out of taking turns talking as you're driving to and from school.

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Talking It Through

Language is the main avenue by which your daughter will learn new information—and share information with others—at school. Here are some ways to sharpen your daughter’s language skills:

- Make reading materials available to her and read to her every day, if possible.
- Take time to explore the *pictures* in magazines and picture books, too. Ask your daughter to tell you about the objects she sees, using descriptive words, and to explain what she thinks is happening in each of the pictures.
- Answer questions that she asks and encourage her to ask more questions. If you don’t know the answers, show your daughter where and how to find them.

Solving Problems

As your daughter navigates the new world of school, she’ll rely heavily on her problem-solving skills. The more experiences you give her now, the better equipped she’ll be to face future challenges. Here are some everyday ways to bolster your daughter’s problem-solving skills:

- Give her opportunities to experiment with different kinds of materials, such as coloring media, molding materials, and building blocks, so that she understands how she can use these materials creatively to meet her needs.
- Go for walks, go to plays and musical events, and visit parks, museums, and other community resources. The more varied the experiences your daughter has, the better base she’ll have for understanding different subject matters at school.
- Provide opportunities for her to use her imagination. Offer her puppets, dress-up clothes, and other household props so that she can practice a variety of roles and tackle pretend “problems” in a safe environment.

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Shooting for the Stars

More important than any one skill that your daughter develops is her sense of confidence and self-esteem. All children develop skills at different rates, but if your daughter is confident that she can master new challenges, she'll be successful—when she's ready. How can you help her build that confidence?

- Provide her with opportunities to complete projects or jobs *without* the risk of failure so that she can build confidence in her ability to accomplish tasks.
- Praise her for specific efforts and accomplishments. Encourage her to develop new skills, even if she has difficulty with them at first.
- Help her complete open-ended sentences relating to her feelings and abilities:
My best talent is . . .
I can't wait to learn how to . . .
I feel proud when . . .
When I grow up, I'm going to . . .

Embracing Change

In many ways you've been preparing your daughter for school since before she was born. In all likelihood, she's more ready than you—and even than she—might think! Enjoy this time of change and discovery. If you do, you'll help your daughter greet it with enthusiasm as well.

—Dr. Dominic Gullo is a professor of Early Childhood Education at Queens College, City University of New York. He is a member of the Governing Board of the National Association for the Education of Young Children, and he is a consultant to school districts across the country in the areas of early childhood education, curriculum, and assessment.