

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS

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# Prepare Your Child for School

Helen Likierman and Valerie Muter

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# About the Book

All you need to prepare your child for school.

Written by experienced child psychologists, *Prepare Your Child for School* offers practical yet relaxed advice on:

- Developing social and self-care skills
- Improving your child's use of language and their ability to listen
- Teaching preparatory reading, number and writing skills
- Preventing and curbing inappropriate behaviour
- Promoting emotional well-being
- Dealing with teasing or bullying

And much more!

## About the Authors

**Dr Helen Likierman** is a Consultant Clinical Psychologist working with families and children (from pre-schoolers to adolescents) where there are emotional, social, behavioural or learning concerns. After obtaining her Psychology degree in Manchester she trained and worked as a teacher of young primary school children before moving on to clinical training. Her PhD from the Institute of Psychiatry in London was on preschoolers' friendships and peer relationships. She worked for many years in clinical research and as a psychologist in the National Health Service, including in the Child and Family Department at Charing Cross Hospital. In addition to her current consultant work, she is School Counsellor at a large co-educational school and is the mother of two teenage children.

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Dr Helen Likierman & Dr Valerie Muter

# Prepare Your Child for **School**

How to make sure your child  
gets **off to a flying start**

**Vermilion**  
LONDON

# **Introduction**

The school years are looming. As if you didn't have enough to do already! Your baby grows into a toddler and zooms off to playgroup before you've even had time to enjoy those amazing ups and downs, panics and excitements that go under the name of 'child development'. It sometimes doesn't seem like development at all, more a headlong plunge into ever more frantic activity and troubleshooting. It's scary and it's exciting.

One of the scariest and most exciting changes is your child's entry into the world of school. This brings a big transition from the small world of the home, the playgroup or nursery to the wider, more structured environment of school. There will be new experiences and, above all, new challenges. Not just for your child, but for you as well.

Most of you reading this book will have a child in the age range of two to five. And your child will have learned a huge amount already. Normally-developing pre-schoolers can talk, socialise with others, play with toys and materials, and look after themselves in many basic ways. They have an awareness of their own thoughts and of the world around them. Nowadays, almost all will have had a variety of opportunities to expand their learning, such as attending nursery school, playgroup or kindergarten. Some will have older brothers and sisters they can learn from. Most children will have had additional opportunities to relate to other adults and children outside their immediate family, such as relatives, neighbours, religious communities and friends. But is this enough?

Sometimes it's really hard as a parent to know how best to tackle some of the challenges so that you can avoid the pitfalls. In the following chapters you will find out how to make sure your child starts school happy, able to make friends, free from worry or fear, able to cope with the demands of the day's routines and the work, and able to develop into a contented, flourishing individual.

It's not just your child's ability to learn to read and write and do sums that's important for success at school. There's also the little matter of sitting still long enough to take in what a teacher has to say. There are classmates to contend with too, not the siblings, cousins and neighbours your child already knows. These bring potential new friends, but there may also be less friendly peers. And there is authority. Don't expect teachers always to treat your child as you might treat your own flesh and blood. Nice though they generally are, teachers have a whole class to deal with, and they expect a level of compliance and fitting in. If they can detect enthusiasm and competence, marvellous! Teachers, too, are human; they are going to enjoy their new charges all the more once they see they are prepared for school.

Getting off to a good start at school is really important. If the experience is an unhappy or negative one, there are some well-known bad effects. For example, children with problems relating to other children and making friends are more at risk of developing psychological problems in later life such as depression or behavioural difficulties. Also, children who make poor initial progress in learning to read develop persistent (and difficult to erase) negative attitudes towards books and reading. On the other hand, those who make a good start in these areas will have positive experiences and are more likely to be successful later in childhood and in adulthood.



## **How to Use this Book**

This book is research-based, practical and tried and tested. Just as important, it empathises with you as a parent. Use it as a reference book – a resource for you to use as it suits you and your child. It is designed to be as comprehensive as possible. This means it might look a bit daunting at first. You might think, ‘How can I possibly do all those things for my child?’ You may be feeling guilty already! But that’s not the intention. You may find you need to concentrate only on some – perhaps just a few – of the issues raised and the suggestions made; the rest may be there simply to reassure you that all is progressing well.

You don’t need to read the book from beginning to end. However, most readers may find it useful to do so, if only to get an overall grasp of what is on offer and an overview of the main challenges of preparing your child for school.

You may have specific concerns: ‘What I need most is advice on behaviour. How on earth can I stop my child from doing those embarrassing, naughty things?’ Or: ‘My child’s problem is his speech. He doesn’t seem to say anything anyone understands and he’s already three.’ You’ll find the answers in this book, but it’s also important to help your child develop a wide range of skills – self-care, emotional, social, behavioural, pre-educational – because they are all prerequisites for developing well. Everything interacts. That is why you will find many places where you are referred to issues raised in other chapters. So you may want to dip in and out of the book as and when you feel the need, but do give some thought to the whole picture as well.

Each chapter covers a different aspect of your child’s life. Although these skills develop simultaneously, they may progress at slightly different rates from child to child. The development of one skill may affect, mildly or strongly, one other or several other skills. For instance, children with

educational difficulties may be seen by other children as being less able, and this can in turn affect their self-esteem, friendships and behaviour. Such children may become unhappy and withdrawn or act the 'class clown'. Conversely, children with behaviour or attention problems may fall behind in their class work because they are not listening or concentrating, or because they are being naughty. In this way their educational progress is affected by their behaviour. In turn, these difficulties may affect their emotional state and social relationships.

So, as they prepare for school, children have to juggle many different aspects of life and learning. Don't feel you are failing as a parent if your child doesn't reach a particular level in some skill before starting school. You know how hard it is for you yourself to develop good 'juggling skills'. The following chapters will give you lots of ideas to help you and your child move towards a happy and successful life in the school years and beyond.

You might consider keeping this book handy for a few years after your child starts school. Many of the ideas and principles covered, particularly in the chapters on social, emotional and behavioural skills, will be just as relevant for your eight-year-old as for your four-year-old.

## **Should You Prepare Your Child for School?**

When children start school, teachers build on skills that have already (they hope!) been put in place during those important pre-school years. Of course, getting off to a good start depends on what the child brings into school on day one. Children are not simply a blank page to be written on, products 'created' by the school experience.

Does your child have all the skills in place to make this transition from home to school a happy and easy experience? Throughout this book, you will have the chance

to answer that question. Your child needs to acquire and develop many skills. You possess many skills that can help your child develop *his* skills. Checklists and questionnaires on all the main topics will help you stop and think carefully about exactly what your child has already absorbed and what he might do with some active help and encouragement.

But, you may well ask, is it your job to prepare your child for school? Maybe you feel your efforts might be better directed towards choosing a school, then letting teachers take over and do their job. It's true that most schools are staffed with excellent and dedicated teachers. Their job is to try and help each and every child develop his full potential. They will aim to bring out the best in each child, educationally, socially and emotionally. That is certainly the ideal. However, this may not always be easy. Teachers, like all of us, are busy and pressed for time. Bringing out the best in each child in a class is a wonderfully challenging, creative and worthwhile task. That's why most teachers choose the profession. They want to make a positive contribution to how the children in their care develop. But a teacher conscious of the needs of a whole group (the class) and community (the school) may sometimes see your child in a way that you, the parent, find hard to understand.

For example, you may describe your child to a friend by saying, 'Oh, he's got such wonderful energy!' Or, 'He's so deep, always thinking about things.' But the teacher may say to her colleague, 'Oh, he's an absolute tearaway, disrupting all the others. I'm at my wits' end.' Or, 'He's so quiet I despair of ever getting through to him - just one reaction would make me happy!' It's not that teachers are objective while parents' views are distorted, but it's natural for loving parents to view their child through rosy spectacles. A teacher, on the other hand, might well regard her charges with a measure of worldly wisdom, not to

mention – on occasional Friday afternoons – world-weary scepticism.

As psychologists, we don't claim to have unique and perfect insight into any one child either. But we do see, talk to, assess and work with a great many children and their families. Like teachers, psychologists gradually come to observe patterns within the emotional, physical and educational complexity that is child-rearing.

At school, teachers also have to consider the wider picture. However much they try to meet the needs of all their charges, there's no doubt that some children, when they start out, will be at a greater advantage than others. This means that others will be at more of a disadvantage. For instance, children who come across as less mature and less able to cope are likely to have a harder time settling in.

For all parents, the issue of time is important. Our aim here is to help you make best use of the huge amount of time you already spend with your child. In the long run you will have more enjoyable time together: less time dealing with problems; less time engaging with him over worries or difficult behaviour; and less time needing to involve professionals, should difficulties become too much for you.

## **The Skills Your Child Needs for School**

The skills children need for school have been separated into three main, overlapping areas:

- Getting into shape or general competence (self-care, behaviour, social skills, emotions).
- Learning to learn (play, concentrating, language).
- Educational learning (reading, number work, writing).

Each of these general areas needs a range of approaches:

- Assessing the importance of the particular skills and how each is relevant to your child's progress at school.
- What you might reasonably expect from your child coming up to school age – this will give you an idea of what is regarded as 'normal development'.
- Assessing your child's level of skill, using observations, checklists and questionnaires.
- Developing your child's skills (for example, using practical, play-based activities).
- Identifying and dealing with common problems in pre-school development.

Below is a short checklist for you to complete. This covers the different skill areas mentioned above. Of course, you shouldn't expect your child to have mastered all these skills as yet. He is likely to be better at some than others. This questionnaire will give you a flavour of some of the specific skills that will be covered in the chapters to come.

Check through these skills to see how far you feel your child has come already. It will also help you form a view about how much further you might need to go in preparing your child for school.

### Is Your Child Prepared for School?

Do you think your child is able to...	Yes	To some extent	No	Don't know
<b>Self-care</b>				
Manage by himself in the toilet?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Cope with undressing and dressing by himself?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Cope with mealtimes without adult help?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Say his name, address and age?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Behaviour</b>				
Do mostly what he is told?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Contain (usually) frustration and temper?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Stop himself distracting/interfering with others?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Understand and keep to set rules or boundaries?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Social</b>				
Engage readily in play with other children?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Take turns in play?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Agree to share most toys and materials?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Emotion</b>				
Deal with new situations?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Deal with changes in routine?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Separate happily from parent or carer?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Control his emotions (such as not crying at slight problems)?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Attention/Concentration</b>				
Listen to and follow teachers' or other adults' instructions?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Finish a given activity lasting five to ten minutes?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Stay in a designated area, such as a seat or mat at nursery or meal times, for 10 to 15 minutes?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Spoken language</b>				
Speak clearly so that he is understandable to others?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Understand three-or-four idea sentences (such as <i>put the cup on the chair</i> )?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Produce grammatically complete sentences of five to six words?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Repeat a sentence of about 10 words?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Reading</b>				
Recognise some of the letters of the alphabet?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Blend or join two or three sounds to make a word (such as <i>c-a-t</i> makes <i>cat</i> )?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Break spoken words up into syllables (such as <i>pen-cil</i> )?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Number</b>				
Understand relative size (such as bigger/smaller, most/least)?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Recognise and label simple shapes (such as circles, squares)?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Match objects (such as colours, simple shapes, pictures)?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Count objects up to 10?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Writing</b>				
Control a pencil adequately?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Copy lines (vertical/horizontal, circles/crosses)?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Form some letters and numbers recognisably?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Write his first name?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

You may find that many of these skills are already in place, or that your child finds some skills easy, but others need more preparation in order to be ready for school. You may also discover that you were not so aware of the importance of some skills. Do come back and redo the questionnaire after you've read the following chapters.

## **Preface**

Starting school is a key event in all our lives. Over our many years of clinical practice, we've been struck by how little advice there is available to guide parents through the specific challenges and struggles of helping their children get ready for school. We have also noticed that many parents want to know how to recognise and deal with problems as and when they arise. Our thoughts prompted us to write this book for all such parents and carers. Our aim is to help smooth the way to the school gate and make the transition a happy one for all concerned. We've drawn on our own research work and that of many others, but in particular on our own clinical experience of working with children and families. We've both had experience of working with young children in pre-school settings and in their homes – as well as working with older children.

A recent five-year survey of parents and teachers in the USA carried out by Dr Dorothy and Professor Jerome Singer indicated that more than a third of American school children started school unprepared. David Bell, the head of the UK schools' watchdog, Ofsted, was reported as saying in 2003 that the behavioural and verbal skills of children starting school were at an all-time low, with many unable to settle and not ready to learn. Head teachers also told him that some children could not even speak properly, use a knife and fork, follow instructions or behave adequately. David Bell told the BBC News that many parents were not preparing their children for school: 'Everyone wants children to start well at the age of five, but we know that some children are ill-prepared for starting school.' And this



remains the case because, according to David Hart of the National Association of Head Teachers, many children are starting school without basic skills. In 2005 he commented, 'Teachers and support staff have to spend time sorting them out so they are ready to be educated.' Alan Wells, director of the government-funded Basic Skills Agency, highlighted the importance of talking to children. A survey of head teachers in Wales found that they believed as many as 50 per cent of children start school lacking the communication skills necessary to learn effectively. Wells went on to say, 'If you fall behind in the early years in your school career, research shows you'll be behind when you leave.'

We believe it is important to spend time easing the transition from home and pre-school to school. As the American psychologist, Professor Laura Berk, says: 'Research shows that school readiness is not something to wait for. It can be cultivated.' She adds that, 'Children acquire the knowledge, skills and attitudes for school success through the assistance of parents and teachers.' Actually you will have already become adept at teaching your child many skills, right from birth. This has been shown in a study by Professors Barbara Tizard and Martin Hughes. Pre-school children were found to learn many valuable skills informally at home with their mothers, including general knowledge, conversation and problem-solving skills. Our book is about helping you develop and hone these skills of yours, so that you and your child can thrive and move forward into the school years.

You will notice that your child is referred to as 'he' or 'she' in alternating chapters. The use of a particular gender in no way implies that the chapter is more relevant to one gender than the other.

We hope this book will provide some reassurance about your own capabilities. We also hope we will give you even more ideas about what needs to be done, and help ensure

you don't miss out on any vital areas of your child's pre-school development.

# 1

## **Hot Issues**

BEFORE DEALING WITH the particular skills needed for school, there are a number of important topics to consider. When you move on to the following chapters, keep these general points in mind. They should help to put things into perspective.

### **Hothousing**

What is meant by this much-used term? Some people believe that providing their children with a very high level of enriching learning experiences will bring great returns; it will increase their IQ and give them advantages over other children. Doing the best for your child is one thing, but in reality some children find themselves caught up in more intense levels of activity than they can cope with or profit from. Furthermore, the stresses and strains of overloading a child may have consequences for the whole family.

There is no convincing evidence that hothousing increases children's IQ. The only exception is in cases where children have been unusually deprived of adequate stimulation, most importantly language stimulation. Such children do benefit from intensive learning programmes. For instance, in the HeadStart programme in the USA, these pre-schoolers showed significant increases in IQ

levels as a result of intensive pre-school teaching (these benefits were not maintained unless the children continued to receive good stimulation into their school years). However, for children who benefit from normal parenting and good nursery school experiences, hothousing will not turn any child into a genius!

Some of the general concepts in the notion of hothousing are fine: structure, organised activities and systematic teaching. But children also need opportunities for free play and self-discovery and time to 'chill out'. This enables children to develop independence, self-motivation and the ability to occupy and amuse themselves. It gives them the opportunity to make choices, become more creative and get the idea that relaxing can be as important as work (but don't let them run away with that idea!)

Preparing your child for school is not about increasing her IQ or teaching her to read and write (although some four-year-olds will be able to read short books and write some words and simple sentences). Rather, it is about making sure your child starts school confidently, able to deal with the social, educational, practical and behavioural demands of the classroom and playground. This means preparing your child emotionally and socially as well as intellectually and educationally.

It is a perfectly good idea, and not at all harmful, for your child to attend different organised pre-school activities, such as 'baby gym', dance or music classes. But don't overdo it. Make sure what you choose doesn't put too much pressure on your child. Remember, you're not in a race or competition with other parents – honestly! We all have a deep urge to do the best for our children, to 'give them what we never had', to 'give them a head start in life' and so on. There's nothing wrong with that. But it's never quite clear what really is for the best or what the side-effects of our well-meaning efforts might be. Being ambitious for your child can be a fine impulse, but in

exaggerated form – or forced on a persistently unwilling child – it may backfire badly.

The thing to remember is that different children have hugely different energy levels, interests and abilities. Have the confidence to do what you feel is right for you and your child, even if it's different from what your friends or neighbours are doing. Your child doesn't have to be brilliant or the best at an activity – do whatever it is as long as she enjoys it. Of course there may be moments you need to encourage your child to persist or practise. But watch with care not to let your parental overdrive take over so you end up pushing too hard.

The way you prepare your child for school is crucial. Skills can be taught in ways that do not put excessive demands on your child – or put a strain on your relationship with her. Your child should be left with lots of time to enjoy non-structured activities. Many of the skills described in this book can be developed as part of day-to-day family routines (especially many self-care, play, language and social skills). Other skills need more structured activities that might take place in short play sessions (especially the pre-reading, pre-writing and pre-number skills). These are the essential foundation skills that children need to have in place before they begin formal instruction.

### **The 'Good Enough' Parent**

'Good enough' parenting is about having realistic expectations and setting appropriate goals. It was popularised by the paediatrician and psychoanalyst, D.W. Winnicott, in 1960. It gets away from the idea of being a super parent or a gifted parent, notions that are linked with hothousing and with pushing children to their limits. It is about relaxing and enjoying parenting – enjoying your child, enjoying yourself. You are going to make mistakes

from time to time – say things you wish you hadn't, lose your temper, overcompensate. But don't despair or overly reproach yourself. The occasional mistake of this sort should not affect your child's development in any significant way.

Being a parent is part of your life – a very important part, but not the only part. Remember that you also need to make time for other relationships – with partners, your own parents and even friends.

Do what needs to be done (the basics) and leave time for the frills. Relax!

## **Biology and the Environment**

There has been a long-standing debate about what carries more weight, 'nature' (our genes and biological background) or 'nurture' (the environment and learning). Laura Berk says, 'A major reason child development researchers are interested in the nature-nurture issue is that they want to improve environments so that the child can develop as far as possible.'

Research has clearly demonstrated that many skills to do with intelligence – how we think, learn and remember – have a strong basis in inheritance (more than 50 per cent). Similarly, personality characteristics such as temperament, attention and activity levels, and even sociability, have strong genetic influences. Much more about genetics is understood now than ever before.

But genes are not destiny. Parents can provide their children with experiences that help them compensate for inborn weaknesses. For instance, children with an inherently difficult temperament can be helped by consistent, calm and clear management. They can be taught to relate well to adults and peers, and to learn better self-control. They can practise becoming better at

copied in difficult situations. Children, too, from families with high rates of dyslexia (which is strongly inherited) can be helped to avoid the worst of their reading problems by specialist teaching. In fact, there are numerous ways in which inherited difficulties can be offset by the child's environment, and you will read more about how to do this in the following chapters.

For children with clear difficulties, it's better to act sooner rather than later. This provides more opportunity for the child to learn new patterns or habits. There is also less ground to make up as the child will not be so far behind her peers in learning, and there is no history of failure to overcome.

Your child's pre-school years are perhaps the best time to take active steps to help her make the most of her genetic endowment.

## **Individual Differences**

There is normal variation between children in when and how fast skills develop (the idea of 'between children' differences). For instance, the average age that children are able to walk independently is around 15 months. But clearly some children are walking as early as 12 months (or even before), while others are not on their feet until around 18 months. Equally, some children about to start school are not going to be as mature or as ready for formal learning as others.

In addition, within any one child, different skills may develop at different rates (the idea of 'within the child' differences). At any given point in time, each child will have an individual profile of strengths and weaknesses. For instance, some three-year-olds will have very advanced speech and language, but poorer motor development that makes them clumsy and unable to dress themselves easily.

Any one child starting school may therefore be mature or skilled in some areas but not in others.

If you ask whether your child is *ready* for learning the skills covered in this book, the answer is 'Yes'. But for different skills you might have different starting points. Each of these skills is approached in a gradual, step-by-step way. You start at your child's level and build up from there. Learning will carry on in school; you don't have to have reached an end point by the time your child starts school. Your child will learn and develop at her own pace, and will pick up some skills faster than others.

### **Gender/Sex Differences**

Boys and girls are not the same. The emphasis on ignoring or even attempting to eliminate gender differences is now widely seen as naïve.

- Girls develop language skills faster. They show quicker vocabulary growth initially, though boys seem to catch up from the age of two. But girls retain an advantage in terms of their reading; throughout the school years they obtain higher scores on reading tests. Is this biological or environmental? It looks as though both are important. Girls have a larger language region of the brain than boys (biological). But it has also been shown that mothers often talk more to their toddler girls than to their toddler boys (environmental) – so girls have more language practice early on.
- In school, boys are greater 'risk takers' and end up with more cuts and bruises, whilst girls tend to be more cautious. Girls in general try harder than boys to please and to avoid failure.
- Developmental problems are much more common among boys. Speech and language disorders, reading



difficulties, attention and overactivity problems, emotional and social immaturity, and naughty and aggressive behaviour are seen in three to five times as many boys as girls.

But let's put these differences into perspective. Over the total population of girls and boys, there are more similarities than differences. Differences are small, and they are evident only when you compare group averages. And there are large individual differences even among girls and among boys. There's nothing wrong with the girl who likes to play football or the boy who enjoys cooking - on the contrary!

## **Television**

Parents often ask whether television can have a detrimental effect on their child's behaviour or development. Some hate it with a passion. Many see it as a good source of education and recreation. Some would not know what to do without it as a readily available pacifier and baby-sitter. Researchers in the USA found that children of around three years of age watch television for approximately one-and-a-half hours each day. This increases substantially as children get older. These figures hold true of most developed countries.

To date, research has focused mostly on particular aspects of behaviour - especially whether watching violent television (or videos) relates to more violent and antisocial behaviour. Reviews of studies show that there is indeed such a link. It is tempting to think that watching violent television directly causes violent behaviour among children, but the findings are not that clear cut. Some studies have shown that children who are already prone to violence or difficult behaviour are more likely to choose to watch violent programmes.

Research into the effects of television on learning has shown that pre-schoolers who watch educational programmes achieve better academic results, read more books and place a higher value on education later on. In contrast, another study has shown that watching 'entertainment television' (such as cartoons) takes children away from other activities like reading or interacting with others. Furthermore, this was also shown to lead to poorer academic performance.

So what conclusions can we draw from these studies about children watching television?

- How much should they watch? A study was conducted in a small, remote Canadian town. Children were assessed before the introduction of television into their community, and then again two years later. During this time the children showed a decline in their reading ability and creative thinking and an increase in verbal and physical aggression during play. Bearing this in mind, we suggest allowing some television – but not too much. To be more precise, we recommend around an hour a day, partly because it seems pointless to ban it entirely and partly because there are recognisable advantages. With younger children, and with those who have no older brothers or sisters, you can more easily get away with less 'box watching'.
- What should they watch? Children should of course watch only child-appropriate programmes, of which most should be educationally based. We don't think there is any harm in them watching cartoons or other strictly 'entertainment' programmes as part of their relaxation time, but programmes with a violent content should be avoided.
- Does it matter how much television you (the parents) watch? It seems there is a relationship between children's and parents' viewing habits. If parents

watch a lot, so will their children. You might consider spending some of your viewing time together with your child. This is a fantastic opportunity to, first, expand on and develop further some ideas from educational programmes you've enjoyed watching together. Second, sharing television experiences allows you and your child to make judgements about what you have seen. For example, do you agree with a character's particular point of view or behaviour? What would you and your child have done differently? Which character do you like best – and why?

Now let's move on to the skills your child will need for school. Look back at the checklist [here](#) to remind yourself of the areas you need to concentrate on most.

**PART A**  
**GETTING INTO SHAPE**

## 2

### **Self-care**

MANY OF THE skills and issues important for preparing your child for school may seem basic, but they are crucial. If self-care skills are not in place, your child will find it much harder to achieve many of the other, more obviously school-related skills.

#### **What is Self-care?**

The term 'self-care' refers to your child's ability to care for his own basic day-to-day needs. It is an important part of becoming independent. Self-care covers the practical skills involved in the following:

- Knowing his name and where he lives
- Knowing how to look after himself in the toilet
- Knowing how to dress and undress himself
- Dealing with meal times, including feeding himself
- Learning routines, such as bedtime

For most children, these skills develop naturally and easily through regular routines established at home from an early age. A child's ability to fit in with regular routines and structured activities is also an important part of his development. This is because regularity allows children to know what is happening and to predict what will happen next. This will help them to feel secure and confident.

The long-term aim is to make your child aware of what he needs to do on a daily basis and get on with doing it. You are not trying to create an automaton, rigid in his approach to life, but a child who can order and structure his regular activities. *you* also need time to do other things – perhaps caring for other children, doing domestic tasks such as cooking or washing ... and even making time for yourself to have a break.

Helping your child care for himself makes for a much easier life at home. For example, if you are trying to leave the house quickly and it's cold or wet outside, it's far easier if he can get his coat buttoned up by himself. It's tempting to do the hard bits yourself. Sometimes it can't be helped – you just haven't got time for any other solution. And that's fine. But, whenever possible, make time for your child to do these little tasks independently.

Self-care is especially important when the time comes for your child to go to school. Teachers will expect him to be 'clean and dry', able to cope at school meal times and to dress and undress for sporting activities. The less time teachers have to spend helping and teaching children basic care skills, the more time they have available to concentrate on social and educational issues. Another issue is that a child unprepared in self-care may be seen as 'babyish' by other children. This could then affect friendships.

### **What Can We Expect of Pre-schoolers?**

The checklist below covers all the different areas of self-care. See how far your child has developed in each area. For each item put a tick in the column that most closely applies to your child.