

BUILDING READINESS SKILLS

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Blessed with the best homeschooling laws in the nation, Texas families are choosing more and more to educate their children at home – and choosing to begin that education at a very early age. Many long-time homeschoolers would tell you that they have homeschooled their children “since birth,” meaning they have been purposeful in teaching their children, both spiritually and academically, since the very beginning of their little lives. This is, of course, one of the great benefits to making the decision to teach our children. We tend to spend the toddler and preschool years working with our children to build a solid foundation and a love of learning that will serve them (and us!) throughout the rest of their elementary, middle school, and high school years.

It is important, however, to understand just what activities will be most beneficial in building that solid foundation. The plethora of material available can be overwhelming to



the parent of a very young child. Desiring to cover everything, we invest in a preschool curriculum that requires several hours a day of seatwork, including phonics lessons, math lessons, and endless handwriting practice.

In fact, this type of work is better left to later years for several reasons, not the least of which is avoiding burnout in your student. Beginning schoolwork with a 4-year-old means their education at home will last approximately 14

years. By teaching our children at home, we can view the “big picture” of their education and develop a timeline that is individualized to that student, whereas the government school system has no choice but to teach to the group as a whole. Out of logistical necessity, the classroom setting utilizes more book work than is truly necessary or, again, beneficial.

Rather than strapping our preschoolers to a stack of workbooks, we should devote our time with them to building readiness skills. Webster’s defines “readiness” as “prepared mentally or physically for some experience or action.” The best use of our time would be to focus on activities that encourage the neurological development that will allow our children to perform well as we slowly move toward a more structured approach to education. There will be a time for reading, handwriting, algebra, and book reports. The time we invest in the early years will provide our children the skills they need to succeed academically. Three key areas of readiness are motor development, visual discrimination, and auditory discrimination.

MOTOR DEVELOPMENT

Motor development includes gross motor skills (large muscles) and fine motor skills (smaller muscles). Because motor development follows a natural pattern of larger muscles developing before smaller ones, it is important to work on those gross motor skills first. In other words, using the pincher grip (fine motor skill) to hold a pencil should come after time has been spent on large arm movements. Rather than requiring your preschooler to write his letters on handwriting paper for 20 minutes, give him a paint brush and a bucket of water and have him “paint” his letters in very large strokes on the side of the house. Other activities for building gross motor skills include: hopping on one foot, skipping, jumping rope, throwing a ball, walking on a predetermined line, and walking up and down steps without holding onto the railing. When moving on to fine motor skills, activities would include: stringing beads, lacing, cutting with scissors, buttoning, picking up small objects, and, yes, holding a pencil or crayon.



VISUAL DISCRIMINATION

Visual discrimination is the ability to recognize similarities and differences between visual images. This is essential to both reading and writing. Additionally, sorting, patterning, and sequencing (all skills that require visual discrimination) are the foundational blocks of mathematics. Activities that build visual discrimination skills include: matching colors and shapes, matching by size, sorting silverware, spotting the differences in two objects or pictures, matching letters and numbers that are the same. Visual memory games are also very helpful in building this skill. For example, show a child a picture and discuss it in detail. Then cover the picture and ask the child to recall as many details as possible. Show a tray of four or five objects, then remove one and have the child identify the missing item. Memory matching games are an inexpensive addition to your school material and will do much more for your child’s development than a workbook page.

AUDITORY DISCRIMINATION

Auditory discrimination is the ability to distinguish between different sounds. The ability to distinguish between the sounds of two letters, for example, is the backbone of phonics. Work with young children to build auditory skills by engaging in some of these activities: sound two notes and ask if they are the same or different, say pairs of words and ask if they

sound the same, read poetry and play rhyming games, clap out a pattern and have the child repeat the pattern, have your child identify sounds with their eyes closed, or take a nature walk and have your child identify sounds. Building strength in this area will not only help with language skills, but will help with your child's overall listening skills.

The preschool years are the years during which readiness skills are developed. If we are building readiness skills, then the implication is that our child is not ready – we are working to make him ready. We will do more harm than good by pushing our child in the area of academics. Save the workbooks for later and spend time playing with games and puzzles and exploring the world.

