



Introduction to Approaches to Learning

In the early 1990s, the National Education Goals Panel provided a multi-dimensional definition of school readiness. That definition introduced and gave particular emphasis to approaches to learning as a distinct dimension of readiness. This term refers to aspects of children's characteristic responses to learning situations, such as the child's curiosity, flexibility, or persistence.

Research on school readiness indicates that children's approaches to learning are powerful predictors of their later success in school (The Child Mental Health Foundations and Agencies Network [FAN] 2000). We also know that there is considerable variation among children on these characteristics, some of which is due to personality, but most of which is subject to change depending on children's experiences and early interventions. For example, shyness, which is considered a personality trait, may inhibit initiative and curiosity, but need not hinder success in school if teachers do not equate shyness with low intelligence and if they support shy children in classroom interactions. Children's approaches to learning contribute to their success in school and interact with their development and learning in all other Domains. For example, curiosity is a prerequisite of the scientist, and reasoning and problem solving are as necessary for social relationships as they are for mathematics. School readiness includes the ability to tackle and persist at challenging or frustrating tasks, follow directions, take risks and make mistakes, and work as part of the group.

Progress for English language learners will vary as well. How linguistically diverse children approach learning will differ and affect how quickly they progress in learning English and/or their home language. A child who is more willing to take risks with language may develop more rapidly than a child who is hesitant in attempting to speak English.

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Domain Element: Initiative and Curiosity

Decades ago, Erik Erikson (1963) described the primary struggle of the preschool years as initiative versus guilt. Most children of this age are naturally curious and eager to learn, but they can become easily discouraged if their initiatives are regularly ignored or punished. In *Eager to Learn: Educating Our Preschoolers* (Bowman, Donovan, & Burns 2001), a distinguished panel of scholars concludes that preschool curriculum is most effective when it takes advantage of children's own interests and curiosity to help them acquire the skills and knowledge needed for success in school. During the early years of life, children's initiative and curiosity lead them to explore and experiment in ways that literally contribute to brain development.

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Initiative and Curiosity Indicators

	<p>Initiative and Curiosity</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chooses to participate in an increasing variety of tasks and activities. • Develops increased ability to make independent choices.
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- Approaches tasks and activities with increased flexibility, imagination, and inventiveness.
- Grows in eagerness to learn about and discuss a growing range of topics, ideas, and tasks.

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Initiative and Curiosity Strategies

To encourage initiative and curiosity:

- Encourage children's natural inclination to ask questions and to wonder. Help them refine their questions and think of ways they might get answers.
- Provide meaningful, realistic choices of play and work experiences.
- Help children who have difficulty making choices by limiting choices or helping them think through their options.
- Engage children in science and math experiences that start with asking questions, forming hypotheses or making guesses, collecting data, and drawing conclusions.
- Read or write stories in which children change or make up their own endings.
- Play games that build on and extend children's curiosity, such as, "I Spy" or "Mystery Bag."
- Be flexible enough to change plans if children initiate a more interesting idea or experience.

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Domain Element: Engagement & Persistence

Success in school requires that children engage and persist in tasks and activities that are often not of intrinsic interest to them. School readiness includes the ability to tackle and persist at challenging or frustrating tasks, to follow directions, to take risks and make mistakes, and to work as part of the group. Yet, kindergarten teachers report that many children lack these abilities. These capacities develop over time and build from children's ability to engage and persist in those activities that are of greatest interest to them, such as self-chosen play or interesting projects, and their feelings of joy or pride in their accomplishments.

Teachers' comments to children can encourage them to persist and to take pride in their work. Research shows that if children can attribute their successes, even at a young age, to their efforts, rather than to their intelligence or luck, they will be more engaged and motivated (Dweck 1999).

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Engagement & Persistence Indicators

Engagement and Persistence

- Grows in abilities to persist in and complete a variety of tasks, activities, projects, and experiences.
- Demonstrates increasing ability to set goals and develop and follow through on plans.

- Shows growing capacity to maintain concentration over time on a task, question, set of directions or interactions, despite distractions and interruptions.

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Engagement & Persistence Strategies

To promote engagement and persistence

- Play games in which children must listen carefully and follow more than one direction, such as "Simon says, stand on one foot and touch your nose."
- Assign children important, necessary tasks that involve following multiple-step directions: "Take your coat off, hang it in the cubby, and pick out a book to enjoy."
- When children quit or give up too easily, gently encourage them by saying, "Try one more time" or "Think of something else you could try."
- Gradually lengthen the time children are expected to remain engaged in activities or experiences; for instance, read longer stories to extend children's attention span.
- Engage children in prior planning of their own and remind them of their plans as needed: "What was it you planned to do today? Are you finished?"
- Provide ways for children to revisit and reflect on their experiences and learning.
- Make frequent comments about children's efforts: "Look how hard you've been trying to put that puzzle together. You're almost finished." "You didn't give up until you got just the right color. You must be very proud."
- Help children identify successful strategies for problem-solving: "It really helps when you look for the very first letter of your name to find your cubby." "Let's repeat the directions together, so everyone will know what to do next."
- Offer praise that is specific and meaningful to what a child (or children) have actually done: "You really had to push hard to turn the pedals." "You all spoke in such a kind, gentle way when Jose hurt his foot." Avoid vague words like "Nice" and exaggerated praise, such as "You're the best painter in the whole world."

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Domain Element: Reasoning & Problem Solving

The ability to reason and solve problems cuts across all Domains of The Head Start Child Outcomes Framework. These are skills that serve children well throughout school and life. The Framework gives reasoning and problem solving special emphasis as a Domain Element of Approaches to Learning, but children develop and use their reasoning and problem-solving abilities across every aspect of the curriculum and in all their daily interactions. Science and mathematics provide concrete opportunities for children to question, experiment, reason, and solve problems, but so do reading and writing, the arts, and interpersonal problem solving. In good children's literature, characters inevitably encounter problems that can be solved in multiple ways. Reading aloud to children from a variety of materials exposes them to a multitude of problem-solving strategies and ways of thinking. Children's social experiences inevitably result in conflicts that require thinking through and discussing possible solutions, trying them out, and negotiating to solve problems. All of these experiences draw on children's increasingly sophisticated language skills.

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Reasoning & Problem Solving Indicators

Reasoning and Problem Solving

- Develops increasing ability to find more than one solution to a question, task, or problem.
- Grows in recognizing and solving problems through active exploration, including trial and error, and interactions and discussions with peers and adults.
- Develops increasing abilities to classify, compare and contrast objects, events, and experiences.

Reasoning & Problem Solving Strategies

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To develop reasoning and problem solving

- Engage children in generating multiple solutions to questions or problems: "It is raining and we can't go outside. What could we do instead?"
- When exploring or experimenting with a science or math topic, engage children in the scientific method of asking questions, generating hypotheses, gathering data, predicting what will happen, and observing consequences.
- Play games that involve classifying, comparing, and contrasting, such as Dominoes, Lotto, and other matching and sorting games.
- Ask children to classify objects using more than one attribute ("Find the large, blue square; find the small, red circle.").
- Help children verbalize their reasoning, thinking out loud about how to solve a problem or answer a question. Write down children's recommended ways of solving problems as well as their solutions to problems. Try them out.
- Model open-mindedness and creativity. Demonstrate that there may be more than one way to do things or to solve problems.
- Encourage children to think of as many solutions as they can to interpersonal problem situations. Ask them to think about what would happen next if they use a certain solution or to anticipate the consequences of an action.
- Read and act out stories in which characters reason and solve challenging problems.
- See the Mathematics Domain for other examples.

In conclusion, teachers build children's approaches to learning throughout the program day and across all kinds of planned and spontaneous experiences. It is important for teachers to be intentional about supporting these critical dimensions of children's development, which foster positive attitudes and behaviors, and to give extra support and guidance to children who need it.

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