

School Readiness and Transitions

A companion to the
Child Friendly Schools Manual



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This module was written by Pia Rebello Britto, Ph.D., Associate Research Scientist at Yale University, and Maria Cristina Limlingan, M.S. Ed., of Loyola University in Chicago.

Abhiyan Jung Rana, Maida Pasic and Changu Mannathoko from the UNICEF Education Section in New York provided inputs and revisions throughout the drafting process and contributed to its overall quality and completeness.

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PREFACE

Over the past decade, the child-friendly schools (CFS) model has emerged as UNICEF's signature means to advocate for and promote quality education for every girl and boy. Child-friendly schools enable all children to achieve their full potential. As a part of a Global Capacity Development Programme on CFS, UNICEF has developed the *Child Friendly Schools Manual*, a reference document and practical guidebook to help countries implement CFS models appropriate to their specific circumstances.

A companion to the *Child Friendly Schools Manual*, this module provides guidance to policymakers, educators, programme professionals and practitioners on how to promote holistic early learning and development. It can be used in several ways, including: as a resource document for early childhood programmes, preparing children and families for primary school entry; and as an advocacy document for promoting school readiness practices in the transition to the early grades of primary school. It is intended as general guidance adaptable to particular contexts and settings.

1

PURPOSE, SCOPE AND CONCEPT¹

Background

Through a combination of international development frameworks such as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the Education for All (EFA) goals and the World Fit for Children (WFFC) targets, countries are working towards a society in which all children will complete primary or basic education at a minimum.²

As more children enter school, however, it is apparent that many of them are enrolling too late or too early, repeating grades, dropping out or failing to learn.³ As a consequence, educational disparities are increasing. In light of these trends, the following three questions must be answered:

1. Are children entering school with the social and cognitive skills and competencies needed to achieve success in school?
2. Are schools equipped and ready to provide optimal learning environments for children?
3. Are families and communities ready to help their children make smooth transitions to school?

School readiness is the foundation of equity and quality education. It is gaining global support as a viable means to help young children reach their full developmental potential and engage in lifelong learning. School readiness is linked to improved academic outcomes in primary and secondary school and positive social and behavioural competencies in

adulthood. While adhering to UNICEF's human rights-based focus on the individual benefits of education, school readiness also builds human capital to address economic development.

UNICEF's major effort to achieve school readiness is the CFS model, which was launched as a systemic strategy to achieve MDG 2 – universal access to and completion of primary school by 2015. School readiness is an important component of the child-friendly strategy. When children and families are prepared for school and schools are prepared for them, children are more likely to enrol in school on time and stay until they complete primary school.

Defining school readiness

Many definitions and conceptualizations of school readiness have been used in past decades; however, with recent advances in science and knowledge a growing consensus on the definition has emerged.

School readiness is currently defined by three interlinked dimensions: a) ready children; b) ready schools; and c) ready families. Children, schools and families are considered ready when they have gained the competencies and skills required to interface with the other dimensions and support smooth transitions. For example, the child transitions to school, the school transitions to accepting new children into Grade 1, and the families transition to sending their children to school on time and interacting with the school. These three dimensions and characteristic features are

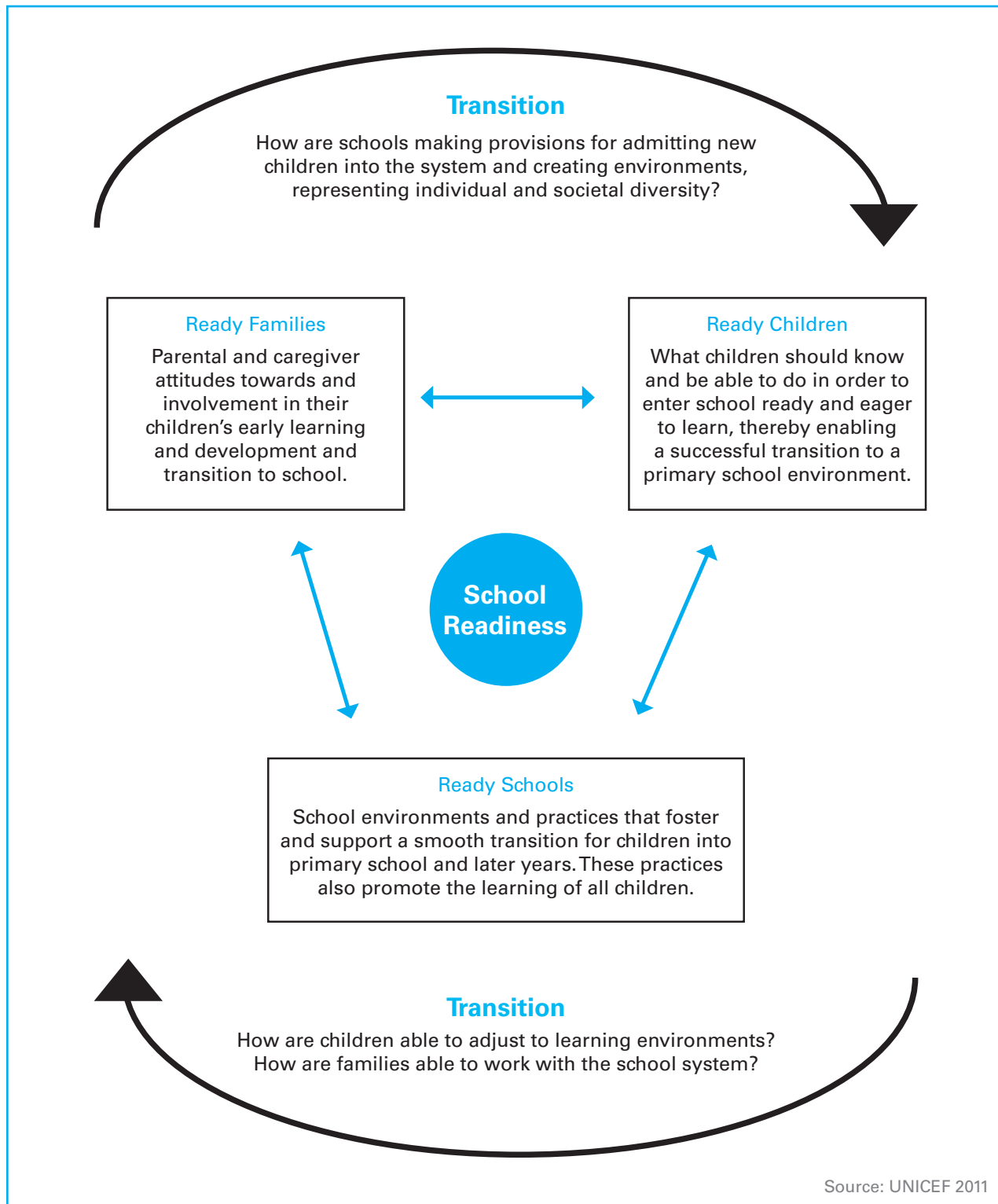
illustrated on page 5 and described in more detail below:

- a. The 'ready children' dimension focuses on children's learning and development. It refers to what children should know and be able to do in order to enter school ready and eager to learn, thereby enabling a successful transition to a primary school learning environment.⁴ Success in school is determined by a range of behaviours and abilities, such as literacy, numeracy, ability to follow directions, working well with other children and engaging in learning activities.⁵ These behaviours and abilities are interrelated across broad domains of development and learning, including physical well-being and motor development; social and emotional development; approaches to learning; language development; cognition and general knowledge; spiritual and moral development; appreciation for diversity and national pride. Children's readiness for school addresses all children, especially the economically disadvantaged and the vulnerable, including girls, children with disabilities, ethnic minorities and children living in rural areas. There is a particular emphasis on equity in achieving MDG 2.
- b. The 'ready schools' dimension focuses on the school environment. It includes practices that: a) foster and support a smooth transition for children to primary school and beyond; and b) promote learning for all children. Ready schools characteristically create continuity and maintain learning expectations for children between early learning and primary school environments. Other important quality characteristics include the practices schools use to bridge the cultural divide between home and school.⁶ The divide is greatest for children

whose first language is not the same as the language of school instruction. Schools can bridge this gap by working with parents and incorporating culturally responsive practices that include the use of the child's first language. This practice promotes equity by including traditionally disadvantaged ethnic minorities.⁷ With respect to children with disabilities, ready schools adopt inclusive approaches in lieu of exclusionary educational practices and discriminatory attitudes.⁸ In general, the dimension of ready schools includes the overall quality of the school environment evidenced in such characteristics as sufficient class time devoted to learning; adequate supply of learning materials such as books and teaching aids; and effective teaching, pedagogic practices and teachers' competencies.

- c. The 'ready families' dimension focuses on parental and caregiver attitudes and involvement in their children's early learning, development and transition to school. Supportive parenting and stimulating home environments have been shown to be among the strongest predictors of school performance during primary school and beyond.⁹ Parents' educational goals, beliefs, attitudes and commitment are considered crucial for school success. Parental commitment to ensuring timely enrolment for young children is an important aspect of successful school transition.¹⁰ Another characteristic of ready families is the learning environment provided in the home, including parents' engagement with their children in learning activities such as singing, reading books, telling stories and playing games.¹¹ Supportive and responsive relationships within the family are the building blocks of children's social and emotional development and are required for success in school.¹²

School Readiness



All three dimensions of school readiness are important and must work together to ensure that the time of transition for the child, family and school system is smooth. Interlinked, they support each other in building competencies and preparing for the transition from home to school.

Factors affecting school readiness

The three dimensions of school readiness are influenced by social, cultural, economic, policy and historic factors. While each factor will not be discussed here in detail, data show that these factors influence how schools, families and children interact. Low- and middle-income countries, for example, vary widely in their provision of early learning programmes that prepare children for school. This diversity in the provision of Early Childhood Development (ECD) programmes is linked with the economic investment of the country, the cultural traditions of sending a young child to a programme and national policies that support ECD.

Consequently, school readiness is a product of both the immediate interaction of the three dimensions as well as cultural and policy influences.¹³

School readiness within holistic child development

Holistic child development includes all aspects of survival, development, learning and participation. It encompasses not only verbal and intellectual skills and knowledge, but also social abilities, health and nutritional status.¹⁴

School readiness is embedded within holistic development. For example, child health is strongly associated with learning. Undernourished and stunted children, for example, often underperform in school. Children who are caretakers for siblings lack adequate rest or suffer other risk factors that deny them the benefits of the school environment. Lack of antenatal care, poor nutrition, low birthweight and lack of routine immunizations have been linked with poorer school outcomes and performance.

Holistic development is essential for children's preparedness for school and their ability to participate in different learning environments. The strong link between holistic child development and school readiness underscores the importance of integrated, multisectoral ECD programmes that unite health, education and protection, guaranteeing all children a strong start to life.

2

BENEFITS AND COSTS

The benefits of school readiness can be understood at two levels: intrinsic and instrumental. Intrinsic benefits address the direct gains to the recipients: to children, families and schools. Instrumental benefits refer to gains towards the broader development goals of social equity and economic development. The cost of school readiness is contrasted with the cost of inaction – the burden borne by individuals and society.



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Intrinsic benefits of school readiness for individuals

School readiness is linked to learning, school completion, later skill development and the acquisition of academic competencies and lifelong success.¹⁵ Children who enter school 'ready to learn' are more likely to succeed at school, stay

in school and learn. Academic achievement involves building upon existing skills and mastering new ones.

The benefits of school readiness are most profound at three developmental points: a) when the transition to primary school is considered complete, typically around Grade 3 or 8 years of age; b) in high school or adolescence; and c) during adulthood. At each stage, school readiness creates specific benefits:

- a. In primary school, reducing drop-out rates and increasing academic engagement.
- b. In secondary and high school, bettering academic performance and rates of graduation.
- c. In adulthood, improving employment outcomes.

Instrumental benefits of school readiness for society

School readiness is a proven strategy to improve the economic and social development of a society. With respect to instrumental benefits, the return on investment has been estimated for such factors as reduction in education costs, increases in human productivity and income, and benefits to society. Examples include:

- a. *Reduction in education costs.* Investment in school readiness has been associated with internal efficiency of primary school education costs. Fewer children repeat grades, and thus the same children do not have to be taught twice.¹⁶

- b. *Income gains.* Every added grade level of achievement results in higher earnings. School readiness clearly marks the path for individuals to higher education and leads to earnings benefits. A citizenry that can earn more can better contribute to the economic growth of a country.

Costs of inaction

The costs of inaction for school readiness, like the benefits, can also be calculated for individuals and society. When considering the life-cycle perspective that informs the CFS model, there are three situations in which inaction costs are most felt: a) during the first three years of a child's life; b) between ages 3 and 6 years; and c) at the primary school level, (6 years and older).

Particular cases of inaction may include lack of access to quality ECD programmes, gaps in coverage and lack of response to children from marginalized communities.

- a. *Lack of access to quality ECD programmes* – Only about 50 per cent of countries have any formal system for the care and development of children aged 3 years old and younger. Due to minimal, low-quality provisions of ECD and high poverty contexts, children often come to school malnourished and stunted.¹⁷ Without the crucial elements for early childhood – antenatal care, good nutrition, health care and routine immunizations – children will experience poorer school outcomes and performance than children who have access to the building blocks of development.¹⁸

Overcrowded classrooms, inconvenient locations, lack of learning materials, and inadequately prepared or absent teachers exacerbate the situation. When

children lack access to quality early childhood programmes, they enter primary school inadequately prepared to participate in individual learning and classroom activities. This adversely affects their learning achievement and school completion and is linked with behavioural problems.¹⁹ Failure to provide ECD often results in children entering school late or dropping out,²⁰ thereby setting a downward economic and social trajectory in adulthood.



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- b. *ECD programmes' gaps in coverage* – In many parts of the world, there is a strong national system of early care and development until children are approximately 3 years old. Then they receive minimal attention until they enter primary school, leaving a gap in services for children between ages 3 and 6. The early intervention programmes from birth to 3 years set the children on an upward path. Without continuity of services, these children may 'fall through

the cracks', lose their early gains and enter school unprepared. The burden of navigating the transition then falls on children and families. Such lack of continuity in services may lead to school failure and dropout because families and children are unprepared for the school system.

- c. *Lack of response to children from marginalized and minority communities* – An analysis of primary school enrolment rates suggests that, while overall increases are being made, rates of enrolment remain low for children from marginalized communities.²¹ Cultural, social and linguistic differences between families and the mainstream school culture may be implicated in these low enrolment and attendance rates, thereby creating inequities.²² Without the skills and competencies necessary to smooth the transition for children from minority communities, schools and Grade 1 teachers are ill-prepared to receive them. Because the schools are not responsive to their needs, children and families make it to the school door but do not remain. They feel uncomfortable; they drop out. Inaction at the primary school level translates into a high cost for society, which misses out on the potential talents and contributions of a portion of its citizenry.

Total costs of inaction

Costs of inaction for society include economic ramifications. Data supporting the connection between malnutrition and learning and development, proxy indicators of early childhood learning, suggest a 22 per cent loss in adult income due to early childhood deprivation.²³

The economic costs to nations are even higher. Multiplied by the cohorts of the population with decreased income potential, these percentages indicate the extreme economic ramifications of inaction in early childhood and school readiness. Although the return on investment for early childhood programmes is higher than for any other human capital development programme, the average government invests less than 5 per cent of total public spending on education during the pre-primary years.

3

DYNAMICS OF THEORY IN PRACTICE

Based on the life-cycle perspective, the CFS model recognizes the importance of the early years and timely entry into school for better learning outcomes. Early childhood development interventions are viewed as one way to enhance equity and quality in early life, which in turn contributes to improved developmental and school readiness. According to the CFS approach and its promotion of the concept of ready schools, continuity in learning expectations between early childhood and primary school environments can ease the transition from home to school. It can also help connect families, community-based service providers, teachers and school administrators.

This chapter focuses on ways to make those assumptions operational through:
a) defining the desired principles of ECD;
and b) establishing early learning and development standards.

Play: A desired principle for learning

Play is an important aspect of development because it provides children the opportunity to acquire not just physical skills, but also cognitive, language and social skills. Play is a key principle for learning in early childhood, when young children gain the knowledge they need for primary school success.

In play, children interact with and learn from more skilled peers, teachers and parents. At the same time, they learn to communicate through the use of language, gestures and symbolic objects. Children who master these skills become socially adept and confident. They enter school eager to learn.

Pretend play might be seen as a skill that comes naturally to children, but it requires concentration and inspiration for children to sustain the activity. Pretending represents a critical step in passing from a more sensory-motor way of thinking to the symbolic types of thinking in adulthood. Once the child has developed representational abilities through play, he or she is then able to use these abilities to improve reading, writing and other skills required for school.

Play can also help children reflect on their emotions. If a child has a bad experience, he or she may use pretend play to regain his or her composure and cope with feelings of anger, sadness or jealousy.

In order for a child to get the most benefits from play, three factors should be present:

1. *Secure attachment.* Attachment refers to the strong emotional bond between a young child and a caring adult who is part of the child's everyday life. Secure attachment serves as the foundation for children to feel safe and protected so they can explore their world. Secure relationships motivate play and prepare a child to interact positively with other children and adults.
2. *Developmentally appropriate environment.* This provides support, stimulation, nurturance and encouragement for children to play and practice emerging skills. In a developmentally appropriate environment, children are able to try out new ideas and make new discoveries.

3. *Nurturing, interactive adults.* They encourage children to play with other children, explore the environment and engage in creative play activities. Adults build on and extend children’s play and provide the right materials at the right time, a technique known as ‘scaffolding’. As a scaffold supports a structure, scaffolding maximizes children’s learning and development.

Continuity: A desired principle for programmes and services

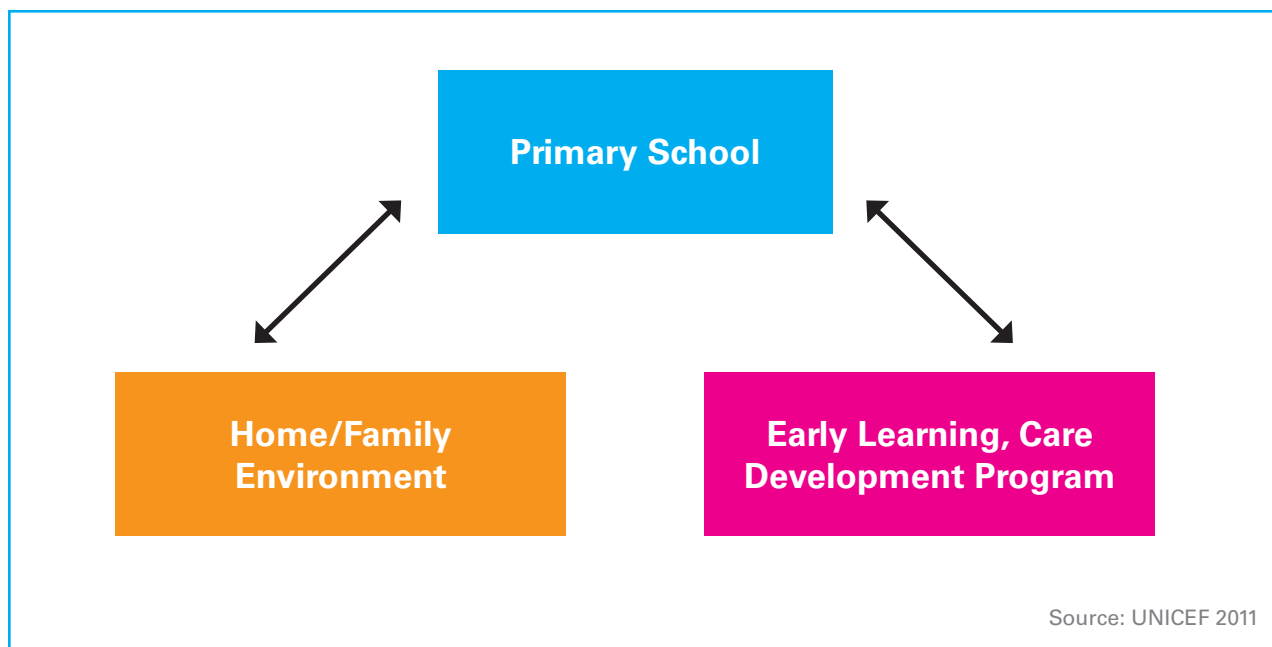
As understood within the concept of school readiness, continuity has two parts: 1) continuity between early learning, care and education programmes and primary school; and 2) continuity between the child’s home environment and the primary school.

Early childhood education and primary school continuity

Children often experience sharp differences when they transition from preschool to primary school, especially in relation to the structure of the setting and curriculum. In early learning programmes, for example, children have the space to play; in primary school they may sit in rows and behind desks. A growing body of research suggests that today’s Grade 1 classes focus more narrowly on academic goals – a trend that can make the transition from pre-primary and early childhood programmes to primary school even bumpier.²⁴

When preschool and primary school classrooms differ dramatically, children may find it overwhelming to make the transition. Classrooms in preschool, for instance, are

Continuity and School Readiness



often arranged in groups or learning areas with a schedule that balances free play, group time and one-on-one instruction. In some countries, early childhood programmes are informal and in community-based centres. Adult interaction with children is often individual. When children move to primary school, they may find it difficult to adjust to a change in rules, routines, atmosphere, and teachers' expectations and styles of interacting.²⁵ Instruction in primary school often tends to be more structured; children are expected to sit in rows and listen to didactic group instruction.

Another significant difference lies in how preschools and primary schools organize curricula. Whereas early childhood curricula tend to address domains of learning (cognitive, physical, social, etc.), primary schools often focus on subjects (reading, mathematics, science, etc.). Again, this switch means children must adjust.

Some countries have taken steps to provide more continuity by using the child's developmental cycles to organize an integrated curriculum for pre-primary and primary school. The 'Step by Step Transition Primary School Programme', detailed below, demonstrates this approach:²⁶

- a. As much as possible, transitions allow children to stay together with their friends as they move from preschool to primary school.
- b. Students from Grade 1 are invited to talk with preschool students about their experiences. Preschool students participate in role-play exercises.
- c. Preschool teachers and parents review the primary school curriculum together and discuss the skills children will need for Grade 1.

- d. Primary and preschool teachers train using the same pedagogic framework and core modules, including individualization, learning environment, family participation, teaching strategies for meaningful learning, planning and assessment, professional development and social inclusion.

Family environment and school environment continuity

Continuity must also be established between families and schools. Language is the medium through which teachers instruct in primary school and families communicate at home. It is a powerful way to establish continuity between the family and school environments.

Parents and other primary caregivers have the strongest influence on children's first language acquisition in the early years. As their child's first teachers, parents' attitudes, goals and behaviours influence the way a child develops language skills, language socialization, and perceptions of the value and maintenance of their mother tongue, the first language they learn at home.



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Many children speak a home language that differs from the language of instruction in education programmes. This difference often puts children from non-mainstream ethnolinguistic groups at a disadvantage and maintains or increases disparities in educational achievement. Ensuring continuity in linguistic communication between home and the classroom increases equity in educational outcomes.

Research shows that young children learn best in their mother tongue as a prelude to and complement of bilingual and multilingual education. As measured by test scores and self-esteem, children who learn in their mother tongue when they are 6 to 8 years old perform better than those instructed in the official language earlier or exclusively.²⁷ Once a child can read and write in his or her mother tongue, the skills are transferable to other languages.

Therefore, it is important to ensure mother-tongue instruction during the early transition years into primary school. Evidence from several countries, such as Bolivia, Guinea-Bissau, Mozambique and Niger, found that parents are more likely to communicate with teachers and participate in their children's learning when local languages are used.²⁸

Early learning and development standards

The CFS model makes the child central to the educational process and the main beneficiary of key decisions in education. With respect to standards, an integrated system puts children at the centre and contours all services and programmes around them.

In general, standards specify an expectation for achievement and provide precision and comparison. In early childhood and primary school, there are several types of standards linked with education and learning, including teacher certification criteria, school regulations, curriculum standards and evaluation, and monitoring benchmarks. These help set the expectations for the teachers, the programmes, curricula and instruction. Standards are essential for promoting quality early learning, care, development and education programmes.

Aligned standards ensure continuity across the components of a child-centred educational system. Early learning and development standards are an example of an integrated system for school readiness.²⁹ Regardless of whether they are known as competencies, goals or benchmarks, the standards articulate expectations for children's growth, development and well-being. UNICEF has supported the development of standards to promote school readiness in dozens of countries.

4

LOCATION, DESIGN AND CONSTRUCTION

The importance of high-quality home and childcare settings for early childhood is indisputable. These settings exert a powerful influence on young children's development. Safety, hygiene, ventilation, light, cleanliness, design and location define quality, allowing children the opportunity to ignite their natural curiosity and wonderment through exploration of the physical landscape. This meaningful engagement with the environment is a critical foundation for development and a particularly important dimension of quality.

Overall principles and guidance for CFS design and construction are applicable for early childhood settings as well (see Chapter Three of the *Child Friendly Schools Manual* for more details). The focus of this chapter is to supplement those principles with particular emphasis for ECD. It considers the multiple settings where young children and their families are served, along with location and design issues linked to programmes for disabled children. Design elements that promote

child safety and protection are particularly important, given the large number of child deaths associated with accidents.

Early childhood services are provided in multiple places, including centres and home-based and non-formal settings. As venues differ in form and structure, specific recommendations vary for the quality of the environment across these settings. The specific design elements of a home-based programme, for example, are very different from one that is centre-based.

- a. Centre-based programmes are offered in a variety of settings and organizational arrangements, including public and private places within elementary schools, churches, community centres or hospitals. The Madrasa Pre-School Programme in East Africa, supported by the Aga Khan Foundation, is an example.³⁰ The foundation supports communities in Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda in establishing, managing and supporting sustainable preschool centres.
- b. Home-based programmes are offered either in a caregiver's home or in the child's home by a non-parental caregiver. The Anganwadi setting of the Integrated Child Development Service in India is an example.³¹

The principles underlying quality recommendations are similar, however. The recommendations for the design of these spaces allow them to meet the definition of quality and promote responsive and stimulating interactions between children and key caregivers.



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Quality design for indoor settings

Indoor physical settings must be safe and appropriate to ensure that children are physically and emotionally secure, their imaginations and intellects stimulated, and their changing needs met over time.³² Children need areas where they can learn together or separately and can explore new concepts and master new skills. Instruments such as the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS) have been translated and used in several countries, offering guidance for space, lighting, comfort and safety.³³

The physical condition of the space is important because it affects the health and safety of both children and adults. Unmaintained spaces in poor repair may contain toxic materials such as lead, which are hazardous and unsafe for children. Rooms require sufficient lighting, ventilation and sound absorption conducive to play and rest. Ideally, a room should have natural lighting from windows or skylights controllable with blinds or curtains. The room can be open to the outdoors and circulate fresh air, or be ventilated with a fan.

Furniture should be easily accessible and convenient. It should support children's independence for playing and participating in learning activities. Children can enjoy and learn from meaningful room displays. The learning environment benefits from classrooms filled with colourful examples of children's individual work, mobiles, charts, graphs, household items and photos of the children and their families. When children see their own work displayed, they realize that others respect and value their contribution. Materials displayed

where children can easily see them can reinforce and recall past experiences and stimulate interest in upcoming events.

Quality design for outdoor settings

Plenty of safe space must be provided to ensure that children develop large muscle coordination, gross motor strength and stamina through active movement. Safety and motor development are the main criteria in designing outdoor settings for young children. Outdoor space generally allows more freedom of movement and provides fresh air. Children need adequate room to fall without getting hurt.

Location of learning space

The location, characteristics and potential hazards of the space should be considered when choosing an appropriate site for an ECD programme. Must children cross a busy street? Is the space located near traffic with inadequate barriers? It is also important to consider the school's distance from children's homes and other potential barriers.

A preschool offered in a central, accessible location for the community must also be in a space free from various safety hazards. Responsible adults must protect children in their care and minimize hazards. In rural settings, for instance, indoor and outdoor hazard assessments may include accessibility of sanitation; availability of drinking water; open well possibilities; motor vehicle traffic; or unclean surroundings such as open defecation or urinating areas.

Children with special needs

When children with disabilities are segregated from other children, both parties miss learning opportunities. Increasingly children receive special education in 'inclusion' settings. Individualized modifications for the child with the disability are recommended to allow the child to participate successfully in classroom activities. These modifications can take the form of furnishings, room arrangement, specialized attention, the subject or the schedule.

Research shows that in such settings children with special needs are able to achieve more success in both academic and social spheres than children in self-contained special education classrooms.³⁴ In classrooms that provide modifications, children with disabilities participate fully in the life of the classroom and school. At the same time, their classmates learn to help others and be more compassionate and caring.



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5

FAMILY, SCHOOL, COMMUNITY

Families are critical for ensuring school readiness. This chapter focuses on the crucial role of families in children's school readiness and how schools can build stronger ties with them.

Family engagement: Vital for school readiness

During the early years, children make leaps in physical, motor, social, emotional, language and cognitive skills development. The role of parents and key caregivers is primary for these developments. Parents provide cognitive and linguistic experiences through activities such as talking with children, singing, storytelling, looking at books and encouraging communication. When parents hug and cuddle their children, they exhibit warmth and affection, influencing their children's development of relationships and emotional well-being. By providing consistency in daily routines and opportunities for healthy growth and development, parents nurture development.

Prior to entering school, the family is the most important context for development. With reference to school readiness, family consists of the people who reside with the young children, including biological and non-biological caregivers, siblings and extended family members. Parenting practices, attitudes and knowledge have been the most studied factors for understanding the role of families in children's readiness for school.

Supportive parenting and stimulating home environments are among the strongest predictors of school performance during primary school and beyond. Early parenting practices that promote learning and development can be assessed by the consistency and frequency of antenatal visits, breastfeeding and early stimulation behaviours for newborns and infants. Parents' education goals for their children are crucial for school success, as are their beliefs in, attitudes toward and commitments to education. Parental beliefs and expectations are often cited as two explanations for the strong link between maternal education achievement and child learning outcomes.³⁵ A study in Pakistan found that children whose mothers had some education spent 75 more minutes on educational activities at home than children whose mothers had no education at all.



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Children living in homes where parents provide verbal engagement, interaction, stimulation and support do better in school than their peers who do not experience the same degree of interaction. Supportive and responsive relationships within the family are the building blocks of the social and emotional development required for children's success in school. Although the female head of household, most typically the mother, fulfils primary caregiving roles, the father's involvement in early childhood is also important. Patterns of greater father involvement in early childhood have been linked with children's language skills, cognition, academic achievement, and social and emotional competence.

According to family systems theories, three types of family interactions should be considered while developing school readiness programmes. They are:

- a. *Harmony.* Cohesive or harmonious families set rules and boundaries that allow children to explore their world without undermining the children's confidence and sense of autonomy.
- b. *Disengagement.* Families that are disengaged have rigid rules and boundaries often manifested in unsupportive and emotionally withdrawn relationships.
- c. *Enmeshment.* In enmeshed families, members relate to each other in emotionally seamless ways. Children may experience some degree of warmth and support, but relationships can be intrusive and may significantly restrict personal autonomy.³⁶

Harmonious, cohesive families have been associated with fewer emotional problems and better peer relationships.³⁷ Harmony and cohesiveness in families are important for young children's development and should be fostered by ECD programmes that strive to promote parental engagement in children's development.

Building strong school and family partnerships

Given the importance of families for children's development and learning, parental involvement in education is essential. To increase parent involvement and foster relationships, schools must create frequent opportunities to communicate with parents. Activities must enable the school to respond to parents' suggestions and concerns. Thus involved, parents feel more comfortable, confident and empowered in their significant role in their child's development. Strong family-school partnerships are especially important for those families most alienated by traditional schooling practices. Because of their social and cultural backgrounds, these parents' expectations of what is educationally helpful to their children may differ from those of school personnel.³⁸

6

EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMMES AND SCHOOLS AS PROTECTIVE ENVIRONMENTS

Young children spend more time in schools and other places of learning than they do anywhere else outside their homes. In line with the CFS approach, these places and their staff need to promote the values of non-violence, gender equality, non-discrimination, tolerance and mutual respect. Additionally, ECD programmes are uniquely placed to break the patterns of violence by providing children, their parents and communities the knowledge and skills required to communicate, negotiate and resolve conflicts in more constructive ways. They also can play a critical role in building young children's resilience and feelings of well-being.

Protective environment framework applied to early learning

A protective environment shields children from harm in the same way that good nutrition and health care safeguard them from disease.³⁹ With respect to early childhood, there are two dimensions of the protective environment framework that are important to incorporate into programming:⁴⁰

- a. The ability, knowledge, practices and resources of the parents, family or other immediate caregivers who are responsible for the child.
- b. The norms, practices, values and support of the community and society in which the child lives.

Role of teachers and key caregivers in creating and supporting a protective environment

The teachers and key caregivers in an ECD programme have countless opportunities to shape children's lives by ensuring their protection. There are specific ways to protect all children and additional measures to take for children who enter the programme with a history of abuse or maltreatment.

For children who have been maltreated or abused, teachers and caregivers need to be particularly sensitive. Building on general principles found in protective schools, such as predictable environments, clear directions, structured time and adult supervision, further interventions are needed to enhance safety and security for maltreated and abused children.

Key caregivers have important roles in facilitating and developing abused or neglected children's resiliency. Teachers and key caregivers should help children feel emotionally stable and help those who are maltreated feel safe and secure. If teachers set rules in a neutral, consistent and meaningful manner, for example, abused or maltreated children can learn to trust that adults can be authoritative without being hurtful or threatening. Participation in creative work, such as art, music and drama, gives children who have been abused or neglected the freedom and safety to express their feelings in constructive ways.

Reducing violence against children in educational settings

Both programme staff and peers may perpetrate violence against children in early learning programmes. Both instances can and must be stopped. Information exists on how to reduce violence in primary and secondary schools, but little is known about reducing such violence in ECD programmes. Although there is a limited body of knowledge, suggestions have been put forth.

School's awareness of disaster risks

Schools should consider issues of disaster risk reduction. As a systematic approach, the school personnel should be able to identify, assess and reduce risks that can impact children's safety.

Too often, young children are omitted from the disaster risk reduction discourse due to insufficient awareness of existing research on how disasters affect them. Disaster risk reduction initiatives must consider the needs and perspectives of the most vulnerable segment of the population – young children – and tailor responses according to their age and developmental level.

Promoting and integrating disaster risk reduction strategies within school settings requires the following considerations:

- a. Personnel working in these institutions need to know what appropriate actions before, during and after emergency situations will help improve families' and children's preparedness.

- b. Adults and older children need to support young children in playing and learning during and after disaster.
- c. Disaster risk reduction must be incorporated into the curriculum using interactive and fun techniques.
- d. Activities can be designed to convey messages about different types of risk and how to stay protected.



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7

TEACHERS AND SCHOOL MANAGERS FOR SCHOOL READINESS

Teachers are among the most crucial factors in building effective schools and ensuring school readiness. This section details ways to improve teacher effectiveness in school readiness.

Young children depend on adults to meet their needs for protection, learning and positive relationships. When children experience sensitive and responsive interactions with adults and receive scaffolded instruction, learning is more likely to occur.

The quality of caregiver and child interaction can be measured in terms of a) responsiveness and sensitivity towards the child; b) stimulation for development; c) positive regard; d) attentiveness; and e) warmth. A child's acquisition of knowledge and understanding is contingent upon opportunities that adults provide for demonstrating existing skills and building more complex ones.

Early childhood professionals can help children learn concepts and ideas by engaging them in activities that interest them, pointing out key features of objects and asking open-ended questions that stimulate children's thoughts and creativity. When teachers support the social and emotional functioning of a child in the classroom, they improve the child's odds of later school success. Children who are motivated and connected to others in early schooling are more likely

to be launched into positive development trajectories in both social and academic domains. Positive interactions among students and teachers help children feel more valuable, competent, appreciated and loved. Staff can meet children's needs verbally by responding to their concerns and offering encouragement and support, as well as non-verbally by smiling, looking pleased, making eye contact or using a pleasant tone of voice.

Teachers' professional qualifications have been linked with overall classroom quality. Primary schoolteachers with early childhood training are more effective in the early grades. Equipped with information on how young children learn and develop, they help ease the transition of children and families to schools much more than teachers who lack this background. Teachers with early childhood training are more likely to use developmentally appropriate practices in the classroom. An investment in primary teacher education with an emphasis on early childhood pays great dividends for educational efficiency and student learning.

8

MONITORING AND EVALUATION OF SCHOOL READINESS

Assessment, monitoring and evaluation of school readiness consider the three dimensions: ready children, ready schools and ready families. A series of questions addresses each. With guidance, appropriate and relevant instruments measure school readiness. Finally, recommendations are made for monitoring and evaluation practices of school readiness.



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Questions to guide the measurement of school readiness

Children's readiness or transition to school is demonstrated by behaviour and knowledge that enable children to succeed in a learning environment. Areas to assess include:

- a. How well boys and girls are prepared to start and continue through primary school.

- b. How children's general health and well-being are addressed as integral parts of promoting learning.

Families' readiness for school or competencies for transition are defined by the degree to which parents understand: a) the importance of education for their children; b) their own behaviours' impact on children's learning and development and success at school; c) their support for children during early primary years. Areas to assess include:

- a. Parents' knowledge of the school system and their ability to develop and foster relationships with school personnel.
- b. Parents' attitudes about their role and responsibilities as primary teacher and partner in their child's development.
- c. Parents' expectations of their child's school enrolment, progress and performance.

Schools' readiness is manifested in the way schools foster the transition of families and children; provide supportive systems for families; and offer quality teaching and learning environments, with a focus on the first year of primary school. Assessment areas include:

- a. How well schools receive children and families and whether teachers are prepared to meet their needs and uphold their rights.
- b. How safe, gender-sensitive and conducive to learning the school environment is.
- c. The extent to which schools and teachers respect children's rights and operate in the best interest of the child.

- d. The extent to which schools and teachers embrace child-centred teaching methods as good practice and standard methodology.
- e. How far schools and teachers encourage child participation as standard practice in classroom interaction as well as in the broader operation and management of the school.
- f. The extent to which effort and resources are invested in creating stimulating classrooms that support active learning.
- g. The availability of adequate, environmentally sustainable facilities, services and supplies to support the needs of the whole child and of all children.

Guidance for the selection of relevant and appropriate school readiness measures

When identifying relevant and appropriate measurement tools for school readiness, some primary factors include:

Guidance 1: Purpose of the assessment

In order to select the appropriate and relevant school readiness measurement instrument, assessors must ask the question, “Why is school readiness being measured?” An assessment instrument used to determine a particular child’s eligibility for remedial services would differ from one that measures the purpose of educational policies. The first type of instrument is diagnostic, takes longer and requires credentialing to administer. The other type of instrument is usually short and can be given to a large number of children at the same time.

There are many purposes for measuring school readiness, such as: a) understanding learning and stages of development; b) determining an individual’s eligibility for remedial services; c) aiding in curricula and instructional planning; d) evaluating ECD programmes; or e) monitoring and comparing school, district, city, state or national trends. As a result, there are many types of school readiness assessment instruments, each type aligning with the evaluation’s aim. The assessment purpose is the foundation for the school readiness measurement.

Guidance 2: How the assessment results will be applied

Knowing the population to whom the results will be applied is an important determinant in selecting school readiness measurement tools. Assessment results applied to an individual child, family or school have different implications than those applied to a group of children, community of families or a school district.



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Typically, individual-level assessments are conducted for diagnostic purposes; group-level assessment results lend insight into a programme, intervention or policy change.

Guidance 3: Which dimensions of school readiness need to be measured

Given that school readiness has three dimensions – child, school and family – assessors make decisions regarding which dimension to measure. Child readiness instruments, for instance, differ from family readiness instruments.

Within each of these dimensions, it is also important to determine what aspects will be measured. If the school's readiness for children is being measured, for example, then such things as school climate, teacher instructional methods and classroom environment come into consideration. The instrument selected would measure those aspects of the school's readiness.

With respect to measuring children's readiness for school, instruments must measure the totality of the child. An instrument that only measures cognitive development, for instance, is limited in scope and insufficient.

Guidance 4: Whether the instrument measures readiness or developmental delay

A huge issue when selecting a measurement tool is to understand whether it assesses a child's school readiness or developmental delay. Many commonly used tests for young children are screenings designed to determine if a child is within normal limits or developmentally delayed and at risk of underperforming. The developmental screening tool identifies individual children who may have health or learning problems or disabilities.

However, absence of developmental delays does not indicate readiness or preparedness. Readiness is more than the absence of delay. Furthermore, a screening tool does not necessarily measure a child's school readiness. It is useful only for determining current risk and limited in predicting future developmental status and academic achievement.

School readiness assessments ascertain whether a child is prepared for the formal learning environment. Where a screening tool finds no developmental delay or risk, it may still not indicate preparedness for formal learning. Instruments that determine families' readiness for schools and vice versa must reach well beyond screening for deficiency, assessing factors particularly indicative of readiness.

Guidance 5: Whether the instrument is culturally relevant

Another defining characteristic of school readiness measurement is whether the instrument was developed locally or adapted from another country or cultural context. With increasingly global connections, there is greater access to instruments developed in other parts of the world. An instrument might be applicable and appropriate for the country or region where it was developed, but unsuitable in a different context. Therefore, it is important to verify cultural relevance and representation of the local definition of school readiness. In order to ensure that the adapted instrument is appropriate and accurate, it should first be validated on a representative sample in any given context.

Guidance 6: The method of the instrument

With respect to school readiness, there are several frequently used methods:⁴¹

- a. *Direct assessments of the child's performance, behaviour and abilities.* In this type of measurement, the child is tested, either through an interview or by responding behaviourally to a set of questions and stimuli. For example, the child completes a block puzzle or reads a book.
- b. *Teacher and parent report.* Teachers and parents are given surveys or interviewed about children's school readiness or the school's readiness for children.
- c. *Observation.* The evaluator directly observes situations and/or children using a structured or unstructured protocol. The goal of observation is to capture

behaviours that might not typically be elicited via a test, interview or survey.

- d. *Combination of formal and informal methods,* for example, observations used in conjunction with a parent or teacher report.

The child's age, the purpose and resource availability influence the selection of the method.

Guidance 7: Whether a criterion-referenced or norm-referenced instrument is required

When selecting an instrument, it is imperative to understand if the instrument assesses readiness of children in relation to a set of criteria or against a standardized population norm.

If a school system sets an entry-age criterion for incoming students, for instance, all children entering school would have to



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meet that entry age. A locally developed 'achievement test' is criterion-referenced if it measures what the school district or teacher has decided children need to know. In order to set criteria, validated research should determine if the criterion is correct and whether children who meet the criterion do better in school than those who do not.

A norm-referenced test is a standardized testing instrument in which the test-taker's performance is interpreted in relation to the performance of a group of peers who have previously taken the same test. This group of peers is known as the 'norming' group. A standardized intelligence test, for example, yields a result called an Intelligence Quotient (IQ). The quotient represents the ratio of a person's mental age to their chronological age, multiplied by 100.

The mental age is determined by performance on the test (for instance, a 5-year-old performs like most other 5-year-olds). The chronological age is the actual age of the child in years so that the average IQ for a given age group is 100. The child's IQ score is compared to scores of many other children and ranks a child's ability compared to others. In other words, the IQ is a norm-referenced test that measures the child's score against an established norm.

Recommendations for measurement practices

Beyond the seven principles described above, various other practices are important when selecting appropriate measurements of school readiness.

Recommendations for school readiness measurement practices include:



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- a. Upholding codes of ethics to ensure the integrity of the instrument.
- b. Collecting data from children and families in a manner that safeguards their confidentiality and respects their rights.
- c. Ensuring that readiness tests are never used to exclude children from learning opportunities.
- d. Using tests only for the purposes for which they were developed or intended. Safeguarding them from misuse or application to inappropriate purposes.
- e. Ensuring that school readiness measures show reliability (they are replicable over time); predictive validity (they predict school performance); and construct validity (they are applicable across diverse groups both within and among countries).

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