

Understanding School Readiness in the Early Years: A Review of Factors, Importance, and Implications

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ABSTRACT

This study conducted a detailed investigation to define school readiness, highlight its importance in early childhood education, and identify key factors that influence it. The aim was to clarify these aspects through an extensive literature review, using sources like Shodhganga, Google Scholar, JSTOR, Taylor & Francis, and ResearchGate. The review found that readiness is shaped by interconnected factors: child-related (age, socio-emotional skills, early learning experiences, play), school-related (physical learning environment, attendance, teacher-child relationships), and broader environmental influences. High levels of readiness are linked to better academic performance, easier school adjustment, and ongoing engagement, while low readiness increases the risk of learning difficulties, grade repetition, and dropping out. The study concludes that readiness encompasses more than just pre-academic skills; it involves holistic preparation. Promoting it involves play-based learning, supportive teacher relationships, safe and stimulating environments, and active family involvement to help achieve equitable education.

Keywords: *School Readiness, Early Childhood Education, Factors Influencing School Readiness*

The early childhood years, from 6 to 8 years old, mark a crucial stage in a child's development, widely recognized as vital for lifelong growth (Yadav, 2011). Research indicates that about 85% of a child's brain development happens before age 6, highlighting that healthy brain growth is fostered when children receive proper care and stimulation during these formative years (National Education Policy [NEP], Ministry of Education, 2020). This stage is especially important because it lays the foundation for cognitive skills, emotional health, social abilities, and physical well-being (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). A key milestone in early childhood is the transition from home or preschool to formal education. Preparing for this shift involves ensuring school readiness. School readiness is a multidimensional concept that extends beyond early literacy and numeracy skills. It includes cognitive, physical, social, emotional, and language development, as well as the preparedness of families, schools, and communities to support a child's smooth transition into school (UNESCO, 2015). Research consistently shows that children who begin school with a strong foundation in these areas are more likely to perform well

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Received: October 13, 2025; Revision Received: March 27, 2026; Accepted: March 31, 2026

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academically, adapt easily to classroom routines, and build positive relationships with teachers and peers (Blair & Raver, 2015). Conversely, children who are not adequately prepared may face academic difficulties, social challenges, and a higher risk of grade retention or dropping out (Duncan et al., 2007). The global policy landscape highlights a growing emphasis on school readiness as a key factor for educational success. For example, Sustainable Development Goal 4.2 calls for ensuring that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care, and pre-primary education so they are prepared for primary school (United Nations, 2015). In India, the NEP 2020 emphasizes the importance of developmentally appropriate curricula and teaching methods to foster readiness across multiple domains, integrating both academic and socio-emotional skills. Although its importance is widely acknowledged, the concept of school readiness remains inconsistently defined and measured in research, policy, and practice. Variations arise from cultural differences, educational priorities, and the diverse contexts in which children develop. These disparities often make it difficult to develop standardized strategies to promote readiness and to compare across different settings (Janus & Offord, 2007). Therefore, it is essential to thoroughly examine the concept, highlight its significance in early childhood education, and identify the key factors that influence it.

Objectives of the study

The primary objective of this study was to define the concept of school readiness, emphasize its significance in early years, and identify the key factors that influence school readiness in children.

METHODOLOGY

This study conducted an in-depth analysis of the concept, significance, and factors affecting school readiness. It is based on a review of literature and was carried out using various online databases and platforms, including Shodhganga, Google Scholar, JSTOR, Taylor & Francis, and ResearchGate. Relevant keywords such as school readiness, early childhood care and education, child readiness, parental readiness, and school readiness were used to gather literature. Researchers conducted a comprehensive literature review. The goal of this study was to explore, synthesize, and interpret existing research findings related to school readiness, its conceptual foundation, and the various factors influencing it in early childhood education.

Understanding school readiness

The term school readiness describes a child's capacity to start formal education with a minimum of basic knowledge, encompassing all five domains: basic and cognitive expertise, physical and motor skills, arithmetic and numeracy skills, language and vocabulary skills, and socio-emotional development skills. The National Education Goal Panel first introduced the term school readiness. It is often conceptualized in terms of specific skills and competencies that could be measured and assessed against established norms and standards (Yadav, 2011). UNICEF (2012) further defines school readiness in terms of two key characteristics: transition and gaining competencies, as well as the three dimensions of readiness for children, schools, families, and communities. Understanding school readiness requires consideration of key developmental domains that support a child's ability to handle the structured and often complex demands of a formal school environment (Christopoulou & Pampaka, 2015). These domains are needed to measure school readiness: basic and cognitive skills, physical & motor skills, numeracy & arithmetic skills, language & vocabulary skills, and socio-emotional skills. Essentially, it is all about the holistic

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development of a child. This view is also reinforced by NEP 2020, which underscores the importance of holistic education in early childhood.

Different researchers have offered varied perspectives on the meaning and scope of school readiness. School readiness has yielded a wide range of hypotheses and viewpoints during the past 40 years (Snow, 2006; Winter & Kelley, 2008). Gan et al. (2016) describe it as a set of essential skills that signal a child's ability to begin schooling, whereas Chandra (2017) sees it as a foundation for equitable access to quality education and improved learning outcomes. Soni and Sangai (2017) described school readiness as a product of the interaction between the child and the range of environmental and cultural experiences that maximize the development outcomes for children. Similarly, the Department of School Education & Literacy, Ministry of Education [NIPUN Bharat] (2021) guidelines state that when a child is ready for school, they have the basic abilities and knowledge across various areas that enable success in school.

However, other studies describe that the definition of school readiness is not confined to the child alone; it also extends to the readiness of the school environment to receive and nurture children. Rahmawati et al. (2018) define it as a child's preparation to engage meaningfully in learning activities, while Jose et al. (2022) focus on the child's capabilities upon entering school. Wangke et al. (2021) describe that school readiness is determined by its instructional program, instructional medium, education values, teaching style, school structure, amount of time spent in the classroom, availability of learning resources, teacher competency, etc. Thus, school readiness is a prominent part of learning readiness among students.

School readiness has been described as a comprehensive and multifaceted concept that encompasses several developmental domains, including motor and physical skills, cognitive, language, and socio-emotional (Boivin & Bierman, 2014; Janus & Offord, 2007; Snow, 2006). It involves the child's preparedness and the readiness of families, schools, and communities to support early learning. Different studies and frameworks highlight school readiness as a dynamic interaction between developmental competencies and the environment. This holistic understanding ensures a well-rounded foundation for children to enter formal education.

Importance of school readiness

School readiness provides a crucial foundation for promoting equity in education, particularly among children from marginalized communities. It serves as a powerful tool to bridge gaps in educational attainment and access, ensuring that every child begins their academic journey on an equal footing. Although the definition of school readiness varies across studies, a widely accepted perspective is offered by UNICEF (2012), which explains the concept through two important dimensions: intrinsic benefits, which directly impact children, families, and schools, and instrumental benefits, which contribute to broader societal goals such as social equity and economic development. In this view, school readiness is not only beneficial for the individual child but also serves as a strategic investment in society as a whole. Further supporting this perspective, Pekdogan and Akgul (2016) suggest that children who reach the expected level of readiness tend to demonstrate higher cognitive abilities and are better prepared to engage in structured learning. These ready-to-learn children are more likely to perform well academically, maintain school engagement, and complete their education successfully, as emphasized in reports by NIPUN Bharat 2021. Additionally, school readiness has been identified as a critical predictor of

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long-term academic success and smooth adjustment to formal education (Doherty, 1997). Conversely, children who begin school without adequate readiness face a range of academic risks, including grade repetition, reliance on support services, and, in severe cases, dropping out of school altogether.

Recent studies further illustrate the impact of school readiness on students' overall adaptation to formal schooling. It plays a key role in how children adjust to Grade I, by influencing factors such as their attitude toward learning, self-concept, academic performance, school attendance, and even grade completion (Bruwer et al., 2014; Munnik & Smith, 2019; Wong et al., 2018). Without sufficient preparation, early learning difficulties can trigger a negative cycle, leading to poor academic outcomes, behavioral problems, and eventual disengagement from the school system (Hojnoski & Missall, 2006). UNICEF (2012) notes that school readiness not only enhances academic performance through the primary and secondary years but also supports better social, emotional, and behavioral outcomes in adulthood. Well-prepared children tend to participate more actively in classroom interactions and display behaviors that foster academic success (Entwisle et al., 2005; La Paro & Pianta, 2000).

Furthermore, high levels of school readiness often lead to positive reinforcement from both peers and teachers, opening doors to placement in high-ability groups and access to enrichment activities usually reserved for advanced learners (Majzub & Rashid, 2012). These opportunities further boost confidence, motivation, and engagement, creating a cycle of continuous academic growth. Therefore, school readiness is not merely a developmental milestone; it is a crucial predictor of a child's educational path and a strong equalizer in education. By investing in early childhood development and making sure all children start school ready to learn, we lay the groundwork for a more inclusive, equitable, and successful education system.

Factors Affecting School Readiness

Child Factor

Age and school readiness

Age has emerged as a key factor among the variables that affect school readiness. Research has revealed that a child's capacity to adjust to the regimented learning environment of a school is influenced by their developmental maturity, which is frequently correlated with their chronological age. Yadav (2011) examined the readiness levels of children in three different age groups: Group I (5–5½ years), Group II (5½–6 years), and Group III (above 6 years), and found a significant difference among them. The results showed that children younger than 5½ years demonstrated lower levels of school readiness compared to those older than 6 years. Supporting this, Van Zyl (2011) observed that older children performed significantly better in subtests related to perception and memory. Similarly, Mazub and Rashid (2012) reported that six-year-olds preparing to enter Year 1 of elementary school exhibited excellent school readiness. In terms of cognitive development, Unutkan (2006) highlighted age-based differences in scientific thinking skills, noting that five-year-olds showed significantly less competence in this area compared to 5.5- and 6-year-olds. However, not all findings pointed to a direct correlation between age and readiness. Febriyanti and Listiara (2020), for instance, reported no significant relationship between a child's age and their level of school readiness, suggesting that other factors may mediate readiness outcomes. Further adding to this complexity, Nakajima et al. (2016) found that children who began early childhood education by starting playgroup at ages 3–4 and

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kindergarten at 5–6 performed better on language and numeracy tests in primary school, indicating that early exposure to structured learning environments may enhance school readiness regardless of age. Therefore, while age is an important factor in school readiness, early learning experiences and developmental support also play a vital role in preparing children for school.

Social-emotional skills and school readiness

Socio-emotional skills are a vital part of school readiness, as they play a crucial role in shaping a child's early academic experiences and overall adjustment to the school environment. Research indicates that children who lack emotional readiness when starting school often struggle with learning, mainly because they have a limited ability to focus and manage attention effectively. Wentzel and Asher (1995) highlighted that children's early academic success is closely tied to their emotional and social skills. Supporting this, Graziano et al. (2007) found that disruptive behavior in the classroom can hinder a child's ability to meet curriculum goals, affecting not just their learning but also the overall classroom environment. Research indicates that deficits in social competence are strongly linked to higher levels of behavioral problems (Hukkelberg et al., 2019). This relationship is further supported by decades of evidence showing the negative consequences of early social skills deficits. Classic studies by Dodge et al. (1990) and Ladd and Profilet (1996) revealed that limited emotional understanding, poor social problem-solving, and low prosocial behavior in early childhood predicted increased aggression, peer rejection, and academic difficulties. Teachers also recognize the importance of these skills, as reflected in the findings of Hindman et al. (2010), who reported that educators view social competence, including behavior regulation, cooperation with peers, and openness to learning from others, as essential for school readiness. These competencies manifest in behaviors such as confidence, friendliness, attentiveness, effective communication, and the ability to build positive peer relationships. Further enforcing this view, Peth-Pierce (2000) identified specific traits such as persistence in challenging tasks, respectful communication, the ability to follow instructions, and strong student-teacher bonds as key predictors of school readiness. Collectively, these socio-emotional traits not only ease the transition into school but also support long-term academic and personal growth. Therefore, the development of socio-emotional skills is a vital component of school readiness, as it not only facilitates smoother adjustment to the school environment but also lays the foundation for sustained academic success and healthy social relationships.

Play and School Readiness

NEP 2020 emphasizes the importance of play in early childhood education by recommending the development of a three-month play-based school preparation module. This recommendation reflects the growing recognition that play is a powerful medium for fostering the holistic development of children. According to the Ministry of Education (2022), the National Curriculum Framework for the Foundational Stage emphasizes that children who spend most of their time engaging in play tend to demonstrate higher levels of school readiness. Play is instrumental in stimulating all five senses and allows children to naturally explore their environment, as it aligns with their inherent tendency to move, interact, and express themselves freely. Through play, children can communicate their thoughts and emotions, build social relationships, and adopt healthy habits. Akhtar and Bilal (2018) also observed that children who enjoy playing with peers are better at making friends and adjusting to the school setting, further underlining the social-emotional benefits of play. At the foundational stage, learning through play is particularly effective as children prefer

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hands-on experiences that involve manipulation, exploration, and experimentation (National Council of Educational Research and Training [NCERT], 2023). Thus, play not only enriches early learning experiences but also lays a strong foundation for school readiness and lifelong learning.

School factors

Physical features of the classroom and school readiness

Among the many factors shaping school readiness, the physical characteristics of the classroom, such as space, seating, lighting, and resources, are particularly significant, as they set the stage for children's early adjustment to school (NCERT, 2022). A school's physical environment comprises its buildings, classroom furnishings, equipment, learning resources, laboratories, libraries, and playgrounds (Ene-Obong et al., 2012). It recommends that classrooms should be clean, well-ventilated, and well-lit, with sufficient resources and organized materials that promote both accessibility and safety. A study by Samanta et al. (2017) found a significant positive correlation between the quality of physical facilities and classroom performance, as well as levels of school readiness, underscoring the importance of infrastructure in early education. Furthermore, the NCERT (2023) recommends constructing school buildings with durable materials while prioritizing the safety of children. It suggests enclosing schools with protective walls and equipping them with secure gates, alongside ample safe spaces for play and group activities. These provisions aim to create an environment that is not only conducive to learning but also ensures the well-being of students. Supporting this perspective, a study by Green et al. (2011) found that inadequate academic support, overcrowded classrooms, and the inability to manage the demands of formal education contribute to students' struggles in school, often leading to poor academic performance. In another study, conducted by Shaari and Ahmad (2016), it was found that a link exists between the physical learning environment and children's school readiness. Thus, research shows that a well-structured and safe physical environment is not merely supportive but essential for enhancing children's adjustment, performance, and readiness for school.

Attendance and school readiness

Regular school attendance is typically regarded as an indication of a child's healthy growth, but frequent absences are typically associated with challenges or issues. Indeed, a child's well-being is strongly correlated with their attendance at school, both on an individual basis and in larger institutions like families and schools. A study conducted by Lee et al. (2018) found that children who attended 20 hours per week at Head Start or pre-kindergarten performed better in reading skills. In their research report, Lipsey et al. (2015) demonstrated that for decades, high-quality early learning has had a significant impact on students' academic and socio-emotional readiness for school, with effects lasting anywhere from six months to a year. Di Caprera (2016) conducted a study investigating the causal effect of childcare attendance on children's school outcomes, demonstrating that attendance has a positive influence on school achievements in mathematics and language, thereby supporting the notion that childcare attendance affects school readiness. These studies collectively demonstrate that regular attendance at school, especially in a high-quality early learning environment, is essential for fostering children's academic proficiency, socio-emotional growth, and general preparedness for school. Engaging in regular activities not only improves learning results right away but also lays the groundwork for future success.

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Teachers and school readiness

Research consistently shows that teachers play a crucial role in shaping young children's school readiness and their adjustment to the classroom. The quality of the teacher-child relationship greatly influences children's early educational experiences. Studies have shown that children who share warm, supportive, and close relationships with their teachers tend to have fewer behavioral issues, enjoy school more, and perform better academically compared to those with more conflicted or dependent relationships with their teachers (Ladd & Burges, 2001). These positive outcomes highlight the importance of fostering emotionally supportive teacher-child interactions in early education settings. Supporting this, a study by Palermo et al. (2007) found that teacher training and professional development focused on building strong teacher-child relationships can significantly enhance preschoolers' academic readiness by promoting better social adaptation. When teachers are equipped with the skills to form close, nurturing bonds with their students, it creates a secure and encouraging learning environment that supports both emotional and academic growth. Further supporting these findings, Birch and Ladd (1997) also noted that teacher-child closeness was positively linked to kindergarteners' enjoyment of school, sense of independence, and academic achievement. This suggests that the emotional climate of the classroom, largely shaped by the teacher, plays a significant role in motivating young learners and laying the foundation for long-term educational success. While some studies have linked less teacher-child closeness to internalizing problems, externalizing problems have generally been linked to more conflict and sometimes less closeness in the teacher-child interaction (Birch & Ladd, 1998; Henricsson & Rydell, 2004).

These studies emphasize the significant influence early teacher-child relationships have on a child's readiness for school, not only by boosting cognitive skills but also by fostering behavioral, emotional, and social development. Investing in teacher training and relationship-building strategies is therefore essential for creating a classroom environment that truly supports every child's successful transition into formal education.

Recommendations

1. Early learning programs should provide comprehensive opportunities that support the growth of the mind, emotions, social skills, language, and physical abilities. A solid foundation during these key years prepares children for long-term success.
2. Regular attendance in preschool is essential for ensuring readiness. Communities and schools should actively promote participation and provide timely interventions for children showing early signs of learning or developmental difficulties.
3. Besides academics, schools, teachers, and parents should focus on holistic development, which includes language skills, mental ability, physical fitness, and social-emotional growth.
4. Enhance teacher-child relationships through professional development to foster warm, supportive interactions that boost school readiness in both academic and emotional areas.
5. Schools need to focus on establishing safe and supportive physical learning environments. Classrooms should be kept clean, well-ventilated, and well-lit to ensure a healthy and productive learning environment. They must also provide age-appropriate and engaging resources that stimulate curiosity, encourage active involvement, and foster the development of skills necessary for school readiness.

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- Promoting play-based and experiential learning at an early age can foster creativity, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills and prepare students for academic success.
- Strengthen parent and community support programs that guide families in preparing for school, ensuring active parental involvement in the readiness process.

CONCLUSION

This review confirms that school readiness is a complex and evolving concept shaped by a child's development across multiple domains, including cognitive, physical, social-emotional, and language domains, as well as the quality of the environments they experience, such as home, school, and community settings. The early years, particularly between the ages of 6 and 8, are crucial for brain development and emotional and social growth. Studies show that factors like age, social-emotional skills, hands-on learning experiences, and regular school attendance are all crucial for preparing young children for structured learning. Children who miss out on these experiences, especially those from underprivileged backgrounds, are more likely to face challenges like poor academic performance, behavioral issues, grade repetition, or even dropping out of school. These initiatives advocate for early structured learning opportunities, play-based education, and stronger connections between homes, schools, and communities. Improving school readiness is essential not only for each child's success but also for creating a fair, inclusive, and high-quality educational system nationwide.

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Acknowledgment

The author(s) appreciates all those who participated in the study and helped to facilitate the research process.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

How to cite this article: Dakpe, O. & Lakshmi, Y.V. (2026). Understanding School Readiness in the Early Years: A Review of Factors, Importance, and Implications. *International Journal of Indian Psychology*, 14(1), 3274-3285. DIP:18.01.327.20261401, DOI:10.25215/1401.327