

## Chapter 12

# Kindergarten: Ready or Not Here We Come?

**IEP Time.** It may be spring but parents of children with autism have *fall* on their minds as they plan for the upcoming school year. Thousands of IEP (Individualized Education Plan) meetings that will determine the children's future school placements and educational goals are being scheduled all over the country. (See *Resources: Know Your Child's Educational Rights!*) That's when my office phone starts ringing off the hook. Amy, my assistant, says 'Everybody's freaking out.' For five and six year old children with autism, the transition from pre-school to kindergarten has begun!

So I wasn't surprised when Jacob Grant's chart appeared on my desk with an urgent telephone note:

4/15. Julie Grant called. She has to decide about Jacob's school placement soon. Please call.

During the last visit, I had advised Julie Grant to get in touch with the school. She hadn't heard anything yet about his IEP meeting (Individualized Education Plan—see Chapter 5) and so didn't know what the school district's plans were for Jacob in the fall. He was turning six in October (he'd only be five when school started in September) and, even though he had made wonderful progress over the last two years, I didn't think he was ready to leave his special education pre-school program yet and move on to kindergarten.

### ***Age Does Not Equal Readiness***

**Me:** "Hello, Julie? Rick Solomon here."

**Mom:** "Oh Dr. Solomon, I am so sorry to bother you so soon after we saw you but I did what you said and Jacob's pre-school teacher said the team is going to

recommend that Jacob go to a full day kindergarten in the fall!"

**Me:** "I'm glad you called. This is an important discussion."

**Mom:** "If Jacob could go to a regular kindergarten in the fall, that would be a dream come true. I remember you said two years ago that you thought Jacob could be in a regular kindergarten program with regular kids."

**Me:** "That would be great. But we just have to make sure he's ready."

**Mom:** "I'm really torn. In a way I'm excited that they think he's ready for kindergarten but I'm also scared that he's not really ready."

As I talk to Julie I'm having the following considerations: Many of the children I see with higher functioning autism *are* truly ready for kindergarten. Others with more severe forms of autism (e.g. autistic disorder) clearly will *not* be ready to function well in a regular elementary school classroom and will need to go to special education programming within the elementary school.

Jacob is somewhere between these two extremes. Even though he has made major gains, he is not quite ready yet for kindergarten. For a child like him I almost always recommend waiting as long as legally possible—this means age 6 *before* September in most states—before starting kindergarten. But I don't want to upset Julie Grant; she is so hopeful about Jacob going to kindergarten. If worse comes to worse and the child goes to kindergarten but doesn't do well, I will recommend repeating kindergarten for the readiness reasons I'll explain below.

**Me** (looking at his chart): "Well, I see that Jacob will still be five in September, thank

goodness. So if we want to keep him in pre-school we can. Our options are still open.”

**Mom:** “But doesn’t he *have* to go if that’s what the school decides?”

**Me:** “Not if it doesn’t make sense. Remember that discussion we had way back in the beginning about the IDEA laws (see Chapter 5)?”

**Mom:** “Not really.”

**Me:** “The single most important thing I can tell you about schools and the IEP process is that parents have a lot of power within the law. (See *Resources*) Sometimes the schools just move the children on because of their age and at five years old Jacob *could* go to kindergarten. He’s old enough but *age does not equal readiness*. *What matters is that he’s ready, not how old he is!* In other words, he has the legal right to one more year in pre-school. If he’s not ready, kindergarten—especially a full day of kindergarten—could be very stressful for him and it could hurt his progress.”

**Stress!** As if the rushed early morning routines, the bus rides, the new (and noisy!) classrooms, and the new teachers & students aren’t enough stress. There are also major new demands on the child to comply socially and perform academically in a kindergarten setting (see the *Seven Habits of Highly Successful Kindergarteners—Chapter 15*). And since children with autism want to ‘keep the world the same’, all these demands are all the more stressful.

**Mom:** “I’m glad we’re talking about this. I was feeling anxious about Jacob going to kindergarten.”

**Me:** “I would trust your gut. I’ve seen far too many kids develop major mood changes, sleeplessness, anxiety, and even aggression when they go to kindergarten too soon.”

**Mom:** “So what should we do?”

**Me:** “Let’s just go through this systematically Julie and then we’ll make a decision.

- The first issue is *functional readiness*. Has Jacob accomplished his *pre-school goals*? I’ve got a handy dandy checklist of functional skills that Jacob needs to have accomplished first (see below).
- Then we’ll talk about whether Jacob can achieve key kindergarten *milestones*—I call them the ‘Seven Habits of Highly Successful Kindergarteners’.
- Finally, I have a list of *basic supports* that Jacob (or any child for that matter) would need to function in a demanding school setting—especially if there are questions about readiness.

And these checklists can serve you as key IEP goals for Jacob, whether he stays in pre-school or goes to kindergarten.”

### ***Children Who Are Not Ready.***

**Me:** “I know you’re excited about Jacob going to a regular kindergarten but Julie *there are very few times in a child’s life when he can gain a year of development on his peers.*”

**Mom:** “But then he’d be older than the other kids.”

**Me:** “Just a little. But what difference does it make to his friends if he’s five or six? I’ll say it again: What matters is that he’s ready, not how old he is!”

**Mom:** “True.”

**Me:** “But let’s discuss it and we’ll decide. You’re the boss. I’ll support whatever you want to do.”

**Mom:** “I want to do what’s right for Jacob.”

So what does ‘ready’ really mean? As I explain to Julie Grant there are *three forms of readiness*: behavioral, academic and functional readiness.

**Me:** “If you don’t mind I’d like to give you two extreme examples of children;

one who is behaviorally ready and one who is academically ready but neither of them is *functionally* ready.”

**Mom:** “Okay.”

**Me:** “*Behavioral readiness* is the least demanding on the child (though not necessarily easy!) and simply means that the child can *behave* for 2-3 hours for a half day or 6 hours for a full day in the kindergarten setting without repeatedly disturbing or disrupting the class routine.

I had a patient I’ll call Johnny whose parents came to me when he was already six. He had pretty severe autism—no words and little ability to interact. But his family wanted him *fully included* in kindergarten which meant in his case that he stays in the regular classroom all day with a paraprofessional helper (sometimes called a *parapro*, *para*, and/or *aide*) with him at all times. I didn’t really think it was a good idea but that’s what the family wanted. Johnny would sit but he rocked and occasionally hummed throughout the 2-3 hours of the morning kindergarten class. He moved wherever his parapro took him without really participating. He didn’t acknowledge the other children. He left class for occupational therapy and speech therapy, went out to the playground where he wandered around alone. If he became anxious and his humming got too loud, he was allowed to flip through office equipment catalogues page by page, which was one of his favorite repetitive behaviors. Outside of reminders to keep his humming down and sit down when he began to wander, he behaved himself for the whole year—almost.”

**Mom:** “What do you mean almost?”

**Me:** “Toward the end of the year, he started misbehaving and the parents finally agreed to move him to a more restrictive, self-contained classroom.”

**Mom:** “Do you think Jacob is behaviorally ready? He sounds like a lot higher functioning than Johnny.”

**Me:** “Well, Jacob *is* a lot higher functioning but if the classroom demands are too high and he doesn’t understand what’s going on he could get bored and then he might have trouble sitting. It might not be fun or meaningful for him. Then he might misbehave and not be *behaviorally ready*.”

**Mom:** “I see what you mean. And Jacob is not one to take things lying down.”

**Me:** “Right, so behaviorally he might be a problem. OK. Let me tell you about another type of kid, I’ll call him Joey. Joey seemed to be *academically* ready. At age 5 he had been reading for two years! He could count, knew his name, and could recite his address and telephone number on command. He knew his colors, numbers, and shapes. But Joey, despite his apparent academic readiness, was often in his own world. He was not very attentive to the environment. He ‘scripted’ (repeated, memorized songs and dialog) from his favorite TV show—*The Wiggles*—and had to be prompted to go along with the group by his parapro.”

**Mom:** “He needed a parapro too?”

**Me:** “Yep. He didn’t really find classroom activities very interesting, so he would just get up and wander off and go play with trains or cars in the back of the room. He was misbehaving; his para had to bring him back. And he was easily overwhelmed by the noise and chaos of his classmates and would occasionally bolt for the door. So you could say that Joey was *academically* ready but not *behaviorally* or *functionally* ready.”

**Mom:** “I think Jacob falls somewhere in between. Both those kids sounded like they weren’t as connected as Jacob.”

**Me:** “And that gets us to ‘functional’ readiness. In order to truly succeed in kindergarten—which is by the way becoming much more demanding (it’s like

the new first grade)—a child has to be ready behaviorally, academically, and functionally.”

### **Functional Readiness.**

**Me:** “*Functional* means able to relate to people (i.e. teachers, school personnel, and peers) in a developmentally and socially appropriate way. A child can behave by sitting quietly; a child can perform academic skills; but if the child cannot connect to the teacher and other children, if the child cannot understand how to communicate, then he or she isn’t going to *function* very well in a school classroom. That’s why we’ve been working so hard with Jacob on the functional developmental levels.

From the school’s perspective sending a child to kindergarten based on age alone can turn out to be a big mistake. *In order for children to really learn, kindergarten activities must be interesting and meaningful to them.* The typical child finds school fun and not too hard. And one of the teacher’s main jobs is challenge the children at just the right level. Classroom activities should not be too demanding or too easy or boring for the child. When the challenge is *just right* this is called being in *The Zone of Proximal Development.*”

**Mom:** “I think you mentioned this to me before but honestly I don’t remember what it was about. I’m sorry.”

### **The Zone of Proximal Development**

**Me:** “You remember the *Comfort Zone*?”

**Mom:** “That term I know. Amber talks about Jacob’s *Comfort Zone* a lot during home visits. That’s when Jacob goes into his own world, right?”

**Me:** “Right. Well there was a brilliant developmental psychologist by the name of Vgotsky who developed a theory of learning at the turn of the last century that’s still influential today (See *Resources: Vgotsky*). What he said is that there are

three zones of development, which can guide us to understand *school readiness.*

The **first zone** is the *Comfort Zone*, where the child is comfortable doing what he already knows (Figure 1 below). For children with autism this is *what the child will do when you let them do whatever they want to do.* For example, Jacob loves to line up cars or watching the same video or flip through the same books.”

**Mom:** “He used to love to watch the door open and close. Drove us crazy. But he’s doing all those things a lot less now.”

**Me:** “Yep, that’s *Comfort Zone* behavior. When children with autism are in their *Comfort Zones*, they are not learning very much. Two *pre-school* indications of functional readiness for children on the spectrum are:

- That they *turn consistently to their names.*
- And they are *connected* with the social environment most of the time.

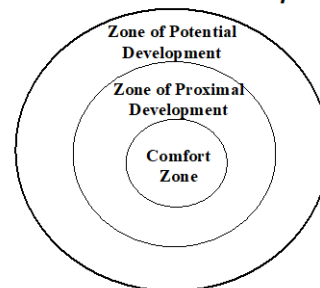
If your child is ‘stuck’ inside their *Comfort Zone* and

- not paying attention to the environment,
- not easily engaged,
- not able to interact in a back and forth fashion

then your child is not going to be functionally ready for kindergarten.

Figure 1.

### **Reaching the Child’s Potential Zone of Proximal Development**



Vygotsky's **second zone** is where the best learning happens—the *Zone of Proximal Development*. You know your child is in this zone when:

- They are attentive, engaged, excited, happy and *participating with others*.

When I am doing a classroom observation of a child on the spectrum, I am looking to see if the kindergarten setting is:

- *Interesting and engaging* to the child most of the time.

If not, if the activities of the day—following a schedule of events, sitting attentively in circle time, cutting and pasting, following oral instructions—seem irrelevant, and the child is disconnected, then the curriculum is in the child's *Zone of Potential Development*.

This is Vygotsky's third zone—the *Zone of Potential Development*. In one sense it means that this is where the child has potential to learn but it also means that the learning is too hard and 'over the child's head'. And I'm afraid there are way too many children who don't 'get' school because they are in their *Comfort Zones* and school activities are way over their heads i.e. in their *Zone of Potential Development*."

**Mom:** "And you're thinking that kindergarten is going to be over his head in Jacob's. . ."

**Me:** "*Zone of Potential Development*. He'd need help in kindergarten. He'd need to be prompted to do this and that by aides in the classroom. I'm also worried that he'd just be 'going along' and not really learning a lot. In short, I don't think he'd be in his *Zone of Proximal Development*."

**Mom:** "Those concepts are very helpful. I'm beginning to see that buying another year for Jacob would give him a huge advantage developmentally."

**Me:** "I'm thinking that way too."

**Mom:** "So what do we need to do to get Jacob truly ready for kindergarten?"

**Me:** "We're doing it. Jacob is getting ready by marching up the Functional Developmental Levels of the PLAY Project. And he *is* marching. I mean look how far Jacob has come over the last year."

**Mom:** "When I look back on it, it is amazing. Even my sister who hasn't seen him since last Christmas noticed the huge change."

**Me:** "He used to be in his own world (FDL I) and now he's *with us* almost all the time. He used to be hard to engage (FDL II) and wouldn't even turn to his name."

**Mom:** "Now he won't leave us alone!"

**Me:** "That's great two-way communication (FDL III). And he used to have trouble understanding even the simplest requests."

**Mom:** "Now he understands all of his routines. The other day I told Jim I had to get some eggs and milk. Jacob overheard me and showed up at the door with his shoes on!"

**Me:** "He wanted to go to the store too. That shows real problem solving abilities!"

**Mom:** "And recently he's been following some of those one step commands you've been telling about. And the number of words is really increasing."

**Me:** "Really? You didn't tell me that!"

#### Functional Developmental Levels

- Self regulation and shared attention (FDL I)
- Engagement (FDL II)
- Two-way Communication (FDL III)
- Complex two-way Communication (FDL IV)
- Shared Meanings & Symbolic Play (FDL V)
- Emotional Thinking (FDL VI)

That's FDL IV! What Stanley Greenspan (See FDL list above) maintains is that all of us have to achieve and maintain all of these FDLs all the time to function in a given social setting."

In other words, if a child cannot stay attentive and engaged he's not going to learn. If he cannot handle the noise and chaos of a typical kindergarten setting and stay *regulated*; if he is impulsive and easily upset by stress or the demands of a typical kindergarten curriculum, then he will end up becoming a 'behavior problem' for the teacher when, really, his sensory motor system simply can't handle the overload. If he cannot initiate and sustain interactions with others, he's not going to function. If he cannot understand and connect ideas, he's not going to make sense of a complex setting like kindergarten.

So Jacob is at a crucial turning point (see next visit) in his climb up the functional developmental ladder.

**Mom:** "So what FDL does Jacob have to get to in order to be *truly ready* (not just behaviorally or academically ready) for inclusion in a regular kindergarten program without aide support?"

**Me:** "At a minimum he should be at a solid FDL 5 to early FDL 6 (see list below). He should be able to

- Pay attention and stay engaged with people for long periods of time
- Understand most of what people say to them,
- Be able to carry on simple back and forth conversations with adults and their peers,
- Talk in short 3-5 word sentences, and
- Have some imaginative play abilities."

### *Kindergarten Readiness Checklist For Children with Autism*

- Turns to name consistently.
- Can answer: 'What are you doing?' Or 'What do you want for lunch?'
- Speaks in sentences of 3-5 words or more.
- Follows two to three step commands.
- Pretends: Doctor, tea party, etc.
- Points to small body parts.
- Plays simple games: Hide and seek, Candyland.
- Beginning to ask and answer 'why' questions.
- Recalls 2-3 events from their day.

**Mom:** "Jacob's not quite there yet."

**Me:** "I agree."

**Me:** "So I don't think he's likely to do well in kindergarten without substantial support."

**Mom:** "You mean an aide."

**Me:** "An aide or even spending time in a resource room with a special ed teacher. I'm most concerned that the school could recommend a self-contained classroom."

Note: It is important to understand that different states in U.S. have different approaches to the process called *inclusion* i.e. how do we include a child with special educational needs in a classroom setting? In some states *all* children are in a general education setting all the time. This is called *full inclusion*. In many states however, this model is hard to achieve and very expensive so the special education school districts may opt for *partial inclusion* (i.e. some time in general education and some time in more *restrictive* environments like *resource rooms* (see also Chapter 5). In some states children with special needs are placed in *self-contained classrooms* (the *most restrictive environments*) where the child is only with other children with disabilities. The child may be *mainstreamed* only for such things as lunch, recess, and gym.

**Mom:** "And put Jacob in a classroom only with other kids with autism?!"

**Me:** "Yep."

**Mom:** "I don't want that at all."

**Me:** "Don't worry. Remember, you have the power by law to have Jacob in the *least restrictive environment*."

**Mom:** "I think we'll keep him in pre-school another year."

**Me:** "I think that's smart, mom."

**Summary:**

- It's IEP time. The Grants are facing a choice: send Jacob to kindergarten or hold him back another year in pre-school.
- Kindergarten may be too stressful for children with ASD if they are not ready.
- I argue that *age does not equal readiness* and define what I mean by functional readiness.
- Vgotsky's three zones of learning and Greenspan's Functional Developmental Levels help us decide where Jacob is at.
- I provide a Kindergarten Readiness Checklist.
- Guess what we decide to do!

**Resources:**

- [\*Know Your Child's Educational Rights! Learn about the law.\*](#)
- [\*Vgotsky: Zone of Proximal Development\*](#)

**Coming Up Next:**

Jacob is reaching 'The Turning Point' and moving up the functional levels into FDL IV!