When to send your child to preschool or school

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The decision on when to start your child at preschool is very significant, because it effectively determines when your child will start school. Parents need to be thinking ‘when will be the right time for my child to start school?’ and then work back from there as opposed to starting kinder as soon as their child is eligible and dealing with the start of school later.

Sometimes, parents start their child in a 3 year old kinder program as soon as they turn 3, but by the end of 4 year old kinder, realise that their child isn’t ready to go to start school. At that point, it’s very difficult to delay starting school, because having a second year of 4 year old kinder is not easy or straightforward. One of the reasons for this is the regulations the Government has set down relating to funding:

• Each child can receive one year of funded kindergarten: the year before a child begins school
• Children must reach the age of 4 by April 30 in the funded preschool year
• Children must reach the age of 5 by April 30 in the year they start school
• Children are not legally required to attend school until the year which they turn six

There is a lot of room for parental choice in these regulations, and they are not designed to be guidelines for a child's readiness to start preschool or school. However, parents need to be aware of the financial implications of their decisions: if a child needs a second year of 4 year old kinder, in nearly all cases, it must be funded by the family. In occasional situations, the Government will fund a second year of preschool, but this is based on the teacher assessing that the child is experiencing delays in 2 developmental areas. A significant number of steps are required to determine this, including discussions with the family, detailed plans for specific learning and development in the identified areas of delay, involvement of the Preschool Field Officer and the child's Maternal Health nurse or doctor. The result is that if the child is deemed ineligible for a second year of funding, the family must self-fund the additional year – a cost of approximately $1,700 - $2,000 on top of the kinder fees.

When thinking about preschool and then school you need to consider your child based on his/her personality, development and maturity, because as we know, all children develop at different rates. For some children waiting an extra year may mean the difference between being ‘okay’ at school and ‘thriving’ at school. For other children parents generally know that their child is ready for that next big step and they too are confident and ready to guide this transition.

Assessing your child’s readiness for 4-5 year old preschool and school the following year

Even though your child may enjoy preschool and appears to be coping in day to day activities, parents should be aware of the challenges of school the following year (and the years to follow).

There are a number of significant differences between school and preschool:

• At school, children need to be independent as they play with other children in the playground and solve problems and disputes in a friendly manner. They must look after their own belongings and go the toilet by themselves. These skills are always taught and encouraged at preschool but adult support is more readily accessible.
Activities at preschool are usually free choice, play based and generally open ended. School activities are generally task-centred and require extended concentration on specific activities.

The number and age of children your child will mix with

The physical environment including the number of classrooms and buildings as well as the school boundaries

Working and talking with different teachers and support staff

and importantly the number of hours your child will spend at school.

The following information (taken from the Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework) outlines the developmental requirements recommended for school readiness. Although it is difficult to predict how much growth and development your child will undergo during 4 year old kinder, it’s helpful to be aware of the skills required for a child to thrive in the school environment, when you are determining the right time to start 4 year old kinder.

Outcome 1: Children have a strong sense of identity.
- Can build secure attachments with educators.
- Can communicate their needs for comfort and assistance.
- Openly express their feelings and ideas and can demonstrate an increasing capacity for self-regulating emotions.
- Initiate and engage in play and conversation with peers and educators.
- Persist when faced with challenges and when first attempts are not successful.

Outcome 2: Children are connected with and contribute to their world
- Listen to other’s ideas and respect differences between people.
- Become aware of ways in which people are included or excluded from physical and social environments.
- Use play to investigate, project and explore new ideas.
- Develop the ability to recognise unfairness and bias and the capacity to act with compassion and kindness.
- Explore relationships with other living and non-living things and observe, notice and respond to change.

Outcome 3: Children have a strong sense of wellbeing
- Seek out and accept new challenges, make new discoveries and celebrate their own efforts and achievements and those of others.
- Increasingly cooperate and work collaboratively with others.
- Recognise and communicate their bodily needs (for example thirst, hunger, rest, comfort, physical activity).
- Manipulate equipment and manage tools with increasing competence, skills and purpose to explore and respond to their world.

Outcome 4: Children are confident and involved learners
- Express wonder and interest in their environment and are curious and enthusiastic participants in their learning.
- Apply a wide variety of thinking strategies to engage with situations and solve problems and adapt these to new situations.
- Participate in a variety of rich and meaningful inquiry-based experiences.

Outcome 5: Children are effective communicators
- Engage in enjoyable two-way interactions verbally and non-verbally with others.
- Contribute and give their ideas in play, small and large group discussion.
- Show increasing knowledge, understanding and skill in conveying meaning.
- Being to understand and engage with written and oral literacy and numeracy concepts.

Recommendations of further reading:
- What's the Hurry? Kathy Walker
- Raising Boys. Steve Biddulph

References
DEECD / VCAA Victorian Early Years Learning and Developmental Framework
DEECD The Kindergarten Guide 2013
DEECD Does my child need a second year of Kindergarten?