

Countdown to KINDERGARTEN

The Smart Kids Guide to Reading Readiness

Reading is the single most important skill your child will learn in school. Kids who enter kindergarten with lots of early language experiences—talking, listening, word-play, knowing letters and how books work—have a head start on the road to reading.

Countdown to Kindergarten (C2K) is the pre-K program that gives your child these valuable experiences, along with the social and emotional skills to help them stay focused, calm, and ready to learn.

Because parents play a critical role in preparing children for school, C2K provides you with the tools to help your child develop the skills they'll need for kindergarten success.

Topics & Skills

C2K is an “evidence-based” program, which means it has been developed using the most up-to-date research available. It is organized into the following sections, each one representing an important pre-reading skill:

Sounds in Language	Writing	Emotions
The Alphabet	Conversations	Struggling Learners

The sections are presented in sequential order, allowing you to build on your child’s knowledge as you go through the program. Each section follows a similar pattern that includes a brief explanation, a video demonstration to guide you, and suggested activities intended to be fun and engaging. The last section offers guidance if you find your child is struggling with the other sections.

Trust Yourself

Keep in mind that there are many different ways to practice these essential skills, so if your child is not enjoying an activity, try another. You know your child better than anyone, so don’t be afraid to try new and different approaches!

“Almost all children learn to speak naturally; reading and writing must be taught.” – **Dr. Reid Lyon**

1. Sounds in Language

Introducing Beginning Sounds

As children play with sounds in language, they begin to understand that there are letters of the alphabet that are used to spell those sounds. Songs, games and nursery rhymes give children a chance to discover the joy and excitement of the words that they hear and speak. These activities also prepare them for learning to read and write.

- By age 4, children develop rhyme and syllable awareness. For example, they can tell you that *chairs* rhymes with *bears*. They can also tell you that their name, Rylee, has 2 claps: Ry – lee. (A clap is also called a syllable).
- By age 5, they can identify words that have the same first sound. For example, they can tell you that *Mommy* and *moon* begin with the sound /mmmmm/.

The following activities will help prepare your child to think about words in spoken language.

Rhyming Activities

Sing rhyming songs, read rhyming stories, and recite nursery rhymes

When you get to the rhyming words emphasize them.

Jack and *Jill*
went up the *hill*
to fetch a pail of water
Jack fell *down*
and broke his *crown*
and Jill came tumbling after

Fill in the rhyming word

With repetition your child will eventually become familiar with the rhymes. Once that happens, let them fill in the rhyming word.

Jack and *Jill*
went up the _____

Humpty Dumpty sat on a *wall*
Humpty Dumpty had a great _____

Play silly rhyming games

As your child becomes familiar with rhyming, try these options.

Rhyme your child's name with a real or pretend word that starts with a different letter. For example: David *Bavid*, Brookie *Cookie*, Juan *Don*.

Or say a simple word your child is familiar with and ask them for a word that rhymes. Their words don't even have to be real words.

You say "cat"; they may say "hat"; you say "bat"; they may say "pat" or "lat". Keep the game going as long as the real or pretend words rhyme, then start all over with a new word.

Counting Syllables

Explain to your child that words are made up of "big chunks" of sounds called syllables. Some words such as cat and dog have one chunk; others have two chunks, such as bunny and mommy; and some even have three or more chunks, such as banana and watermelon. Use this activity to help your child learn to listen for chunks of sounds (syllables):

Clap out syllables

Using words that are familiar to your child, clap out the number of syllables together. To make sure they understand, give one or two examples. Say the word slowly and clap for each syllable.

/cat/ (clap)

/ti/ (clap), **/ger/** (clap)

/ba/ (clap), **/gel/** (clap)

Using the method you demonstrated, together with your child, clap out several words with different numbers of syllables.

Kids love to clap and will want to play this game often. Having them clap out the syllables in their name (and the names of others they know) will be especially fun!

Here are some words to get you started. Add your own as play continues.

bat, hat, cat, dog, log, cow

toothbrush, twinkle, sister, brother

animal, dinosaur, butterfly, potato, lemonade

Beginning Sounds

Another way to prepare your preschooler to learn to read is to play with the sounds of words. Focusing on the first sound in words will help your child pay attention to the sounds that their mouth makes and help them to learn the sounds that go with letters later on. Following are several activities to encourage this skill:

Stretchy sounds

Begin with sounds that you can stretch out. For example, you can stretch out /ssssss/ in sun and soap, and you can stretch out /mmmmm/ in milk and mommy. These sounds are easier for children to separate from the rest of the word.

Prompt your child to “Say a little bit of ssssss-oap.” “Say a little bit of mmmmm-ommy.” Other sounds to try this with include /ffffff/ (as in fffff-riend), /jjjjj/ (as in jjjjj-ump), and /rrrrr/ (as in rrrrr-uby)

Tongue ticklers

Play with one sound over and over again. Here are some examples: For /m/: **Mister Mouse makes a mess munching on melted marshmallows.**

As you say each of the words that begin with /m/, be sure to say each of those words slowly and loudly.

If your child is successful with this one, you can try a tongue tickler that has a different kind of sound at the beginning of the words.

For /p/: **Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers.**

I Spy

Display several objects or picture cards on a table (sock, sun, suitcase, milk, monkey, mitten).

You say, “I spy with my little eye something that begins with the sound /mmmmm/,” and ask your child to pick up a picture card with that sound.

Pro Tip: Play these basic building block word games often with your child. Mixing in new rhymes, words, or sounds with familiar ones is a fun and educational way to help them learn that words are made up of sounds—an important pre-reading skill that will help prepare them to learn to read.

Pro Tip: If your child has difficulty with rhyming, you can still play the syllable and beginning sounds games.

Helpful Resources

Beginning Sounds

- *Rain Play*, by Cynthia Cotton
- *Piggies in the Pumpkin Patch*, by Mary Peterson and Jennifer Rofe

2. The Alphabet

Learning the ABCs

A five-year-old's ability to recognize and name the letters of the alphabet is necessary for learning how to read. Making sure your child has lots of opportunities to play with letters is a fun and effective way to develop this important pre-reading skill. This can be done through alphabet songs, reading and looking at books, and playing games.

- By age 4, many children can point to and name at least 10 or 12 letters of the alphabet. They are also aware that the letters spell sounds that they make with their mouths. For example, "I make the sound /mmmm/ when I see the letter M. M is for Mommy!"
- By age 5, children can begin to match uppercase and lowercase pairs of letters. With guidance, they can continue to identify new letters and can match them with the sounds their mouths make when they say words.

Alphabet Fun

Sing the alphabet song

The most common way to introduce your child to the alphabet is by singing The ABC Song. This will familiarize them with the 26 letters in the alphabet.

Sing the song slowly, pronouncing each letter clearly, especially L-M-N-O-P.

Sung to the tune of "Baa Baa Black Sheep" or "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star" the lyrics are:

A-B-C-D-E-F-G
H-I-J-K
L-M-N-O-P
Q-R-S
T-U-V
W-X
Y and Z

Now I know my ABCs
Next time won't you sing with me

The more exposure, the better. Keep your child interested in letters by watching one or more variations of The Alphabet Song. Here are some favorites:

- [Sesame Street ABC Song](#)
- [Sesame Street ABC Rap](#)

Say the alphabet

To encourage letter recognition, line up a set of uppercase magnetic letters in alphabetical order. After your child has learned the ABC song, ask them to “say” the alphabet. Point to each letter as they say it.

Read an alphabet book

When looking at an alphabet book together, ask your child to name the letter first and then tell you what the picture is. For example, on the first page your child can tell you, “That’s the letter A.” When you ask what the picture is, they’ll say, “It’s an apple.”

As you go through each letter and picture, emphasize the beginning letter and the sound it makes: “Apple starts with the letter A. Apple has the /a/ sound at the beginning.” Keep in mind that some letters, especially the vowels (A E I O U), can have more than one sound. For example, the alphabet might have a picture of an acorn for the letter A.

This game can be played with a set of **simple alphabet picture cards** too.

Match the Letters

For these activities use a set of magnetic letters and an alphabet chart. You can create your own chart by printing letters on posterboard. Use one side of the chart for uppercase letters and the other side for lowercase letters.

The match game

Give your child a few letters to start. Ask them to match the magnetic letters to the letters on the chart. Say “Where does the A go?” Then have your child place the magnetic letter on top of the A on the chart.

Vary the game by playing with a handful of different letters each time. Your child will also enjoy matching the letters in their name.

As your child begins to recognize the letters, draw their attention to letters they know in signs and books. This will be especially fun once they know the letters in their name. For example,

when passing a McDonald's, Maria's mom might say: "There's an M! That letter is the first letter in your name, Maria."

Pro Tip: Using a set of magnetic letters will come in handy for many of these activities. Find a set that has both uppercase and lowercase letters. You can also make your own letter cutouts using cardboard or posterboard.

Pro Tip: When playing with alphabet letters, start by using uppercase letters as children find them easier to recognize than lowercase letters.

Helpful Resources

Books

- *Chicka Chicka Boom Boom*, by Bill Martin, Jr. and John Archambault
- *Eric Carle's ABC*, by Eric Carle
- *Dr. Seuss's ABC*, by Dr. Theodore Seuss
- *B is for Bulldozer, A Construction ABC*, by June Sobel
- *Alligator Alphabet*, by Stella Blackstone and Stephanie Bauer
- *The Letters Are Lost*, by Lisa Campbell Ernst
- *Z Goes Home*, Jon Agee

Online Videos

In these versions of The Alphabet Song your child hears the letters and the sounds the letters make.

- [The Alphabet Song with Jack Hartman](#)
- [Animal Alphabet Move and Groove with Jack Hartman](#)

3. Writing

Beginning Writing Practice

As you prepare your child to learn to read, you are also helping them learn to write. When your preschooler plays with sounds, letters, and the alphabet, they will naturally seek out crayons and markers to draw and write with. A preschooler's writing begins with scribbling and drawing letter-like shapes and will progress to practicing the letters they are learning. Your child will learn that writing has a purpose—something you can encourage through the games and activities below.

- By age 4 many preschoolers can write familiar letters such as those in their name.
- By age 5 many children have the fine motor skills (coordination of the hand muscles) to hold a pencil correctly and maneuver it in ways that are necessary for writing.

Writing Readiness

Show and tell

Young kids mirror what they see at home. When you make a grocery list, write a note to a friend, or email a work colleague, show and tell your child what you're doing. For example, "I'm writing down everything we need at the store." Ask them to make a list too. They can then "read" their list to you while you shop together. These interactions help your child understand that writing is a part of everyday life.

Write their name

Learning how to write their own name is fun and empowering for kids. As your child becomes familiar with the alphabet, have them write their name, using uppercase letters first and then switching to lowercase letters as they learn to recognize the difference.

Connect writing with reading

To help your child understand that they can read the words they write, have them "write" a story (it will look like scribbling) about what they feel, or something they see. Then ask them to "read" you what they wrote.

Writing play

Keep it fun by thinking of new and different ways to “pretend” write. Here are some ideas to get you started:

- Make letter or word art by using fun writing instruments like glitter pens
- Form letters with Play Doh
- Using a finger, draw letters on a baking sheet covered with shaving cream
- Write in the sand with a stick
- Create street art with chalk
- Use an erasable white board or writing tablet and markers to practice letters
- Make bath time fun with special bath-friendly markers.

Get a Grip: Learning to hold a pencil correctly is important when learning to write. This video provides clear instructions on how to teach your child the proper grip. Any time they pick up a writing instrument (crayon, marker, pencil, etc.) check first to make sure their grip is correct, and make adjustments if they’re holding it wrong.

Pro Tip: Having crayons, markers, pencils and paper readily available allows kids to prepare for writing through play. By scribbling, drawing, and tracing, their brain and muscles are learning how to hold and use the tools that form written words.

Pro Tip: Don’t worry if the letters and words are incorrectly formed, misspelled, or illegible. At this stage the aim is simply to expose your child to writing and give them opportunities to practice this new skill.

Pro Tip: Make it a habit to read books together. Frequent exposure to letters, sounds, words, and stories is one of the best ways to help your child learn to read and write—and develop a love of both that can last a lifetime.

Helpful Resources

Online Resources

- [Writing Activities for Your PreK Child](#)
- [Helping Young Children Develop Strong Writing Skills](#)

4. Conversation

Talking & Listening

Talking with your preschooler helps prepare them for kindergarten in several important ways. Through conversation they learn that words have meanings and can be used to express thoughts and feelings. In addition, engaging in two-way communication helps your child understand the world around them, while also encouraging the important skill of listening. All of these experiences are valuable steps in preparing them for kindergarten.

- By ages 3 to 4, children understand the meaning of many words and are able to follow one- or two-step directions. For example, “Put on your coat” or “Get your book and bring it to me so we can read it together.” They can use sentences with 4 or more words.
- By ages 4 to 5, children can hear and understand most of what is said at home and at school and can answer questions about a story that has been read to them. They can also tell a familiar story or list several day’s activities in order.
- By age 5, children speak understandably and in complete sentences with few mistakes. They’re able to put together sentences such as “Can I have a cookie after I finish dinner?” rather than “I want cookie.”

Use these activities to develop your preschooler’s speaking and listening skills.

Small Talk

Any time is talk time

Take advantage of times when you and your preschooler are together without a lot of distractions to have conversations. Look for one-on-one time while in the car, at the grocery store, making dinner, reading a book, or taking a walk.

Ask your child open-ended questions that can’t be answered with a simple “yes” or “no.” Instead of asking, “Did you play games at Blair’s birthday party?” ask, “What games did you play at Blair’s birthday party?”

When your child answers your questions, encourage them to answer the question with a complete sentence. For example, “My favorite game at Blair’s birthday party was Pin the Tail on the Donkey.”

Follow up with other questions to keep the conversation going: “How do you play Pin the Tail on the Donkey?” “What else did you do at the party?” “What would you like to do for your birthday party?” etc.

Stretch out story time

Most children love to be read to. Many love to hear the same story over and over. Whether a new book or an old favorite, use story time to have a conversation. Read slowly, pausing at various times to ask thoughtful questions. “Why do you think Jack is so sad?” “How did the bunny make friends with the squirrel?” etc.

Share picture stories

Draw pictures together with your child, then make up stories about the pictures and tell them to each other.

Finish the sentence

Make up a story together. Start the story by saying, “Once upon a time there was a dog.” Next have your child add a line: “The dog’s name was Rover.” Then you add a line. “Rover got into the neighbor’s yard and...” Have your child tell what happens: “...ate the neighbor’s flowers.” Taking turns, continue the story until you finish it or your child wants to stop. After playing a few times let your child start the activity.

How Books Work

Reading together is the perfect time to introduce your child to how books work.

Show & tell

Start by showing your child the title of the book on the cover and the first page.

As you begin to read the story, take a minute to point out that you read from one side of the book (**the left page**) and then the other side of the book (**the right page**). Next point out that you start at the **top** of a page, and read the words from **left to right, one line at a time** until you reach the **bottom** of the page.

As you read the words, use your finger to point to the word you’re saying. This helps your child understand that words carry the message.

Draw attention to the pictures. This will show your child that the words and pictures work together to tell the story.

Ask leading questions about the illustrations or photos: “Why do you think Amir looks so confused?” To encourage discussion, follow up with one or more questions: “Do you remember a time when you were confused?” “What helped you feel less confused?” “What would help Amir feel less confused?”

Building Listening Skills

Play games that encourage listening

Kids love to play “Simon Says,” (especially when they get to be Simon and turn the tables on you!), and “Red Light, Green Light.” These games allow them to practice listening and following directions.

Model careful listening

Give your child your full attention when they talk to you. Take the time to explain things and answer all their questions.

Explore and discuss interests

Use your child’s interests (bugs, space, animals, etc.) to find informational books you can read to them. Have them tell you or another family member something new that they learned.

On a walk in the park (or at the playground, zoo, or museum) have a two-way conversation about all the interesting things that you notice.

Pro Tip: Any experience your preschooler has is an opportunity to practice talking and listening. The more practice your preschooler has in these areas, the more confident they’ll be to use their talking and listening skills when they get to school.

Pro Tip: Preschoolers often go through a stage where they ask “Why?” repeatedly. But before you tear your hair out and finally answer, “Because I said so!” take a deep breath and instead answer the questions as fully as you can. Curiosity is a valuable trait that should be encouraged. Furthermore, taking the time to provide a thorough response may be all that’s needed to satisfy their inquiring young mind.

Helpful Resources

Books

- *El Perro con Sombrero: A Bilingual Doggy Tale* by Derek Taylor Kent
- *Whistle for Willie* by Ezra Jack Keats
- *Giggle Giggle Quack* by Doreen Cronin
- *A Color of His Own* by Leo Leonni

5. Emotions

Social-Emotional Learning

Just as children learn about sounds, the alphabet, writing, and conversations, they can learn about their feelings. This is called **social-emotional learning (SEL)**, which helps kids stay calm, pay attention, get along with others, and be ready to learn.

SEL begins at home when parents talk to their children about feelings. When children can identify how they feel, they have an easier time controlling their behavior. You can help your child learn SEL skills with the activities in this section.

- By ages 3 to 4 children can identify feelings such as happy, sad, scared, and mad.
- By age 4 children begin to identify how other people feel and show empathy when others are upset.
- With the help of adults, preschoolers begin to develop skills to manage their behavior and control strong feelings.

Naming Feelings

Ask your child how they feel

If they are not ready to describe a feeling, you can say how you think they feel. Ask questions to see if your child agrees: “I’m wondering if you’re feeling sad?” Or “Are you feeling scared right now?”

Show your child that you understand

Listen and accept how your child feels without judgment: “I wonder if you feel sad because you can’t go to the park today. Is that right? I understand, you really wanted to go.”

All feelings are OK, but bad behavior is not OK: “When your little sister takes your toys, I understand that it makes you mad, but hitting her is never OK. Let’s think about what you can do instead if she takes your things again.” Use this as a starting point to help your child learn how to problem-solve to prevent conflict or manage it better.

Be a role model

It’s important for parents to recognize and name their own feelings: “I’m beginning to get frustrated because you are not listening to what I’m saying.”

Be aware of how you express your feelings. Show self-control by not yelling or threatening your child when they do not listen. Your child is learning from your reactions. If they hear an angry voice or hurtful words they will think that's an acceptable response.

Help Your Child Manage BIG Feelings

Self-regulation is the ability to manage emotions, thoughts, and behavior to stay calm, get along with others, and do well in school and in life. Help your child practice these skills until they are able to control big feelings and bad behavior on their own.

Promote self-regulation

Use these activities to help your child manage strong feelings:

- Talk about feelings: “Why are you angry at your friend? What happened that made you so mad?”
- Practice ways to calm down such as taking deep breaths, slowly counting to 10, or doing something physical like jumping jacks, stretching, or shaking their body.
- Find outlets for high energy, for example, playing outdoors (races, catch, hopscotch), turning up the music and having a dance party, going for a brisk walk together, or doing wall push-ups.
- Use quiet activities to take a break until your child is ready to rejoin the family. Examples include drawing or coloring, playing alone with a favorite toy, looking at books, or listening to music.

Books Help Build SEL Skills

Books are a great way to help your child name their feelings, notice and relate to others, and manage BIG feelings when upset.

Draw on your child's experiences

Look for books that are about emotions. Use the pictures on the page or the story itself to begin talking about your child's thoughts and experiences with different feelings: “Do you remember a time when you felt sad?” “When was the last time you felt angry?” “What happened at school today that made you happy?”

Share your feelings

Pointing out your feelings helps your child see that everyone has the same emotions. “The day you were born was the happiest day of my life.” Or “The day I started my new job I was really worried because I didn't know anyone there.”

Use clues to identify feelings

For books about many emotions, when you turn the page to a new picture, ask your child to name the feeling, and talk about how they guessed the right answer. This helps them pay attention to body language and facial expressions.

Next, have some fun! Both of you make a face that expresses the same emotion. If you have a smartphone, take pictures of the faces you make to share with your child. Use the pictures to make a feelings book or feelings poster that your child can use to identify their feelings each day.

Pro Tip: SEL skills can be practiced anytime and anywhere. It does not require anything more than drawing attention to and talking about the many feelings your child experiences or sees daily. SEL can take place with family or friends, in real life or on a screen, in books or songs!

Helpful Resources

Reading

- *The Feelings Book*, by Todd Parr
- *Lots of Feelings*, by Shelly Rotner
- *My Body Sends a Signal: Helping Kids Recognize Emotions and Express Feelings*, by Natalia Maguire
- *The Boy with Big Big Feelings*, by Lee Winn

Online Videos

- [The Feelings Song](#), by Miss Molly
- [Inside Out: Guessing the Feelings](#), by Laia Garcia

6. Struggling Learners

If Your Child is Struggling

As many as 40% of kids have trouble learning to read, but identifying challenges early offers the best opportunity to address issues that might otherwise lead to long-term reading difficulties.

Be aware

As your child's first and most cherished teacher, you play an important role in their preparation for kindergarten. This means that you are also in a position to recognize potential problems about your child's readiness to read. If your child has *ongoing* difficulties with these C2K activities or is not reaching the milestones at the beginning of each section *despite persistent efforts*, it could be an early sign of future reading problems.

Acknowledge concerns

There are many reasons why children have trouble learning to read, including (but not limited to) learning disabilities. Regardless of the reason, it's important that you acknowledge your preschooler's challenges and help get them on track at this early stage. Studies show that appropriate interventions before and/or during kindergarten are highly successful in bringing struggling pre-readers up to grade level by early elementary school. On the other hand, the older a child is, the more difficult it becomes for them to learn to read.

Take action

Educate yourself by exploring the resources below. If you still suspect problems, do not hesitate to consult a speech-language pathologist. To find a certified professional in your area contact the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association's (ASHA) toll-free HELPLINE at [1-800-638-8255](tel:1-800-638-8255). Together, you can develop a plan to help your child become a competent reader. The benefits will pay off for years to come.

Helpful Resources

Online Resources

Reading Rockets is a public media literacy initiative offering information and resources on how young kids learn to read, why so many struggle, and how caring adults can help. If your child is

struggling, these articles are a few of the many on the *Reading Rockets website* that will help you understand the challenges and what you can do to address your child's problems:

- [Why Some Kids Struggle](#)
- [Recognize Early Signs of Trouble](#)
- [Early Identification of Speech-Language Delays & Disorders](#)
- [Helping Struggling Readers](#)
- [Top 10 Things You Should Know About Reading](#)
- [Preschool Reading Screener](#)

Older Kids with Reading Problems

For school-age children with reading problems, explore C2K's parent company, *Smart Kids with Learning Disabilities*. Smart Kids mission is to help children with learning and attention differences reach their full potential by inspiring, educating and empowering parents to help their children succeed.

Who We Are

The Countdown to Kindergarten program was developed by Jane Ross, Founder and former Executive Director of *Smart Kids with Learning Disabilities*®, a non-profit organization dedicated to helping children with learning and attention differences reach their full potential. It was created in collaboration with leading experts in the fields of reading and social-emotional learning:

Margie B. Gillis, Ed.D is a nationally renowned literacy expert and a Certified Academic Language Therapist (CALT) specializing in reading and addressing reading challenges. She is the founder and president of [Literacy How](#), a non-profit organization that trains administrators and teachers in research-based reading instruction. Dr. Gillis is also an affiliate of the [Haskins Global Literacy Hub](#) at the Yale Child Study Center, and a member of the *Smart Kids with Learning Disabilities*® Professional Advisory Board.

Judy Grossman, DrPH, OTR is the Associate Director of the Center for the Developing Child and Family at the [Ackerman Institute for the Family](#). She is also an adjunct faculty member at NYU and consultant to community agencies regarding family resilience, mental health consultation, and preschool children with disabilities. Dr. Grossman is a member of the *Smart Kids with Learning Disabilities*® Board of Directors, Professional Advisory Board, and Chair of the C2K Program Committee.

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