

What do they mean by readiness?

The government's business plan for the next five years mentions a child's 'readiness' for school, a phrase that is being used more and more by the education department. It is a dangerous and confusing term.



Wendy Ellyatt

is an independent writer and researcher specialising in the early years. She is the founder of The Unique Child Network
www.uniquechildnetwork.ning.com
 and editor of the OpenEYE Campaign newsletter

HERE IS a great deal of confusion about the term 'readiness'. In early childhood settings this normally means developmental readiness – that the child's natural physical, neurological, social and emotional development is sufficiently developed to cope with the task in hand, with adequate challenge, but not undue stress. What we are increasingly hearing, however, are the two phrases 'readiness to learn' and 'readiness for school'.

'Readiness to learn' is a strange term because the quality and rate of spontaneous learning in a child's first few years of life is more rapid and impressive than at any other time. Children's Minister Sarah Teather used the phrase, 'ready to learn when they get to school', no less than four times in her July interview about the EYFS Review with *Nursery World*.

Children are ready to learn the moment they are born (even beforehand). We are innately natural learners and are programmed to interact with our environments in ways that serve each of us as unique individuals. During the first phase of life, from birth to three-years-old, the young child mostly unknowingly or unconsciously acquires basic developmental abilities. Once these basic skills are developed, however, by about three-years-old, there is a movement into the next phase of more consciously seeking out those activities that best serve his or her unique development.

The mantra at this stage is: 'Let me do it for myself'. Many educators have also identified specific critical or sensitive periods during this phase that are characterized by increased interest in, and particularly rapid development in, certain areas of learning.

Once the sensitive period has passed, learning in that area will never again be as easy. Of course, it is during this second period that the child learns best from what we call 'play' – although this is also a word that people have got very confused about. Play should be primarily self-initiated and implies a deep and meaningful engagement with the environment that helps children make sense of their worlds and serves social, emotional, cognitive and other crucial areas of development. It is a universal feature of natural and healthy child development and is essential for wellbeing.

'Readiness for school' is very different because it involves a specific set of cognitive, linguistic, social, and motor skills that have been defined, by the culture in which the child lives, as crucial for his or her successful integration into its learning community. *Early Years Foundation Stage Profile* results are to be published by school for the first time, under proposals in the Department for Education's five-year business plan.

Children will be assessed with new 'readiness for school' measures at the age of five, linked to the EYFS profile, and at age 11 they will be assessed to ensure they have basic command of the 'three Rs'. [*Nursery World*, November 17, 2010]

It has primarily developed in response to the disparity in children's early learning experiences and a concern that some had deprived or disrupted development that might compromise the fulfilling of their learning potential. Children and their families can experience a substantial discontinuity as they make the transition from pre-school settings into reception classes and this phase is seen as essential to ensure equal access to more formal education.

The typical response to this has been to establish a framework based upon externally-set 'norms' and 'standards', with each child measured against such norms and assessed accordingly. It assesses the child according to his or her lack of opportunity, judges the child on the pre-defined norms and makes little allowance for age or gender variation in the rate and nature of individual development and learning. The onus is on the child to measure up to those externally-set expectations. In this respect we are asking children to be 'ready to learn' what we require of them to fit the system, and this does not necessarily mean that this is right for the child or developmentally appropriate.

What is now beginning to be recognized by many educators is that it is not the child that needs to be ready for school, but the school that should be ready for the child. Instead of trying to fit the child into some externally created norm, with all the dangers of imposing developmentally inappropriate expectations, there is a call, instead, for schools to focus on strengthening children's confidence in their own developing intellectual powers and positive dispositions towards learning.

Children are born natural learners and we need to ensure our 21st educational systems validate this fact, nurture each child's unique potential and provide opportunities for continued growth. With the review in process, let us hope that the government is being advised by people with their eyes on the needs of the future, rather than the past.

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Useful resources

- For the Department for Education's business plan, visit: <http://media.education.gov.uk/assets/files/pdf/d/department%20for%20education%20business%20plan.pdf>