Parents, districts work to prepare children for classrooms

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If your child is turning five anytime this year; you are probably already thinking about the fall and that inevitable first day of Kindergarten. It can be a scary time -- for everyone involved. The key, however, is preparation.

New Brunswick has a one-of-a-kind program to prepare both children and parents for the experience. Each district employs a coordinator whose role it is to determine not only what preparation is needed, but also what fears could be alleviated. They follow a specific assessment which was also developed in our province, the Early Years Evaluation: Direct Assessment (EYE-DA). It is designed to give parents and teachers information about where kids are developmentally.

A teacher meets with the child one-on-one at their school and goes through a series of questions for 40 minutes to an hour. EYE-DA focuses on five areas: awareness of self and environment; social skills and behavioral approaches; cognitive skills; language and communication; and gross and fine motor development.

"It is important to say that there won't be anyone at the door on the first day of school saying you have to know this, or you have to know that. Everyone gets to come to school. (The program) just helps us prepare," says Karla.

Some children will need to work more on social skills, so the program works with their parents as well as the child in getting them more comfortable with leaving preschool and coming to a new school. Other children need skills in problem solving, or reading.

"What we do is to focus on having the children registered and working with the families as they go through this year of preparation," explains Karla.
Stephanie Thomson's daughter Lily will be starting school this September. Lily is her fourth child and Stephanie believes that it does get easier every time.

"That first time you are uptight, you don't know what to expect, but now we know what to expect and therefore we realize that she is ready to go," says Stephanie.

"She is just eager to learn, like a sponge, and she has gone to pre-school, is starting to put words together, and is socially ready. She is really excited, which says a lot," says Stephanie.

The other reality is that most of the parents out there attended school in a different time and a different era. What they remember from their first day may be of no use when they are trying to relate to how their kids are approaching school. Many children today, for example, have attended some form of day care or pre-school.

The week after Thanksgiving is the official registration week; and there are already more than 900 children set to begin school in the fall. The Transition to School Program has already met with most of them, and will soon have covered the rest.

After that meeting, there is also a pre-school program where children are invited into school for five weeks for an abbreviated pre-school day with an activity-based program for an hour and half once a week.

In June, there is a Kindergarten Orientation Day, where families come in for half a day, and while the parents have an opportunity to meet with administrators, the children meet with the teachers and their future classmates.

"Right from the get-go, parents have somewhere they can call. From October to now I have fielded over 100 calls about 'what school should I register in,' 'what can I do about . . .,' 'what do I need to know . . .'," says Karla.

"Lily and I went to an evening up at the school and she came home with a bag of things that she could do, activities to help her prepare at home. It was wonderful," says Stephanie.

"Families that don't have any children in school yet, this program would really open their eyes as to what they should be working on to get ready," continues Stephanie.

It is also very helpful in relieving the anxieties of the parent. She says the transition to school is very hard when you realize that it is your baby growing up.

"I remember my first child; they got to school and got changed into indoor sneakers. I just stood there. He said 'mommy you can go now.' I was the one who was shedding the tears. It is definitely harder on us (as parents)," says Stephanie.

"The big thing for a parent is knowing what is going to happen next, so as a parent, registering early means we get more information and therefore are more aware," says Karla.
On the other hand, it is never too late to register. Parents can go to their community school or phone their district. Even though registration begins in October, it is still possible right up until school starts. However, the sooner it is done, the more of the program families can benefit from.

"Just talking to your child and exposing them to different experiences, talking positively about school and what will come -- that is a big part of preparing," says Stephanie.

The following is a list of things you can do to help your child prepare for a lifelong love of learning.
* Read to your child each and every day.
* Provide books, magazines and other print materials for your child to handle.
* Talk together about pictures and stories.
* Provide opportunities to play alphabet games and read alphabet books.
* Provide pencils, markers, and paper.
* Encourage drawing and scribbling or writing.
* Invite your child to help with grocery lists, grocery shopping, sending cards.
* Provide a daily routine that includes regular times for meals.
* Establish a bedtime that gives 10 or more hours of sleep at night.
* See that your child has opportunities for rigorous physical activity, outside.
* See that your child has had required immunizations and current health examination.
* Help your child develop independence in dressing, eating and personal hygiene.
* Interact frequently with your child each day by talking, and listening.
* Take your child to a variety of places such as the library, the park, the grocery store, and the post office and talk about what you see.
* Provide toys, games and household objects that encourage exploration and manipulation.
* Play with your child
* Encourage problem-solving skills.
* Teach ways to communicate needs and desires in a socially-appropriate way.
* Provide opportunities to play with other children and form relationships.
* Teach socially-acceptable ways to disagree.
* Encourage social values such as helpfulness, cooperation, sharing and concern for others.
* Demonstrate common expressions of courtesy and praise your child for using them (thank you, please).
* Encourage work values such as initiative, persistence, and completion of tasks.