Over the last two weeks, much of the talk among the moms at my son's pre-school has centred around mysterious meetings. Children across the province have been having one-on-one sessions with teachers in preparation for entering kindergarten in September.

"What goes on once we leave the room? - What are they talking about in there for 45 minutes? - My kid told me she was jumping on one foot. What does that have to do with kindergarten?"

You have to remember, we are moms who likely attended kindergarten at a church hall or a private home - if we attended at all. We mostly fought with each other over toys and sat at miniature tables drinking juice and munching cookies.

We didn't spend a lot of time working on our letters and numbers or talking about important things like how recycling helps the Earth.

But early childhood education has come a long way in New Brunswick. Kindergarten is much more like Grade 1 used to be. And kids are better prepared than we were for our first day of school.

In District 6, it starts in the fall with a meeting for parents of children entering kindergarten the following year. A few weeks later, children visit their school for the first time and participate in short, teacher-guided group sessions where they may use scissors or crayons or find objects hidden in a picture. In the spring, they return for transition day, a half day of kindergarten topped off by a short ride on the school bus.

The meetings us moms were wondering about are the newest step in how educators prepare children for school. The Early Years Evaluation: Direct Assessment (EYE-DA) was developed in New Brunswick to give parents and teachers information on 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 four areas: awareness of self and environment; cognitive skills; language and communication; and gross and fine motor development (that's where jumping on one foot comes in.)
Alyssa MacIsaac, the transition to school co-ordinator for School District 6, helped pilot the program last year.

"They might have a question where they're just being asked to point to something, they might have a question where the child is asked to respond, the child might get up and have to do something active and that would be the gross motor-type things," said MacIsaac. "They might have to use a pencil or a crayon and print something or scissors to cut."

Throughout the assessment, the teacher is also paying attention to the child's speech and language skills.

Children with special needs are included. She said each child will be accommodated according to his or her needs. For instance, if a child has autism, parents may choose to have a support worker present. She said the majority of kids can at least do part of the assessment.

Most kids enjoy their visit, said MacIsaac, 34, a teacher with two daughters, Holly, 13, and Emily, 7.

Once the reports are complete, MacIsaac goes through them and contacts parents if a concern arises. She mails copies of the colour-coded, easy-to-understand reports to parents. Seventy per cent of children come through the assessment with no red flags, she said.

The information will be put to work.

"We're using it in many different ways," MacIsaac said. "But one of them is for intervention or getting children the help that they may need. It may be through our program. It may be by referring them to outside agencies."

She said parents may not know that there are programs out there that may be beneficial to their children. MacIsaac and co-ordinators like her throughout the province provide that link.

In District 6, a pre-school session will be held in three locations in the spring. MacIsaac will extend a special invitation if a child struggled in some areas. Similar pre-school sessions will take place throughout the province.

EYE-DA results may also reveal trends at specific schools so educators can dedicate more resources.

The information helps teachers and schools prepare for students.

"We're not using it to group or stream or anything like that. But it is important to have balanced classrooms," said MacIsaac.

"We use it somewhat to determine class makeup just because we don't, obviously, want all children that may be identified with needs all in one class. We want to make sure that there's a balance."
MacIsaac also stresses that the age of the child is always taken into account.

"They're not comparing a December baby against a January baby. That January baby's had a lot more life experience than the December baby."

And if a child is having a bad day or is having trouble separating from their parent, he or she can come back and do the assessment another time.

MacIsaac said parents often tell her that their child who will soon be entering kindergarten is not interested in looking at books, holding a pencil or playing with magnetic letters.

"I think it's important that they know that's OK," she said. "The only thing is that you need to keep giving them the opportunity to have those experiences."

The ultimate goal is to help kids get ready for school.

"If kids just come to school ready to learn, we can teach them all they need to know about academics," she said. "Knowing how to sit beside another child and how to share and how to take their turn, having a few independent skills like attempting to put on their own jacket and boots.

"If kids all came to school ready to be able to sit for a few minutes and listen to a teacher while she talks, or know how to interact with adults, then we can take those kids and we can take them to the moon."

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