

## What Is Kindergarten All About?

There is a lot of misunderstanding today about kindergartens. I'd like to pass on a few ideas for you to mull over about what a kindergarten looks like, and why; and what it is supposed to do. I hope you find the ideas interesting and perhaps they may set to rest some questions you have.

One of the troubles in understanding kindergartens is that we all remember best what school was like in the years not too far behind us — our high school days, 5th and 6th grades: sitting, answering the teacher's questions, getting a grade, doing homework . . .

That is school — upper-grade school. But kindergarten isn't like that.

Kindergarten is a school for five-year-olds — that is the important point. And I don't need to tell you that your Five is very different from upper-grade youngsters. So:

Kindergarten looks different.

It sounds different.

Kindergarten has a whole different style. It is for Fives. It is geared to Fives. It is custom-made to fit children of this particular age.

The key question, then, is: What are Fives like? For one thing, although they talk big and brave, inside of themselves Fives are very soft. They are essentially shy. They put on a show of being big, but they know that the world is pretty overwhelming. They are timid, even the toughest of them.

A school for these children — a school for beginners — has to be a gentle school. It has to be a warm and friendly school. Kindergarten can't and must not be a place that overpowers youngsters and pushes them back.

This means that the size of a kindergarten is important. A kindergarten shouldn't have the feel of an auditorium or a stadium. It means that children should be able to spend a lot of their time in little groups — two or three children together, or even working alone — so they can be comfortable and at ease. And of course, the soft

tone and good spirit of the teacher are exceedingly significant.

What else about Fives? A note that always strikes me is that they are doers. They are forever on the go. They are into everything. Their nature will change as they grow older but right now, Fives are not good sitters; they are not youngsters who can keep quiet for very long; and they are not good listeners either. Instead, they have another quite-wonderful quality: They want to see and do for themselves.

What does this mean for a kindergarten? It means that the emphasis has to be on reality and on action: on animals, on jobs the children do, on activities they carry out, on trips they take, on workers of all kinds who come into the classroom. The emphasis has to be on chances for children to use their hands and to work with tools: magnets, magnifying glasses, saws, hammers...to work even with what look like playthings: clay, blocks, paint, puzzles, sand...Kindergarten is not a place for teaching children by talking at them, not a place for grownups' lectures. It is a place where active children are involved in the goings-on. Fives learn best that way.

Still another quality of Fives always tremendously impresses me: Their imagination,



their creativity. I am sure you must be impressed too. They are geniuses at make-believe. This peak period of imagination doesn't last forever. In fact, it passes very quickly, so it is important for a kindergarten to make the most of it. That is the reason for the kindergarten's clay and paints and blocks and dolls and dress-up clothes. This kind of material strengthens imagination, a matter of first-rate significance now, one of lasting significance for a child's whole later life.

One last point, a basic one: Fives are very curious. Very eager to learn. Determined to know more and to build new skills. A good kindergarten has to be a learning place where children's minds are challenged and where youngsters feel they are growing.

Today a special problem comes in here. Whenever there is talk about "Fives learning," many people translate that to mean: "Learning to read." They tend to forget all other learnings. Reading, of course, is very important but we all have to remember: Only a few Fives are bursting to sink their teeth into reading. Many, many others — just as healthy, just as bright — have little interest now.

This variety in individuals means that a teacher has to be alert to each child's development, not pushing too hard on the many who are not yet excited about reading; yet there to help the few who want to get started, giving them all the help they need. Most important — and beyond reading — the teacher must make sure that *all* children learn countless facts and skills and ideas, whether they are early- or late-blooming readers.

How can you tell if a kindergarten is really geared for Fives? Your child's behavior is one excellent indicator.

I would call it a good kindergarten if my youngster had a positive feeling about school: liked to go, liked being independent.

I would call it a magnificent place if my child had a friendly feeling toward the kindergarten teacher and thought "teacher" was something special: a peach, a honey.

I would call it a prize kindergarten if my child came home from school excited by new learn-

ings, *any* learnings. Not necessarily excited every day — no one is on Cloud 9 all of the time — but full of something new much of the time.

Some parents, I know, would feel more comfortable if their child came home with more specific proof, especially of learning to read — if the youngster knew the alphabet or the sounds of the letters, for example. I urge you: Try to relax. Don't put too much weight on these specifics. Keep in mind that your "scholar" is only Five. Be sure you don't rush the seasons.

Raising a child is a little like farming. In the fall and winter and early spring, the farmer plows and harrows and fertilizes. The farmer doesn't get anxious: "There's no crop, where's the crop?" There has to be a time for spadework, a time for groundwork, a time for the foundations. This is the kindergarten time.

It is a learning time — you can be sure of that. I think you will be surprised and pleased day by day with how much smarter your youngster is. The stories children hear in kindergarten, the trips they take, the discussions, the displays, the activities, these all teach an amazing variety of facts and skills and ideas.

In addition, I think you are certain to see better language and a longer attention span. Better coordination. And almost surely your child will increasingly be feeling more confident.

And in kindergarten children get, more and more, the hang of getting along with people. I don't mean that there are happy times all the while. Kindergarteners fight some. They argue. Your child may come home in tears some days. But out of the give-and-take of kindergarten — the good times, the rough times — children learn more of how to live with others. They learn to lead now and again, and to follow.

Many facts and skills will sink in very painlessly. In fact, I can put it more strongly: If all goes well, they will sink in joyously.

This seems fine to me, and I hope you agree. This kindergarten year is your child's only fifth year of life. It will never come again. What could be nicer than to have it turn out to be an exciting and pleasing year, a very contented year for your child to live?

Distributed to parents by:

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