

# Top OT Ideas for Kindergarten Readiness




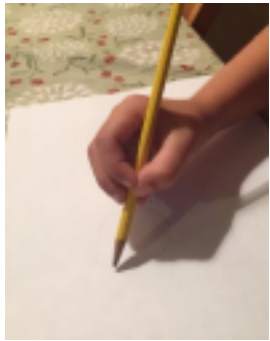
By Lynn Herlihy, MS, OTR/L

For many families, kindergarten marks the start of “real school”. Whether your children attended full-day preschool, a part-time program, or had no formal experience, the start of kindergarten is a major milestone. Over the past decade in American schools, there has been an increased academic demand placed on young children, starting with strict curriculum and expectations in kindergarten, and continuing on as they face state testing as early as age 8. This trend appears to be a result of many factors, including increased pressure on teachers and administrators, parental expectations, national awareness of America’s lagging behind other nations with regard to math and science, and legislation including *No Child Left Behind*. Whatever the reasons, many people are stating that “Kindergarten is the new first grade”.

As an occupational therapist, developmentalist, and parent, I am in favor of keeping play and exploration at the heart of the kindergarten experience. (Our family has been blessed to be part of a progressive, public school in Brooklyn, where my son just completed a wonderful year of inquiry, community field trips, and project-based learning.) Whether you have chosen a play-based setting, a more academically-focused kindergarten, or something in between, there are several foundation skills that will help make the year successful for your student. This article will explain the various motor, perceptual, and social skills that can help prepare your child for the school year ahead. Games and activities that you can do at home are provided under each area of development. *If your child is lagging behind significantly in any of these areas, please consult your pediatrician, OT, PT, or SLP to determine if professional intervention is needed.*

## **1. Promote a mature pencil grasp**

As children enter kindergarten, most are at the age where they should have a fairly mature grasp on a writing tool (crayon, marker, pencil). For a 5-year-old child, Occupational Therapists expect to see a dynamic, tripod grasp (the pencil held with the thumb, index, and middle finger; other fingers tucked under; wrist movement used in lieu of whole arm movements). A typical progression of grasps is seen here:

Cylindrical grasp (1 – 1 ½ years)	Digital grasp (2 -3 years)	Modified Tripod grasp (3 ½ - 4 years)	Tripod grasp (4 ½ - 7 years)
			

If your child is stuck in one of the earlier developmental grasps, below are some activities you can do to help facilitate a mature grasp. (*NOTE: if your child is utilizing an alternative grasp, it could be indicative of hand weakness or delayed dexterity; you should consult an Occupational Therapist to explore.*)

- Color with small pieces of crayon (broken crayons are great for this). Put the paper on a vertical or inclined surface (tape to a wall, use an easel, or attach to a large 3-ring binder to make a “slant desk”). Together, the incline and the small crayons will encourage a child to use a finger grasp and hand muscles, instead of relying on using the whole arm to color.
- Tear paper into little pieces (as part of a craft project) and/or wad paper into balls. • Coloring in a confined space (the smaller the space, the harder it is, the more strengthening it is). • Use a hole punch on various thicknesses of paper. Fiskars makes a “Teeny Tiny Cassette Punch” with exchangeable cassettes that children find fun to punch out various shapes.
- Use a squirt bottle filled with water to water plants, “clean” the table, or “melt” shaving cream from the tub wall; ensure that the child is using the index and middle finger to pump while the other fingers are stabilized on the bottle. Tug-o-war with a towel
- “Finger” tug-o-war with a popsicle stick or coffee stirrer; make sure child maintains grasp by pinching pad of thumb and pad of index on the stick (don’t let him use a lateral “key grasp” with the thumb on top)
- Games with tweezers or grabbers: Caterpillar Scramble, Bed Bugs, Gumball Grab,

## **2. Let them work (but not run!) with scissors**

Many children enter kindergarten without ever having held a pair of scissors. Parental fears and our protective nature are often the culprit since it is developmentally appropriate for children to learn to hold and snip with scissors by the age of 25 months and be able to cut a paper in half by 37 months. By age five, accurate cutting on a line and cutting simple shapes (circle, square, and triangle) are emerging. Scissor cutting should play a big part in preschool and kindergarten activities because learning how to use scissors correctly can also help with developing pencil control skills. Some key points to know about the development of good scissor use: *Scissors should be held with the thumb in the top loop, with the middle finger in the bottom loop. The index finger is placed on the outside to be free to guide the hand around curves. Holding the scissors in this way enables the tripod fingers to work together well. You can help your child keep the ring and little fingers tucked away by putting a little piece of paper under them. If the child’s fingers are very small and/or if the finger hole is large, it is acceptable to put the index and middle fingers through the same hole.*

### **Snipping**

- Plastic straws: then string up the pieces to make a necklace
- Styrofoam packing peanuts
- Playdoh and putty
- Dandelion (or other flowers) stems and leaves
- Edges of paper plates, Styrofoam plates and cup
- Edges of index cards

### **Cutting straight lines**

- Place 2 rows of stickers or dots on a card or paper; practice cutting in between the rows
- Draw a wide line (1/8 to 1/4 inch thick) to cut short strips of paper to make a paper chain

Cut up junk mail in strip

- Cut along straight lines to cut out coupons

### **3. Feed their senses**

All those wonderful sensory table activities are not just for preschoolers! Your rising kindergartener still enjoys getting their hands messy, and they are gaining valuable experience from it, too. A child's tactile skills continue to develop well into their school-age years. Through tactile exploration of water play, Play-Doh, clay, sand, and dried rice and beans, kids are learning about the qualities of objects and how they interact, working on vocabulary to describe tactile materials, and improving their tactile discrimination skills. All the input to their hands helps kids improve their "stereognosis", which is the ability to perceive the form of an object by touch alone. Some activities you can do at home include:

- Make a mystery bag of common objects (bottle cap, quarter, eraser, penny, button, etc.) and see if your child can identify the object without looking at it
- Make a sensory bin for the home (use a 5-gallon plastic bin with a lid). Fill with dried rice and/or beans, bird seed, sand (beach or kinetic or "moon" sand), instant snow, water beads, etc. You can hide small "treasures" for your child to find, or puzzle pieces that she has to seek and then complete the puzzle.
- Sensory materials such as playdoh, modeling clay, theraputty, and model magic are all great materials for hand strengthening as well as tactile play.
- Practice copying lines, and shapes, and drawing faces in shaving cream on the bathtub wall.
- Practice writing their name in sand or salt on a cookie sheet.

### **4. Body awareness**

Peek into any kindergarten classroom at circle time (aka "morning meeting" or "rug time") and you will likely see several children in some alternative position to the teacher-requested cross-legged position. I would even venture to say that several children would be sitting on, leaning on, flopping over, or in some other way touching their nearest neighbor(s). Besides being adorable, sweet, and cuddly...many kindergarteners often have an underdeveloped body and spatial awareness. Some ways that you can help your child improve this "hidden sense" are:

- Animal walks (crab walk, bear walk, slither like a snake, hop like a bunny, etc.)
- Wheelbarrow walking for good weight bearing on the arms and core strengthening
- Whole body activities such as swimming, yoga poses, karate, dance and gymnastics
- Obstacle courses, where the child needs to change their position to move through the challenges. If you're ok with making a little mess at home, you can set up obstacle courses using couch cushions to walk over, chairs to crawl under, broom handles to jump over, etc.
- Push and pull weighted objects. This could mean pulling a sibling on a blanket, pushing stuffed animals in a laundry basket, or helping carry in the groceries.

### **5. Listening skills**

Ask any kindergarten teacher and this is probably the biggest request. They'd like their students to be better listeners. Good kindergarten teachers employ a multi-sensory approach to getting kids' attention in a noisy active room (meaning that raising your voice is not the best practice). She will often ring a bell, flash the

lights, do a call-response, or raise up two fingers....all ways to tap into a child's other senses when that pesky kindergartener auditory system is not responding as it should. You can help improve your child's ability to listen and follow directions (wouldn't that be great?!) through several fun activities and games.

- Do-it-yourself listening games: Simon says, Follow the leader, Hokey pokey, Red Light Green Light, Yoga poses, and drumming, tapping, or clapping rhythms and patterns (the parent does a pattern, child repeats it)
- Play the games "20 questions": Players try to guess the person, place, or object that another player is thinking about. Participants must pay attention to deduct the final answer. You can only ask "yes/no" questions. The player who figures out the answer with the least amount of questions wins. In my family, we call this game "Is it metal?" since that was always my stepson's first question.
- Treasure Hunt: Hide a "prize" (or maybe a favorite stuffed animal) somewhere in the house. Give your child directions to follow to find the treasure. You can start with simple one-step clues, such as "check in the kitchen", but then you can add more fun and silly steps as they improve, such as "march to the kitchen, jump three times, and then open the fridge". Children will find it funny and will be building their multi-step direction skills!
- Commercial games: Hullabaloo, Diggety Dog, Whack-a-mole, BopIt!, Cat in the Hat I can do it game

## **6. Self-help skills: buttons, snaps, and zippers oh my!**

A really meaningful way in which you can ready your child for school is to give them the confidence to know that they can take care of their own body and belongings. As caring parents, we want to help our children any way we can (or we are just so busy and want to get out the door!) Either way, after the age of four, we are actually NOT helping our children if we are helping them too much. They need to develop good self-care skills, from eating, to toileting, to dressing and grooming. One of my son's fears going into kindergarten was that he'd have a bathroom accident if he couldn't unbutton or unzip in time. His solution was to ask for only elastic-waist pants. I've found that preschool teachers are often quite involved in helping kids with managing their backpacks, lunches, and coats. There is typically a higher teacher-to-student ratio in PreK which gives teachers (and kids) this luxury. A lot of changes come with kindergarten! In my son's school this year, he had 24 classmates and one teacher! She did not have the time to help each child unzip their backpack, take off their coat, take out their lunch, and put their folder in the bin. The bathroom was down the hall, and kids were expected to be fully independent with their clothing fasteners, toilet hygiene, and hand washing. As your child prepares to enter kindergarten, you should be preparing him or her for the important job of being in charge of his/her body and belongings. You can practice buttons, zippers, and snaps on dolls, on stuffed animals, or on a younger sibling....but there is no substitute for practicing on themselves. It is not only a fine motor task, but also a great confidence builder for our growing kids.

## **7. Visual-Perceptual skills**

Good visual perception is a foundation skill needed for reading, writing, and math. There are many ways that you can help your child hone their skills in this area of development. Visual perception is the ability to see and interpret (analyze and give meaning to) the visual information that surrounds us. Visual perception has several areas, including the following which are key to success in school:

- **Visual discrimination:** The ability to determine differences or similarities in objects or forms based on size, color, shape, etc. The school skill this helps with is a child's ability to tell the letter "b" from "d",

or differentiate a circle from an oval.

- **Visual closure:** The ability to recognize a form or object even when the whole picture of it isn't available. This relates to a child's ability to read sight words.
- **Visual memory:** The ability to recall visual traits of a form or object. This is related to recall skills during reading, as well as copying from a book or the board.
- **Figure-ground discrimination:** The ability to locate something in a cluttered or busy background. School-wise, this has many implications, from finding their backpack in a big pile, to being able to the ability to focus on important information on a busy worksheet or book.
- **Form constancy:** The ability to know that a form or shape is the same, even if it has been rotated, made smaller/larger, or observed from up close or far away. With regards to reading, this is a child's ability to know that the letter "A" is an "A" whether it's printed in a book, written on a board, on a billboard or sign, or made out of sticks.
- **Visual spatial relations:** Understanding the relationships of objects within the environment. These skills help kids develop their gross motor skills and safely navigate the environment. It also helps develop right/left awareness, reading a map/chart/graph, and figure out if it's a 6 or 9, p or q.

Some fun, play-based ways to help your child improve visual-perceptual skills include:

- Sorting objects: sort by different characteristics of the items (size, color, shape, etc.); some fun things to sort are different types of pasta or cereal, buttons, blocks, Lego pieces, and playing cards.
- Complete age-level puzzles. A 5-year-old child should be working on interlocking (not inset) puzzles. Puzzles of 12 to 24 pieces are appropriate for this age.
- Copying block designs (you build a structure, ask the child to copy); Following visual directions that come with Lego sets.
- Working on patterns. Introduce the concept of a pattern to your child when stacking blocks, stringing beads, coloring, etc.
- Playing the memory/matching game. This refers to the commercially available game "Memory", which comes in many varieties now (SpongeBob, Disney, Minions, baby animals, Dory, etc.). You can also make your own matching game by using cards from a standard deck of cards (start by using about 10 pairs; from a deck of 52 cards, take two 2's, two 3's, two 4's, etc....then you will have your own matching game ready to go). Another way to make your own is with index cards (you can write letters, numbers, shapes, or use stickers). To play: Mix up the cards and place them face down in rows. Each player is allowed to turn over two cards and see if they are a match. If not, put them back in the same spot to help work on visual memory. My family plays that you get another turn if you get a match.
- Playing Lotto or Bingo games with pictures or letters
- Play "What's different?" Put three things on the table, have the child close his eyes, and then change one. Have the child tell you which one is different. Use more objects as he gets more skilled
- Place a covered tray with a dozen or so objects on a table, let the child look at it for 30 seconds, cover the tray, and have the child tell you everything that he remembers. Alternative: take one item away and have him guess what is missing.
- Other good games you can purchase: Eye-spy books and games, Where's Waldo books, Tangos, Guess Who?, Rush Hour Jr., Colorforms, Highlights magazine, Busy Town I Found It game

## **8. Social Skills**

Children will learn many new social skills throughout the kindergarten year. It is a time of huge growth, independence, and confidence building for these young learners. By the end of the school year, my son was much better at expressing his needs and emotions, and negotiating with peers (without getting upset or immediately asking for an adult to intervene). There are many things that parents can do at home and in the community to help their child have some of the key social skills to be ready for Kindergarten. As an OT, we address play skills in our daily practice, since play is a child's main "occupation".

- **Taking turns:** A key factor in many games and activities is turn-taking. Before entering Kindergarten, you can support your child by teaching the concept of taking turns, including the fact that he or she does not always get to "go first!"
- **Being a good sport:** This is also called having a good winning-losing response. Kids often need to be taught what to say in this situation, since most people do not like to lose. "Good game, maybe I'll win next time", "Nice playing with you", and "It was fun, even though I didn't win" are some phrases that parents can model for our children so that they will see and hear an example of being a "good sport" and hopefully mimic our words.
- **Problem-solving:** OTs frequently address this "executive function" skill during the therapy session, and parents can do much to support their child's ability to identify and solve problems on their own. As parents, we are often quick to jump in and "fix it" for our kids; whether it's mediating a squabble over a toy, or asserting (for them) that they were next in line. To help prepare your child for school, you can model the language they can use in such situations while at home, but encourage your child to come up with their own solutions when issues arise.

My final words of wisdom as an OT and the parent of a kindergarten "graduate" are: Enjoy this exciting time! Each school year will bring its own challenges. Making the kindergarten year fun and enjoyable can help set a positive tone for years to come. If we as parents can maintain a healthy attitude towards school, our children will see this example. If we give them the building blocks for education from an early age, they can succeed in school. It is important to include math and literacy in fun activities, this will instill a love of learning much more than doing worksheets, math problems, or pushing reading skills on them too early. And finally, if you have any concerns about your child's development (whether it is the fine motor, visual perception, language, or social skills), seek professional help from the appropriate provider as early as possible to ensure your child has the foundation skills she/he needs to thrive.