

COUNTING
DOWN *to*
Kindergarten

A Complete Guide
to Creating a School Readiness Program
for Your Community

R. LYNN BAKER



An imprint of the American Library Association

CHICAGO 2015

www.alastore.ala.org

R. LYNN BAKER is a conference speaker and advocate for early childhood education, early literacy/school readiness programs, and public libraries. As a former preschool and kindergarten teacher, Lynn holds a bachelor of science in interdisciplinary early childhood education and a minor in special education, as well as permanent library certification from the Kentucky Department of Libraries and Archives. In her current role as the Youth Services Specialist at Paul Sawyer Public Library in Frankfort, Kentucky, Lynn has developed school readiness programs and curricula for preschool children, families, and communities. Through the culmination of her education and experiences, Lynn was instrumental in the development of the Kentucky Public Library School Readiness Task Force, also known as READiness Matters, in collaboration with the Kentucky Department for Libraries and Archives. Lynn received her MLIS from San Jose State University. Lynn currently lives in Frankfort, Kentucky, with her husband, Andrew, and their two sons, Thomas and Tyler.

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ISBN: 978-0-8389-1333-8 (paper)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Baker, R. Lynn.

Counting down to kindergarten : a complete guide to creating a school readiness program for your community / R. Lynn Baker.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-8389-1333-8 (print : alk. paper) 1. Libraries and preschool children—United States. 2. Children's libraries—Activity programs—United States. 3. Readiness for school—United States. I. Title.

Z718.2.U6B36 2015

027.62'5—dc23

2015005573

Cover design by Krista Joy Johnson. Cover illustration © suerz/Shutterstock, Inc. Composition by Kim Thornton in the Trend, Boucherie Cursive, Source Sans, and Minion Pro typefaces.

Ⓢ This paper meets the requirements of ANSI/NISO Z39.48-1992 (Permanence of Paper).

Printed in the United States of America

19 18 17 16 15 5 4 3 2 1

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Foreword

WOW! WHAT A CONTRIBUTION TO THE BODY OF LITERATURE around the public library's role in the community in supporting early literacy and school readiness through parent education. Here we see the precepts and teachings of both the first and second editions of *Every Child Ready to Read* enriched—not only to help parents understand the connection between activities and later reading, but also to give specific examples and advice, bringing your public library to the forefront in the realm of early childhood education.

As public libraries have moved more intentionally in this direction, I have become concerned that, in some cases, the joy of reading and the love of books and reading are taking a backseat to the early literacy focus. In some library systems, there is a move to call storytimes “classes.” I am happy to see that Lynn is making a distinction between storytimes and Countdown to Kindergarten storyhours. With storytimes, the impetus for our choices is based on the quality of the books and other materials, our joy in them, and their appropriateness for the ages/stages of the children targeted in the storytime. The Countdown storyhours have the adults' understanding of early literacy and school readiness as the primary focus while using enjoyable books, materials, and activities that support the skills, practices, and domains being addressed.

It may seem daunting to raise the level at which your library provides school readiness support to families and to increase the visibility of that aspect of library service in your community. As we add to our knowledge about early literacy and

school readiness—and incorporate intentionality into our programs, services, marketing, outreach and initiatives—we must acknowledge what we already do know while continuing to increase our knowledge about child development and early literacy. This is an ongoing process. Recognize what you do know and grow from there. Our special contribution to the early childhood community is our knowledge of children’s literature and language activities and its connection to young children at different ages and stages, the collections we offer access to, and the community resources we offer.

While both formal and informal learning have critical places in a person’s total learning, the public library must embrace its education role in the community as the place for informal learning. This is the niche where we make the most valuable contribution, where participants need not feel intimidated, where no one is tested, where no one is judged, where all are welcome, where all can grow and learn. Lynn’s tone, programs, techniques, and advocacy approach all support the public library’s contribution to informal learning.

Lynn has brought to the public library realm her strong background as a preschool and kindergarten teacher, enriching the community and the state of Kentucky in her role as early childhood advocate.

May this book serve as inspiration to expand what you are already doing or to take a first step in an exciting journey to help your public library play a key role in helping every child enter school ready to learn.

SAROJ GHOTING

Early Childhood Literacy Consultant

www.earlylit.net

Coauthor of *STEP into Storytime: Using StoryTime Effective Practice to Strengthen the Development of Newborns to Five-Year-Olds* and *Storytimes for Everyone! Developing Young Children’s Language and Literacy*

Acknowledgments

THROUGHOUT THE WRITING OF THIS BOOK, THERE HAVE been many fellow librarians and literacy professionals who have graciously taken the time to share their experiences with me.

A special thank you to Saroj Ghoting for all the ways you have served young children and families—in your own community and state, as well as throughout the global community. Your work in early literacy and school readiness have advanced the programs and services offered by public libraries today. You have taught us the importance of being intentional. Your support and encouragement has meant a lot to me, and I sincerely appreciate you introducing me to ALA Editions.

Jamie Santoro, thank you for your guidance through this process and for being so patient with me. I am so appreciative of your support and for navigating me through this new experience.

Kathleen Reif, director of St. Mary's County Library in Maryland, thank you for leading the charge toward establishing public libraries as early childhood and school readiness service providers. Your efforts have inspired the rest of us to advocate for our own library services, and there are more public library school readiness services being developed because of your leadership.

To my coworkers at Paul Sawyer Public Library, thank you for allowing me to be a part of a team who truly cares about serving children and families. I am honored to work alongside each of you. A special thanks to Erinn Conness, the youth services coordinator at PSPL. Thank you for believing in the importance of

the Countdown to Kindergarten program. I believe, because of your leadership, that we have helped bridge the gap for many families, classrooms, and children within our community.

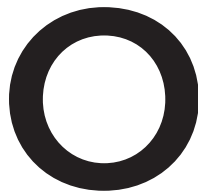
Thanks to the kindergarten, preschool, and early care teachers in our community, as well as the parents, caregivers, families, and children who have participated in the Countdown to Kindergarten program. We hope that our program has made a difference in your transition to kindergarten. Thank you for allowing our library to be a part of this special time in your child's life!

Thank you to Heather Dieffenbach and Wayne Onkst at the Kentucky Department for Libraries and Archives. Your immediate openness when I approached you about addressing school readiness is why the READiness Matters task force was formed, and why we have been able to build strong collaborative partnerships across the state. Public libraries in Kentucky are working together because of your support and encouragement. Thanks to each and every member of the READiness Matters task force. Your willingness to work with other libraries to provide better, more intentional services to children and families is a great example to other libraries across the country.

A special thanks to the Kentucky Department of Education and the Governor's Office of Early Childhood. We appreciate your support of public libraries as valuable members of our state's school readiness goals.

Lastly, this book would not be possible without the love, support, and (maybe most of all) patience of my family. Andrew, Thomas, and Tyler, I promise to make up for missed dinners and family time. I appreciate each of you for allowing me to type, for quiet when it was needed, and for understanding when I couldn't go participate in family fun. Andrew, thank you for being my best friend (and for playing the dulcimer). Thomas and Tyler—I can't wait to see what you become passionate about in life. I have no doubt you will help change the world for the better.

Introduction



OVER THE PAST FEW DECADES, RESEARCH HAS SHOWN just how important the early years of a child's development are to later success in school. Most states—in recognition of these important years of development—have established guidelines and indicators of what it looks like for a child to be ready for school. While there are many wonderful early and preschool childhood programs in existence today, unfortunately, not every child has the opportunity to attend a formal preschool program before entering kindergarten. The public library is in the perfect position within the community to help bridge the gap between preschool and kindergarten—not just for families and children, but also for early care and preschool teachers, kindergarten teachers, legislators, and other service providers.

Most public libraries offer early childhood programs for children and families, but the development of a program that is deliberately focused on school readiness skills involves specific and intentional planning on the part of the librarian. This book will walk you through each step of creating a school readiness program that is connected to child development and early literacy skill practices. Beginning with the basics of early childhood development, the literacy practices of Every Child Ready to Read, and commonly adopted domains of school readiness, this book shows you how to successfully combine each of these components into a program that is intentionally focused on preparing children for school.

The basic framework in this book is based on the Countdown to Kindergarten program that I developed for Paul Sawyer Public Library in Frankfort, Kentucky. The program was developed in response to statewide kindergarten entrance

scores, which showed that the majority of kindergarten children in Kentucky were entering school not ready to learn. While our library was already offering programs that fostered early literacy skills and modeled literacy practices for parents and caregivers, we made the decision to intentionally develop a school readiness program that connected to the definition of school readiness as established by the Governor's Office of Early Childhood. I was able to combine my education and experience in early childhood education with my experience working in the public library in order to develop the Countdown to Kindergarten program.

I first conducted research on existing school readiness programs and began the planning process in the winter of 2012. By spring 2013, our library launched our first adult/child Countdown to Kindergarten program. We had such great interest and success that we decided to offer an additional summer session for adults and children who had missed the program in the spring. After our first sessions, we made the decision to add a program in the fall for adults to attend without children in order to better connect adult attendees to early childhood community guest speakers. Guest speakers were invited to present information to adult participants during the fall session based on the individual needs of our participants. As of the printing of this book, we have kept this basic timeline for both sessions of the program, and change guest speakers based on each individual group of adults who participate in the fall session of the program.

While our programming timeline works well for our library, it is merely a suggestion to help you plan your own. Base your session timeline and frequency on what is appropriate for your own community. Some libraries may not have the room or ability to sustain a two-part, six-week session. It may work better for your library to offer a onetime program. Whatever your timeline or method, this book is meant to offer you guidelines of the types of things you will want to think about as you plan your school readiness program. Feel free to use the parts of the program that work best for your library and community, and/or adjust the parts that do not fit your needs.

One of the most beneficial collaborative partnerships that our library worked to establish was with our local kindergarten teachers. Working closely with your community's kindergarten teachers can provide valuable information as you prepare to connect your program activities to the specific needs of your community. Planning a meeting with local kindergarten teachers was one of our library's first steps toward creating the Countdown curriculum. As a former preschool and kindergarten teacher, I knew that there were some important pieces of information that kindergarten teachers could provide from the frontline of the classroom that we would not have otherwise. Connecting to early care and preschool teachers in our community was equally helpful to the development of the Countdown program. Meeting with early care/preschool and kindergarten teachers helped

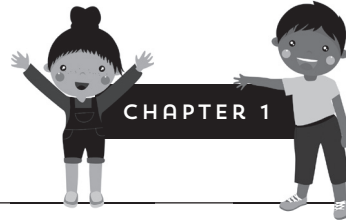
us gauge how well the practices of preschool-level programs in our community aligned with the expectations of kindergarten teachers. After meeting with kindergarten teachers, and then later with early care/preschool teachers, it became clear that there was a lack of collaborative partnership opportunities between the two groups. In order to help facilitate communication between preschool and kindergarten teachers, our library has since planned a meeting that will bring the two together.

There are many benefits that your library may find from collaborating with the teachers in your own community. Chapter four of this book, “Public Libraries Bridging the Gap,” offers some guidance for building collaborative partnerships with preschool and kindergarten teachers, but there may be other ways that your library may find for your own community. The most important thing is that you make the effort to establish partnerships. As our library heard many times during the process, other organizations may not think of the public library as a school readiness service provider unless you make the effort to reach out.

While our library’s Countdown to Kindergarten program offers one framework option, there are other school readiness services that can be incorporated into your own library’s early literacy-based programs. There are many ways that your entire statewide library system can become involved. In chapter eight of this book, “Examples of Public Library School Readiness Programs,” you will find examples of local and statewide programs. The ideas in this chapter can be used to help you develop a program for individual libraries, or to help libraries from across your state develop a collaborative initiative. The research involved in preparing our library’s Countdown program led to the realization that there was not a consistent level of public library school readiness services being offered across the state of Kentucky. This realization led me to approach our state library system about establishing a task force that would work together to address school readiness programming on a statewide level.

As outlined in chapter nine, the task force worked together to promote public library services among other school readiness services in the state of Kentucky. The public library was not at the early childhood legislative table at the time. As members of our task force approached local and statewide legislators and those working in the state’s early childhood office, we were pleasantly surprised at the positive response we received. By and large, the sentiment we heard each time we made these connections was, “We never even thought of the public library, but it makes sense!” This experience taught us that public libraries have to be better advocates of the services that we provide. We have not been our own best champions in the past, and we need to understand that a lack of self-advocacy may mean that we are not affording ourselves the opportunity to serve those who most need our services because we are not reaching them. Additionally, we

have learned how important it is to fully understand how what we do connects to school readiness and early childhood development as a whole. For this reason, our task force attempts to connect librarians in our state to training opportunities that help develop knowledge and intentionality of school readiness programming. We also work to connect to early childhood organizations and advisory boards on a state level. Through working to build these connections, we have been able to offer ourselves as early literacy experts, and to receive support for our school readiness services. It is my hope that this book will help other local and state library systems do the same.



THE BASICS OF *Early Childhood* DEVELOPMENT

IN ORDER FOR YOUR SCHOOL READINESS PROGRAM TO HAVE THE greatest impact, it is important that you have a basic understanding of early childhood development. While this chapter of the book is certainly not inclusive of every early childhood development theory there is, it does provide a foundational overview to help you connect your school readiness program to specific developmental milestones that occur throughout early childhood. If you intentionally connect your program-planning choices to these milestones, your program is more likely to help prepare children, families, and schools within your community for the transition to kindergarten.

There are many child development theories that have evolved over time in response to current research findings. While there are theories that have existed for quite some time about the way that the young mind develops and learning occurs—and we will touch on several of these—the brain development research of the 1990s has made the biggest impact on how we look at early childhood development today. In order to provide services that truly link to where children are and where they need to be before kindergarten, it is imperative that you have a basic understanding of developmental domains and theories, as well as how the brain develops during the preschool years.

Early Childhood Development Theories

Theorists such as Jean Piaget, Erik Erikson, Lev Vygotsky, and Arnold Gesell helped pave the way for today's understanding of early childhood development. While each of these theorists developed very different theories long ago, each theory connects to skills that are important for school readiness today.

Jean Piaget's theory of cognitive development asserts that children move through four different stages during childhood.¹ This theory further suggests that two of these stages occur during early childhood, and that a child must move through each developmental stage before she can truly learn. According to Piaget's theory, children from birth to age two are in the *sensorimotor* stage. In this stage, children learn about the world through movements and sensations. This means that children learn through actively doing—by manipulating the things in the world around them. At age two, according to Piaget's theory, children move into the *preoperational* stage. Children continue to move through this stage until the age of seven. During the preoperational stage, children begin to use words and pictures to represent ideas. This stage coincides with the explosion of language that also occurs during this time, which we will discuss more in-depth later in this chapter.

Erik Erikson's theory of psychological development suggests the idea that children move through various stages in order to form an “ego identity,” which changes over time in response to new experiences and gained knowledge.² This ego identity, according to Erikson's theory, develops into competencies that form a child's identity over time. This theory concentrates on the impact that the environment has on a child's personality development.

Another theory that focuses on how children learn is Lev Vygotsky's constructivism theory.³ This theory suggests that children learn through social interaction with others, and that this social interaction, in turn, leads to a child's cognitive development. According to Vygotsky's theory, all learning is social, and modes of communication are based on tools from the child's culture, through language, reading, and writing. This theory focuses on the environment around the child as the primary factor impacting how a child learns.

One of the first early childhood experts to develop a list of “norms” or milestones of early childhood development was Arnold Gesell. Gesell was a well-known pediatrician and believed that the innate nature of maturing has more influence over a child's development than that of the external environment.⁴ The modern concept of child development being organized into levels of “ages and stages” stemmed from Gesell's theories and research.

Ages and Stages

There have been several versions of developmental milestones published since the work of Gesell. The term “ages and stages” has become a universal term used by early childhood experts in order to organize milestones. Using Gesell’s work as a guideline, there is somewhat general consensus regarding the overall sequence of developmental skills, though age level divisions may vary slightly from source to source. Pediatricians often use some form of an ages-and-stages screening tool in order to assess a child’s developmental growth. Many well-known early childhood psychologists and pediatricians have published their own versions of milestones or ages and stages guidelines, as well.

The Ages & Stages Questionnaire (ASQ) screening tool is used to identify areas of strength and developmental need according to milestones.⁵ The ASQ asks parents to share observations of their child’s behavior across developmental areas. The ASQ is used to identify children who might need early intervention services before a child begins school. Many public library systems have become trained in administering the ASQ and offer this as one of their school readiness services for parents. Before your library offers any type of screening as a service to your community, it is important to acquire the relevant, required training. It is also important that library staff who are trained in using screening tools are familiar with the basics of early childhood development included in this chapter.

Brain Development Research

Arguably, the research that has had the most impact on our understanding of how children develop skills is the brain development research published in the 1990s by the National Research Council and Institute of Medicine.⁶ This research provided evidence that a child’s development is not solely dependent on the natural course of developmental milestones, nor on the impact of the environment around them, but a combination of the two. This research also provided evidence that the human brain develops at the most rapid rate during the first few years of life. From the time of birth until a child reaches the age of five, the brain forms seven hundred to one thousand new neuron connections per second. From the age of six on, new connections slow down significantly, making the first few years of life before a child reaches kindergarten the optimal time for learning.

Language skills develop at a rapid rate during this time as well, and are directly connected to the language that a child hears in his natural environment. A child learns how to communicate by the interactions around him. When an infant is nurtured, spoken to, and responded to, his cries will develop into babbling, which typically leads to a language explosion of more than two hundred words by the age of two. By age five, a child who has been raised in a language-rich environment will likely speak over two thousand words.⁷

Language and communication development is directly linked to a child's vocabulary and literacy skill development. Understanding how a child's brain develops will help you plan activities that foster language and literacy in your school readiness program. It is equally important that you model practices for parents and caregivers in order for your program to have the most impact. Parents play the most important role in developing learning habits, and they know their children best. Providing guidance and making suggestions for activities that are feasible for parents to do with their children at home will reach beyond the walls of your program room and into the homes of the families you serve.

Early Childhood Developmental Domains

There are five widely accepted domains of early childhood development. These five areas of development are commonly identified within school readiness definitions and used in screening tools that measure a child's development as they enter kindergarten. While some early childhood experts may label these domains a little differently, the following are the most common:

GROSS AND FINE MOTOR (PHYSICAL)

This domain includes large and small muscle movements. Gross motor activities are those that require large movements, such as running, jumping, skipping, and walking. Fine motor activities are those that engage the smaller muscles, such as writing, cutting, gripping, and eye-hand coordinated activities.

SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL

This domain includes a child's ability to learn how to play and get along with others, as well as the child's self-perception and the ability to regulate her own emotions. A child's ability to create bonds with others around her and to relate to the emotions of others are also social-emotional skills.

COGNITIVE

A child's ability to pretend and explore are examples of early childhood cognitive skills, as is a child's ability to understand concepts, such as numbers, colors, letters, and shapes. Cognitive skills include the development of logical and creative thinking.

COMMUNICATIVE (LANGUAGE)

This domain includes a child's ability to listen and communicate through speaking and responding. Developing language skills is strongly associated with literacy skill development. This area also includes a child's ability to communicate through drawing and writing as well as a child's development of auditory communication skills, such as the ability to listen to stories and books.

ADAPTIVE (SELF-HELP)

This domain refers to the child's ability to adapt to new situations and transitions. Adaptive skills relate to the child's ability to care for his own needs, such as taking care of bathroom needs, hanging up a jacket, and making alternative choices when met with obstacles.

These five domains offer a reference point for creating programs and services which foster growth in developmentally appropriate skills. In order to connect each child in your program to each developmental domain, you also need to understand the concept of developmentally appropriate practice.

Developmentally Appropriate Practice

Developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) refers to the foundational belief that activities should align both with typically progressing early childhood milestones and with the individual development of each child. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) officially adopted DAP as a part of its position statement in the late 1980s.⁸ Most preschool programs today are built on the principles of developmentally appropriate practice. Unfortunately, not all children will have a formal preschool experience prior to kindergarten. In fact, according to the National Center for Education Statistics, approximately 44 percent of preschool-age children do not attend a formal preschool program.⁹ Your school readiness program will likely include many of the children who are within this population. Understanding and applying the concepts of DAP will help you provide services that are beneficial to children who do not have any other formal experience before starting kindergarten.

The core belief underlying DAP is that those who work with preschool children should build relationships with the children and families in their programs in order to understand their abilities and needs. Knowing the children and families in your program should help you set goals that are “challenging and achievable,” one of the main objectives of developmentally appropriate practice.¹⁰ While it may seem difficult to develop a relationship in the span of six weeks with every child and family who attends your program, this book provides interactive strategies to help you identify and meet your attendees' needs. Using these strategies, you will be able to help families and children make connections between early childhood experiences and preparing for school.

Connecting Early Childhood Development to School Readiness

This chapter has provided several pieces of early childhood development information. As you prepare your school readiness program, begin with these pieces

as your foundational base. In order to create a program that intentionally bridges the gap between early childhood and kindergarten, you must understand why you are doing the things that you are doing in your programs. When you choose books, songs, and activities, do not choose them simply because they are “cute” or entertaining, or fit the overall theme of a program. Ask yourself how each of them relates to developmental theories and domains, brain development research, and developmentally appropriate practice. While you may find that you have already been offering some activities that connect to each of these, there is power and purpose in understanding the connection. When we understand the full impact that our school readiness programs can have for families and children, we become better early childhood advocates within our communities.

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