

When my daughter started kindergarten this fall, I was terrified. I feared the unknown. I hoped she would make friends easily. I hoped she would like her school and become comfortable in a new, unfamiliar place. Most importantly, I hoped this would be the first step toward a lifelong love of learning.

Luckily, we were met at the door by a smiling face, a calm demeanor, and sensitivity that quickly put my fears to rest. My daughter's teacher had been through this before; she knew that parents are usually more apprehensive than kids.

ONE OF THE HALLMARKS OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IS THE IDEA OF ACTIVE, PARTICIPATORY LEARNING.

As my daughter jumped in, getting to know her new classmates over a tub of Play-Doh, I was loaded down with schedules, class rosters, school newsletters, and the all-important curriculum outline. This didn't seem like the kindergarten I remembered. In fact, it looked downright challenging. Reading readiness, art, science, music, social studies, and computer skills were to be part of the daily schedule. At the same time, the

classroom was comfortable and inviting—small tables for group learning, bean bags on the floor, a reading loft, and a computer corner!

I didn't know *what* to expect from this school year. I didn't know what she would learn, and I didn't know how to prepare her for first grade. It was overwhelming. I felt I had a lot to learn about kindergarten, too, and it was going to require some research.

THE HISTORY OF KINDERGARTEN

Friedrich Wilhelm August Froebel opened the first kindergarten in Germany on June 28, 1840, at the Play and Activity Institute. In German, *kindergarten* literally translates to *children's garden*. Froebel, recognizing that children excel in an active environment, encouraged learning through dance, song, gardening, and play. To accompany his teaching philosophy, he developed a series of building blocks to encourage hands-on learning and exploration.

Margarethe Meyer Schurz furthered Froebel's philosophy when she opened the first U.S. kindergarten in Watertown, Wisconsin. Schurz crafted her own teaching model to create the program while successfully home-schooling her five children.

Kindergarten today is part of the preschool curriculum in many countries, but in the United States it is the first year of formal education. Most kindergarteners are between 5 and 6 years old when they begin their elementary education and remain at the same school until they are 11 or 12. In years past, it was typical for children to attend kindergarten for half of the day and remain at home for the other half. Whether it's an effort to close the achievement gap, address the academic rigors of No Child Left Behind, or simply better prepare students for the transition to first grade, many schools now offer full-day programs.

THE IMPORTANCE OF ACTIVE LEARNING

One of the hallmarks of early childhood education is the idea of active, participatory learning. High/Scope and Montessori are two of the most common teaching methods for young children. Both philosophies seek to teach students through play and empower them through hands-on learning—letting kids touch, build, sing, dance, and explore their world. They also encourage teachers to guide children through learning and exploration rather than dictating a strict curriculum.

Learning focus is where these philosophies differ. High/Scope emphasizes its *plan-do-review* sequence, encouraging children to make a plan for play, act out the play, and then review the success of that play. The Montessori method encourages child-empowerment through choice, allowing children to choose individual, age-appropriate activities that use all five senses within a timed work period.

Whether the teacher adheres to one method or uses a combination of philosophies, these kids are not sitting at a desk. Kindergarteners are learning to navigate the classroom through movement and play.

KINDERGARTEN CURRICULUM

Many children begin their first year of elementary school with some preschool classroom experience. Others may have attended daycare. Some kids may have remained at home with a parent or caregiver prior to kindergarten. Although children come to class with different levels of

experience, they will all acquire the necessary skills to move on to first grade over the course of the year.

Curriculums vary, but most children will learn to pre-read, write the letters in the alphabet, and do basic math with the help of objects. They will learn to be attentive and take turns speaking. They will learn how to be healthy through eating well and exercising. They will learn to express themselves with words, visual art, and music. Many kids will learn basic computer and library skills. And finally, they will learn how to make friends, go to school, and be away from their parents so that they may be successful learners for the entirety of their school careers.

Now I feel a bit more at ease with our transition to the big-kid school. My daughter has made some great friends. She knows how to get to the office, cafeteria, and playground. She is learning how to identify Texas on the U.S. map, how to add and subtract numbers, how to read *Clifford the Big Red Dog*, and most importantly, she is having a great time while gaining the foundation for lifelong learning.

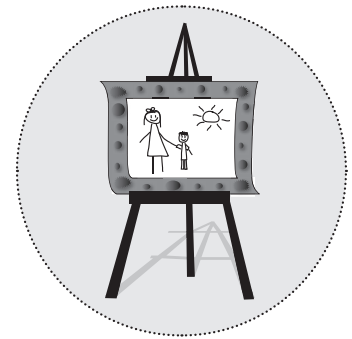
Sources: highscope.org; content.scholastic.com; hubbardscupboard.org; froebelweb.org; montessoriboard.com; ericdigests.org; *Microsoft Encarta*; wikipedia.org

KINDERGARTENS AROUND THE WORLD

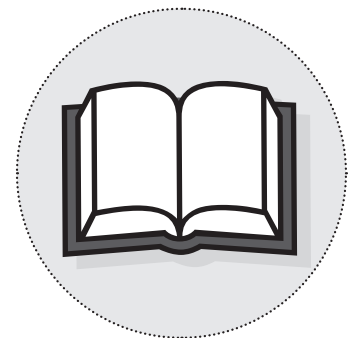
- *Germany*: Kindergartens are handled differently in each German state. Attending a kindergarten is neither mandatory nor free of charge, although it can be partly or wholly funded, depending on the guidelines of the local authority and the income of the parents.
- *United Kingdom*: Preschools are known as nursery schools or playgroups. The word *kindergarten* is sometimes used in the naming of private nurseries, which provide full-day child care for working mothers.
- *Ontario, Canada*: There are two grades of kindergarten: junior kindergarten and senior kindergarten. Both programs are optional.
- *France*: Preschool is known as *école maternelle*. Regulated by the French department of education, these free schools are available throughout the country, welcoming children aged 2 to 5. Preschool is not mandatory, but almost all children aged 3 to 5 attend.
- *Israel*: A kindergarten system has been developed to cope with the high percentage of working women. There are two streams: private and state-funded. Attendance is mandatory from the age of 5 years.
- *North Korea*: Children attend kindergarten between the ages of 4 and 5. Kindergartens are divided among the upper and lower classes. Upper-class kindergartens are structured and educational, whereas lower-class children receive little academic education.
- *Mexico*: Three years of preschool education is mandatory before elementary school. The kindergarten system was developed by Rosaura Zapata (1876-1963), who received the Belisario Domínguez Medal of Honor, Mexico's highest honor, for her contribution to education.

TIPS FOR KINDERGARTEN PARENTS

- Supply children with creative resources at home and encourage them to express their thoughts and feelings.



- Promote self-reliance by letting children make some decisions and giving them responsibilities at home.
- Read aloud to children and support their attempts to read.



- For a parent's guide to kindergarten topics, go to hubbardscupboard.org and click on the kindergarten link.