

SCHOOL READINESS

Early childhood is a critical period for learning and development. From birth to 5 years of age, children acquire language, develop learning and problem-solving skills, and obtain knowledge that is essential for helping them succeed in school and life. Children who begin kindergarten with early skills, such as early math, literacy, and attention-related skills, are more likely to have later academic achievement,¹ while those with fewer or less developed skills are more likely to attain lower levels of education and be unemployed as adults.²

School readiness can be defined as when a child possesses the skills, knowledge, and attitudes necessary for school and for later learning and life. It is suggested that school readiness is composed of five dimensions: physical well-being and motor development, social and emotional development, approaches to learning, language development and early literacy, and cognition and general knowledge.³ Although there is no standard measure of school readiness, there are several skills that can be assessed to indicate a child's readiness for school. For example, skills pertaining to early literacy and cognitive development include a child's ability to recognize the beginning sound of a word, recognize letters of the alphabet, clearly explain things that he or she has seen or done, write his or her first name, count to 20, recognize basic shapes, and use a pencil or crayon.

In 2007, the latest year for which data are available, approximately 93 percent of children aged 3–6 years not yet enrolled in kindergarten were reportedly understandable to strangers when speaking to them; 87 percent used their fingers when holding a pencil; 63 percent count-

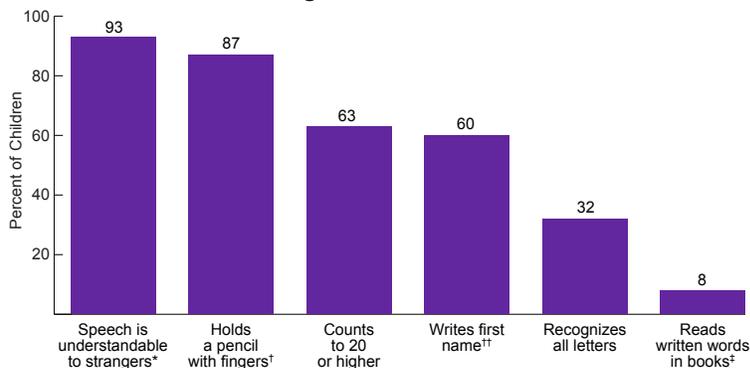
ed to 20 or higher; 60 percent could write their first name; 32 percent recognized all letters; and 8 percent could read the words written in books (figure 1).

School readiness varied widely by children's race and ethnicity. Among children aged 3–6 years, a lower percentage of Hispanics demonstrated each of the six skills compared to their non-Hispanic counterparts. For example, in 2007, a lower percentage of Hispanic children could read written words in a book (3 percent) compared to non-Hispanic White (8 percent), non-Hispanic Black (16 percent), and non-Hispanic Asian or Pacific Islander children (8 percent; figure 2).

School readiness also varied by household income as a percent of poverty. Children living in households with incomes below 100 percent of poverty were less likely than those in households with higher incomes to recognize all letters (21 versus 35 percent, respectively), count to 20 or higher (49 versus 67 percent, respectively), and write his or her first name (46 versus 64 percent, respectively). The percentage of children who could hold a pencil with his or her fingers, read written words in books, and speak understandably to strangers did not vary as widely by poverty status.

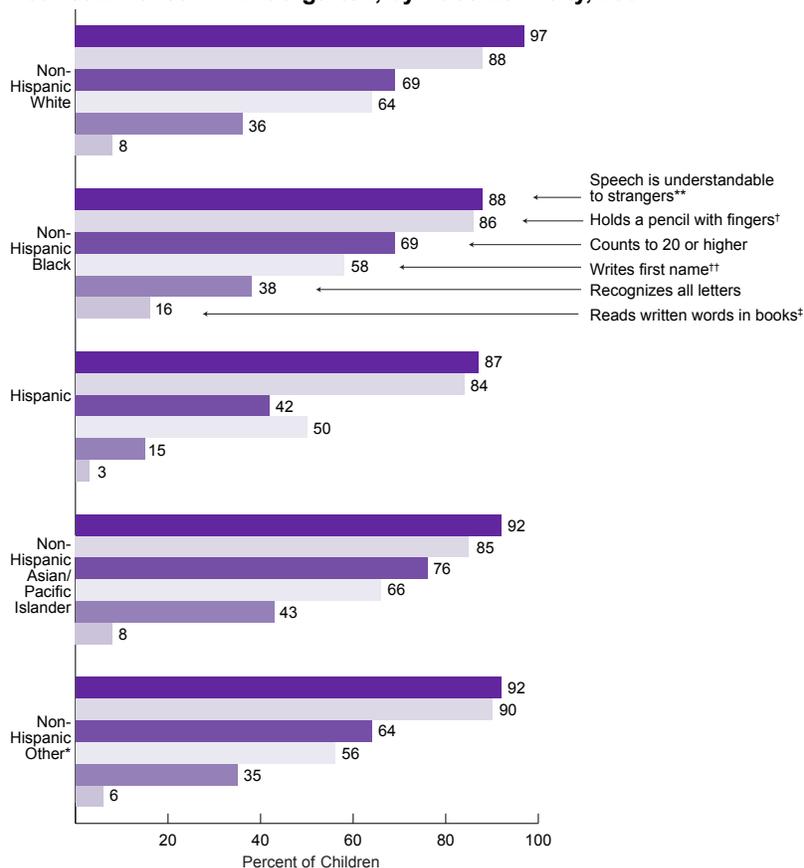
A number of federal programs work to ensure that children are ready for school. Two of these are the Head Start and Early Head Start programs, administered by the Administration on Children and Families in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. These programs provide early education, health, nutrition, and social services to low-income children and families.⁴

Figure 1. School Readiness Skills Among Children Aged 3–6 Years Not Yet Enrolled in Kindergarten, 2007



*Sometimes, often, or very often understandable to a stranger when speaking to them. †Use their fingers when holding a pencil as opposed to those who grip a pencil in their fists or cannot hold a pencil. ††Can write their first name, even if some letters are not quite right (e.g., backwards). ‡Children who read the words written in books as opposed to pretending to read.

Figure 2. School Readiness Skills Among Children Aged 3–6 Years Not Yet Enrolled in Kindergarten, by Race/Ethnicity, 2007



*Includes non-Hispanic American Indian or Alaska Natives, other races not specified, and children of two or more races. **Sometimes, often, or very often understandable to a stranger when speaking to them. †Use their fingers when holding a pencil as opposed to those who grip a pencil in their fists or cannot hold a pencil. ††Can write their first name, even if some letters are not quite right (e.g., backwards). ‡Children who read the words written in books as opposed to pretending to read.

Data Sources

Figure 1 and 2. O'Donnell K. *Parents' Reports of the School Readiness of Young Children from the National Household Education Surveys Program of 2007*. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics; August 2008. Available at: <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2008051>. Accessed October 6, 2014.

Endnotes

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