

What Does School Readiness Really Mean? SCRIPT

“Welcome to Session 1 of our **School Readiness and Building Lifelong Learners** series.

Across the next six weeks, we're going to explore what school readiness really means and, importantly, challenge some of the assumptions that can sit around that phrase.

Because when people hear ‘school ready’, they often jump straight to academic skills.

Can they write their name?

Can they count?

Can they recognise letters?

Can they sit still?

But true school readiness is much broader than that.

It includes confidence.

Communication.

Relationships.

Self-regulation.

Independence.

Curiosity.

And the ability to keep going when something is difficult.

So today's session is about widening the lens.

Not asking:

‘Can this child already do the things school will ask of them?’

But:

‘Does this child have the foundations that will help them learn, adapt and thrive once they get there?’”

Slide 2 – Safeguarding Spark

“Let's begin, as always, with our Safeguarding Spark.

The scenario is:

A parent tells you their child is extremely anxious about starting school and has begun having frequent toileting accidents and difficulty sleeping. What is the most appropriate response?

Would we tell the parent the child needs to become more independent before September?

Reassure them that all children worry and it will pass?

Avoid talking about school so the child doesn't become more anxious?

Or listen carefully and explore how the setting and family can work together to support the child's emotional security and transition?

The key thing here is that we're seeing anxiety beginning to affect the child's everyday functioning.

So we shouldn't dismiss it as simply ‘normal nerves’.

Instead, we need to understand what the child may be communicating and think about how adults can reduce uncertainty and increase emotional security.”



Slide 3 – Safeguarding Spark: Answer

“The most appropriate response is **C**:

Listen carefully, explore how the setting and family can support the child's emotional security and transition.

We don't need to rush straight to independence targets.

We don't need to minimise the concern.

And avoiding all discussion about school may actually leave the unknown feeling even bigger.

Instead, we work in partnership.

What specifically is worrying the child?

What do they already know about the new setting?

Would photographs help?

Visits?

A transition book?

Meeting key adults?

Practising some of the new routines gradually?

And if the level of distress becomes significant or we have wider concerns about the child's wellbeing, we follow the appropriate support and safeguarding procedures.

The key principle is:

School readiness should never come at the expense of emotional security.

Children learn best when they feel safe enough to engage.”

Slide 4 – Success Criteria

“By the end of today's session, we're aiming to achieve three things.

Firstly, understand what school readiness really means.

Secondly, challenge some common misconceptions about what children ‘need’ before starting school.

And thirdly, reflect on how Early Years practice develops the foundations children need to become confident, capable lifelong learners.

That final phrase is really important.

The goal is not simply to prepare children for one transition.

It is to build dispositions and behaviours that will help them far beyond September.

Curiosity.

Communication.

Resilience.

Independence.

Confidence.

The ability to ask for help.

The ability to recover from mistakes.

Those are not just 'school readiness skills'.

They are life skills."

Slide 5 – The Journey Ahead

"Let's look at where we're going across this six-week series.

Today we begin with **What Does School Readiness Really Mean?**

Next week, we'll focus on **Building Independence and Self-Care.**

Week 3 looks at **Developing Attention, Listening and Learning Behaviours.**

Week 4 explores **Building Resilience and a 'Have-a-Go' Attitude.**

Week 5 focuses on **Supporting Successful Transitions.**

And finally, we'll move beyond the transition itself with **Building Lifelong Learners – Beyond School Readiness.**

There's a deliberate progression.

We're not starting with handwriting.

We're starting with the whole child.

Then we'll look at some of the core capabilities that help children access school successfully.

And finally, we'll ask:

How do we make sure our ambition is bigger than simply getting children through the classroom door in September?"

Slide 6 – Why This Matters

"When we hear 'school ready', it's very easy to think about children being able to:

write their name,

count to twenty,

recognise letters,

or read simple words.

Those are the kinds of things adults can easily see and measure.

But what about being able to:

separate from a trusted adult?

Ask for help?

Manage belongings?

Listen and respond?

Play alongside others?

Or have a go when something becomes difficult?

Those things may be less visible on a checklist, but they matter enormously.

Imagine a child who can recognise every letter but becomes completely overwhelmed if they make a mistake.

Or a child who can count confidently but cannot tell an unfamiliar adult that they need the toilet.

Academic knowledge matters.

But it sits within a much wider developmental picture.

School readiness is about the whole child.”

Slide 7 – What Does the Evidence Tell Us?

“The EYFS is very clear that children's early experiences should build strong foundations for future learning and development.

And that includes all areas of learning.

Communication and Language.

Personal, Social and Emotional Development.

Physical Development.

Literacy.

Mathematics.

Understanding the World.

Expressive Arts and Design.

But underpinning all of these are the **Characteristics of Effective Teaching and Learning**.

Playing and Exploring:

‘I want to find out.’

Active Learning:

‘I’ll keep trying.’

Creating and Thinking Critically:

‘I have an idea.’

Those phrases capture something really important.

School readiness isn't simply what children know.

It's also **how they approach learning**.

Do they want to investigate?

Can they stay with something?

Can they generate ideas?

That learning disposition matters enormously.”

Slide 8 – Myth vs Reality

“This slide challenges some of the most common assumptions around school readiness.

The first myth is:

‘They need to be able to write their name.’

The reality is that children need developing fine-motor strength, communication, confidence and meaningful opportunities to mark-make.

Writing a name is one outcome of a much wider developmental process.

Then:

‘They need to sit still for long periods.’

Actually, young children need gradually developing attention, listening and self-regulation.

Those skills develop over time.

Then:

‘They need to know all their numbers and letters.’

What children really need is rich experience of language, stories, rhyme, number and mathematical thinking.

And finally:

‘They need to be independent.’

Yes, growing independence matters.

But children still need adults.

The goal is not complete self-sufficiency.

It's increasing capability with appropriate support.

The line at the bottom sums this up:

Readiness is developmental — not a checklist.”

Slide 9 – Ready for School... or Ready to Learn?

“This slide gives us two hypothetical children.

Child A can write their name and recognise many letters.

But they become distressed by mistakes.

They struggle to ask for help.

Find sharing difficult.

And give up quickly.

Child B cannot yet write their name independently.

But they listen with interest.

Communicate their needs.

Persevere.

Play collaboratively.

Love stories.

And approach new experiences confidently.

So who is more 'school ready'?

The point is not to say Child B is universally 'better' or that academic skills don't matter.

The point is that school readiness cannot be reduced to a small set of visible academic outcomes.

Child A may know more academically, but some of the behaviours needed to access learning successfully are less secure.

Child B may have fewer formal skills, but they possess strong foundations for engagement.

That's why school readiness has to be viewed through the **whole child** rather than a list."

Slide 10 – The Foundations That Matter

"This slide gives us six really useful foundations.

Children need to develop the ability to:

Regulate — beginning to recognise and manage emotions with adult support.

Communicate — expressing needs, ideas and experiences.

Relate — building relationships, cooperating and participating.

Be independent — managing increasingly more for themselves.

Engage — listening, concentrating and becoming absorbed in learning.

And:

Persevere — having a go, making mistakes and trying again.

Notice how interconnected these are.

A child who can communicate their needs is often better able to regulate.

A child who can regulate is more able to engage.

A child who feels secure in relationships is more likely to have a go.

These are not separate boxes.

They work together.

And importantly, these are foundations children will draw on throughout their education — not just in the first few weeks of Reception."

Slide 11 – Independence Doesn't Mean “Do It Alone”

“This is a really important clarification.

Being school ready does not mean children no longer need adults.

In fact, children develop independence **through supportive relationships**.

The slide gives us a lovely progression.

We move from:

‘I'll do it for you.’

to:

‘Let's do it together.’

to:

‘You have a go — I'm here if you need me.’

That is scaffolding in a very simple form.

Imagine putting on a coat.

At first, we may need to do much of it.

Then perhaps the child finds the sleeves while we help with the zip.

Later, they try everything while we stay nearby.

Eventually, they manage independently.

Our goal is not to remove support quickly.

It is to make support gradually **less necessary**.

That is very different from suddenly deciding:

‘You're starting school soon, so you should be able to do that yourself now.’

Independence grows through repeated opportunity and sensitive adult support.”

Slide 12 – School Readiness in Everyday Practice

“One of the most reassuring messages in this presentation is that school readiness is not another activity we need to fit into the day.

Take lunchtime.

It might look like an ordinary routine.

But children are learning to manage cutlery.

Open containers.

Ask for what they need.

Wait.

Talk with others.

Take responsibility.

And manage frustration.

That is enormous learning.

The same applies to arrival.

Putting on coats.

Choosing provision.

Tidying up.

Moving between spaces.

Using the toilet.

Solving a disagreement.

Waiting for a turn.

These ordinary moments are where readiness develops.

Sometimes we can become so focused on planning 'school readiness activities' that we miss the richest opportunities already built into the day.

School readiness is built through hundreds of ordinary moments every day."

Slide 13 – What About Academic Learning?

"This is an important balance.

School readiness does **not** mean academic learning is unimportant.

Children absolutely benefit from rich experiences of:

books and storytelling,

sounds, rhyme and language,

number and pattern,

mark-making,

and knowledge of the world.

We absolutely want children developing literacy and mathematical understanding.

But those experiences should sit **alongside**, not replace:

play,

communication,

physical development,

relationships,

and self-regulation.

And the line at the bottom of the slide is worth remembering:

The goal isn't to recreate Year 1 in Reception or Reception in Nursery.

The goal is to provide **excellent Early Years education**.

We don't prepare children for the next phase by prematurely turning the current phase into it.
We prepare them by giving them the strongest possible foundations now.”

Slide 14 – Reflection Activity

“For today's reflection activity, work together and complete this sentence:

‘A child is school ready when they can...’

Generate as many ideas as possible.

Don't edit yourselves initially.

Then group your ideas under:

Emotional development.

Communication.

Social development.

Independence.

Learning behaviours.

And:

Knowledge and skills.

Once you've grouped them, look at the balance.

Which areas dominate?

Perhaps your list is heavily weighted towards academic knowledge.

Perhaps independence features strongly but emotional regulation is rarely mentioned.

Then ask:

Which areas receive the greatest emphasis in our current provision?

And:

Which might need greater attention?

Finish by agreeing **one aspect of school readiness** you want to strengthen as a setting.

Not ten.

One.

That's your first small tweak.”

Slide 15 – Spark Forward

“This week's Spark Forward takes the idea straight into everyday practice.

Choose one routine.

Arrival.

Snack time.

Getting changed.

Tidying.

Choosing provision.

Going outdoors.

Home time.

Then ask:

‘What could I stop doing for children here that they are becoming ready to do for themselves?’

That’s such a useful question because sometimes adult habits continue long after children are capable.

We automatically carry something.

Open something.

Put something away.

Make the choice.

Remind.

Direct.

Perhaps this week we can step back slightly.

Not abandon support.

Just remove one unnecessary layer of it.

Then observe.

Do children rise to the expectation?

Do they need a scaffold?

Does it take longer initially?

Probably.

But that extra time is where independence develops.

Independence grows when children get opportunities to practise it.”

Slide 16 – Final Reflection

“I want to finish with the central message of today's session.

School readiness is not a race towards formal learning.

It is about building foundations.

Children who are curious enough to explore.

Confident enough to communicate.

Independent enough to have a go.

Secure enough to ask for help.

Resilient enough to try again.

And excited enough to learn.

Those children may not all arrive in Reception knowing exactly the same letters or numbers.

They shouldn't.

Development is individual.

But they are arriving with something incredibly powerful:

a readiness to engage with learning.

And ultimately, our ambition should be bigger than creating children who are simply ready for school.

We want children who are ready to learn —

for life.”

Slide 17 – Research & Evidence

“Today's session draws on the **EYFS Statutory Framework, Development Matters, Birth to 5 Matters**, the EEF's **Preparing for Literacy** guidance and the **Early Years Evidence Store**.

Together, these sources reinforce the holistic nature of Early Years development.

Communication matters.

Language matters.

Self-regulation matters.

High-quality interaction matters.

Early literacy and mathematics matter.

Play matters.

Relationships matter.

The mistake is thinking we have to choose one or the other.

Strong school readiness comes from a rich Early Years experience where all of those things work together.

So as you move into the rest of this series, perhaps keep one question in mind:

‘Are we preparing children to perform school — or preparing them to thrive within it?’

The first is about meeting a list of expectations.

The second is about building confident, curious and increasingly independent learners.

And that is the much bigger goal.”