

# big PLANS in print

Connecting Big Plans' Parents to their Communities

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## Social Skills: 5 Tips to Help Shy Kids Make Friends

BY REBECCA BOWEN

A few months ago, I was attending a training session out-of-state. Typically I have a co-worker or friend along with me for conventions or classes, but that week I was flying solo. The first evening, after grabbing a plate and a drink, I looked around the dining room for a place to sit. And I froze.

Even as an adult, there are few things as anxiety-inducing as the “cafeteria scenario.”

For kids, especially those who are shy or anxious, navigating social situations with new people can be a challenge. Luckily, getting the hang of a few basics and practicing them often can help put your child at ease now (and into adulthood).

If you have a child who is shy or anxious in social situations, you can help them learn to:

- 1. Read the room.** In our cafeteria scenario, is it easier to approach a table with a big group of friends, all talking loudly to each other or a table with one or two quiet people? To set your child up for success, encourage her to seek out others who look like they don't know a lot of people either. It's easier to engage with another new person who isn't familiar with the group than someone already enmeshed in a close crowd of friends.
- 2. Gain attention.** The first thing you say to someone new should be warm, brief, and polite – just enough to get them to shift their attention to you. Encourage your child to practice using simple “interrupting words” such as: hello, excuse me, oh hey, or good morning. Model these words for your child and practice by pretending and role playing.
- 3. Get in there.** Once you have someone's attention, ask for what you want. Show your child how to give the other person a concrete call to action with a yes/no question. This could be as simple as “Can I sit with you?” or “Want to play basketball?” When there's a clear invitation to interact, most people will say “yes.”
- 4. Introduce yourself.** Once you're in there, either sitting at the table, playing the game or working on the group project, let them know who you are. Demonstrate how your child could introduce himself, giving a simple detail or bit of information to show who he is. “Hi, I'm Ben. I'm in Miss Smith's class.”
- 5. Connect and stand out.** Once you've approached someone, gotten her attention, joined her group and told her who you are, it's time to find some common ground. Give your child examples of questions she can ask to discover what she has in common with a new friend. This link can lead to further conversation and help her stand out from others in a positive way.

And if you stand out, others will remember you and hopefully invite you back next time you're standing awkwardly, tray in hand, in the cafeteria.

*Rebecca Bowen, M.A. CCC-SLP, is a speech-language pathologist with extensive experience in articulation, language disorders, fluency, voice and hearing loss. Reprinted with permission: [www.theinspiredtreehouse.com](http://www.theinspiredtreehouse.com)*



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# When Should My Child Start Kindergarten?

## Options to Consider When Your Child Has a Late Birthday

“This is one of the questions we are continually asked by families”, says Carmen Souster, Director and Principal of Big PLANS for Little Kids. “Unfortunately, there is no easy answer”.

Right now, in Alberta, a child must be four years old on or before March 1st to start kindergarten in September of the same calendar year. The age range in one class may be as wide as 18 months.

“Given the vast levels of growth we see in a child’s fine and gross motor skills, in their emotional regulation, their social communication and play skills and in their executive functioning skills during their last few months of preschool, it is reasonable to say that they NEED time and opportunities in a play-rich environment between the ages of 3-5 years in order to be READY,” comments Souster. “Having the time to learn and experiment with peers in an unstructured play setting, is a BIG deal when it comes to making a decision about entering a formalized learning setting, such as Kindergarten. Academic success is now being predicted not just by measures of IQ and cognitive scores, it is a reflection of the child’s ability to adapt socially and demonstrate Grit when problems arise.”

There is talk of a proposed change to the provincial Education Act in which children entering kindergarten in the fall must turn five by Dec. 31 of the same year. If this change takes effect, we would see fewer very young kids entering classroom (<http://www.asba.ab.ca>); however, no decisions regarding the proclamation of the Education Act have been made at this time.

### **So what should parents consider when trying to make the decision to send their child to kindergarten early or late?**

A careful look at research indicates there is no definite date at which children are more or less ready to go to kindergarten. A study from Stanford University ( “The Gift of Time? School Starting Age and Mental Health,” was published Oct. 5, by the National Bureau of Economic Research) shows that Danish kids who postponed kindergarten for up to one year showed dramatically higher levels of self-control at age seven with benefits up to age 11. Despite this new research, studies are still

mixed on the practice of postponing entrance into school.

The answers are not simple. Each child brings their own unique characteristics with them, including how they have lived and worked through their life experiences and environment to date. This means, teacher and parent conversations are vital to the decision process. “It seems like a decision that’s going to make or break your child’s future, and it probably isn’t,” said Deborah Stipek, dean of Stanford University’s School of Education in an article written by the Washington Post. “The quality of the program, the child and the teacher (are) so much more important than the age at which he enters school.”



“Talk with your preschool, day-home, daycare providers or your family and friends,” explains Souster. “Having other perspectives on your child’s participation in activities when you are not there, can help you to understand their true abilities better. Does your child stand out as a leader, as a follower, as a quiet observer, or as a strong decision maker? Are they confident in their play with others or do they require mediation by an adult on a frequent basis. Have they achieved their early milestones ahead of time or within average or later ranges? The more information you have about your child’s abilities across a variety of different learning contexts and across different levels of independent expectations, the more confident you will feel when you make your decision about starting school.”

### **SOME CONSIDERATIONS**

#### ***In waiting a year your child may:***

- have extended exposure to imaginative play and environments that aid in their emotional and intellectual self-regulation.
- have time to develop physically, intellectually and socially. Within a 12-month year, older children tend to show more advanced developmental skills than younger children; however, the social-emotional development of a child may not be noticed until later grades.
- be the oldest in the class.
- have a longer attention span and his ability to follow directions and get along with peers may be stronger.
- need alternative child-care, with possible financial implications for the family.

#### ***In starting early:***

- younger children may show more rapid growth over time than older children. Some studies show the gap is completely gone by the end of the elementary years.
- the kindergarten curriculum may be developmentally inappropriate for your child.
- parents may need to be extra supportive this first year.
- your child may be the youngest in the class and lack emotional and physical maturity needed to succeed. Being the youngest will continue throughout school, not just in kindergarten.
- your child may not be fully toilet trained or have the capacity to communicate clearly.
- your child may not be ready to focus for longer periods of time or still requires nap.

“The term ‘Readiness’, in and of itself, is a loaded term,” explains Souster. By it’s definition, it suggests the idea that a child needs to have had re-petitive (re-ady) exposure to enough opportunities and experiences, that they have adapted (re-ady/adapt/adjust) to no longer look for supplemental adult support in familiar day-to-day routines. Recent research supports finding a ‘just-right’ time for every child. Chronological age is NOT the best indicator of the readiness that children need to feel independently successful. Watching them succeed and feel confident about this success, however, is. The decision to send your child to kindergarten early or late will always be an individual one.”

## TRY THIS AT HOME

Attend story time or rhyme time at your local library.

Make trail mix together. Have your child scoop and mix 1/2 cup of dried fruits, like raisins, apricots etc. with 1/2 cup sliced nuts, and 1/2 cup whole grain cereal pieces together.

On a December calendar use stickers or a marker to count down until Christmas or your winter holiday starts.

Thread beads onto a pipe cleaner with your child. Encourage your child to make a pattern red, green, white, repeat. Bend into the shape of a candy cane and hang!

Teach your child how to do jumping jacks. Ask them to show you how high they can jump, ask them to jump over different items.

*For more great parenting tips and activities, visit the preschool activity calendar at [www.albertahealthservices.ca](http://www.albertahealthservices.ca)*

## Oh the things you can do with a Cardboard Box!



Uses for Cardboard Boxes:

- make a tunnel
- make a cave or a fort with old sheets and blankets
- make a puppet theatre
- make a doll house
- draw on a clown face, cut a hole for the mouth and throw balls or bean bags into it
- make a train by connecting several boxes: shoe boxes to put dolls in, bigger boxes for children to sit in

Make footprints in the snow and see if your child can follow in your steps. Follow the leader! Make zigzags, circles, jump, etc.



## Peppermint Sparkle Play Dough

Make the peppermint sparkle playdough to give as a gift for someone. Make enough to keep some to play with also!

- 1 cup white flour
- 1/2 cup salt
- 2 tbsp. of cream of tartar (found in spice section at the grocery store)
- 1 tbsp. oil
- 1 cup hot boiling water
- Food coloring, peppermint extract and glitter sparkles

Mix the first four ingredients in a bowl, while boiling the water. Then mix the hot water with the other remaining ingredients and mix altogether with the flour mixture in the bowl. Knead, until soft and then cool! Store in a plastic container or re-sealable bag. Great gift!

## BRAIN STORY CERTIFICATION

The Brain Story is a story about how experiences shape our brains. As such, it is also a story about human relationships, because we depend on those around us for the experiences that build our brain architecture.

As a community, when we identify how and when to support children and families in the course of development, we can change how the story unfolds so that all of us, regardless of background and life circumstances, have the chance to lead happier, healthier lives, build stronger communities, and reduce risk for mental health problems, including addiction. The Alberta Family Wellness Initiative (AFWI) has developed an online course to make Brain Story science available to professionals and the public. Brain Story Certification is designed for those seeking a deeper understanding of brain development and its consequences for lifelong health. The course is also designed for professionals seeking certification in a wide range of fields.



[https://www.](https://www.albertafamilywellness.org/training)

[albertafamilywellness.org/training](https://www.albertafamilywellness.org/training)

An in-depth course for professionals interested in the scientific underpinnings of the Brain Story includes:

- 30 hours of instruction time – completed at your own pace online
- Videos of over 30 leading experts in neurobiology and mental health
- Certification in Brain Story science

Brain Story Certification is open to anyone at no cost to the learner.

For more information or to register visit: <http://www.albertafamilywellness.org/training>.

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# Why Play?



Play is a learning experience for children. Play is a universal and vital process for the healthy development of every child. Play is the child's work. It allows the child to explore the world in which he or she lives and grows.

Play programs give adults and children the chance to play together in a safe and stimulating environment. By being involved together, adults and children get interested in each other's activities and learn to communicate.

Play nurtures sharing and growth. Toys are the basic tools that children use to enrich their play and learning. There is no one "right" toy. Children need a variety of toys and play materials to match their developmental stage, their interests and their capabilities. They need toys for rainy days, for active play with friends outdoors, for sick days and holidays and toys to encourage sharing and cooperation. Think about your child's unique needs and interests when you choose his or her toys.

The "Why Play?" series of brochures produced by The Canadian Association of Family Resource Programs (FRP Canada) offers information to parents and caregivers on play and child development in 11 languages, in addition to English and French. The brochures suggest play activities for children in the following age groups: 0–6 months, 2–3 years, 6–12 months, 3–4 years, 1–2 years, 4–5 years. The full list of printable brochures is available at [www.frp.ca](http://www.frp.ca).

## ***Three and Four Year-Olds***

Three and four year olds like to make believe. Give your child empty food boxes and let him pretend he is shopping for groceries. With pots and pans, he can "cook"; with a small tea set, he can give a party for his dolls. His imagination, and a few dress-up clothes, will let him pretend to be the people he admires. Puppets will encourage him to act out his favourite stories.

Use picture cards to play matching games with your child. You can also match shapes, colours and familiar objects, like socks. These games all encourage memory skills.



Toys that can be used by more than one person at a time encourage sharing and interaction among children of the same age. Some examples are building blocks, train sets, doll houses, toy garages and collections of small animals with a "barn" made out of a shoebox. You can also make a stove and fridge out of cardboard boxes to create a play kitchen.

Play simple games like "I spy" that hold your child's attention. Choose an object that you and your child can both see, then give clues so that your child can guess what you have chosen. Give your clues by saying, "I spy, with my little eye, something that is...." When your child guesses, it is her turn to choose an object and give you clues.

Play active games with your child. Pretend to be animals and walk like a cat, slither like a snake, jump like a frog. Your child may be ready to try pedalling a tricycle.

Your child will be able to compare things and notice the difference between big and little, thick and thin. She will also be able to sort things by shape, size and colour. Give her objects she can sort, such as buttons, stones, shells and beads. She may enjoy sorting them into the separate compartments of an egg carton.

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