
Gearing Up for Kindergarten
Project Overview & Year-End Report for 2015-2016

Executive Summary

The academic and social expectations for children entering kindergarten today are more intensive than in previous generations. In order to aid their children in gaining knowledge and self-confidence, parents need to be made aware of and given supportive tools to prepare their children for kindergarten. Parents are a child's first and best teachers, and many parents need and want support in their role of preparing their children for success in school. *Gearing Up for Kindergarten* provides support by improving access to information, providing early learning activities and parent education classes, and partnering with organizations that work with young children and their families to ensure school readiness.

North Dakota State University (NDSU) and the NDSU Extension Service, in partnership with school districts across North Dakota and the statewide network of Parent Resource Centers, operated this school readiness and family education program for its 10th year in 2015-16. *Gearing Up for Kindergarten* is a family education opportunity for parents and their children who will be entering kindergarten in the following year. The *Gearing Up for Kindergarten* program provides families with an intensive educational experience that combines early learning activities for pre-kindergarten children with parent education opportunities for adults. The key building blocks and objectives of the program are:

- *School Readiness for Children Entering Kindergarten*
- *Parent Education*
- *Early Awareness and Intervention*
- *Parent Involvement with Children's Learning & School*
- *Building Home-School-Community Partnerships*

In 2015-2016 the program operated at 64 sites across North Dakota with 1,169 families enrolled. Fifty school districts participated and held a total of 90 course sessions. Response rate to the evaluation was 72.7%. This executive summary provides highlights of findings gathered through evaluation of the *Gearing Up for Kindergarten* program's sessions in the program year 2015-16.

- **Program participation – 89% of participants indicated involvement in 75% or more of the program sessions of the program during the year, while another 6.8% of participants indicated involvement in 51% to 75% of the program sessions.** This is a very high rate of participation and retention in a parent education program.
- **General value of the program** - Participants expressed very positive feelings about the general value of the program, with **74% indicating it was very or extremely useful to them.** Among participants in the 2015-16 program, 71% said the handouts and learning activities were very useful to them. Finally, all of them agreed that the information was presented well and they were treated respectfully, with those who strongly agreed they were treated well at 81% among all participants.

- **General impacts of program participation** - Among participants, **52%** indicated the program increased their knowledge of child development a lot or very much, **48%** noted it increased their knowledge of healthy parenting a lot or very much, **55%** felt it increased their confidence in being a good parent a lot or very much, and **47%** said it increased their parenting skills a lot or very much. Additionally, **81%** felt it changed their parenting behavior at least somewhat, and **85%** indicated that it influenced their relationship with their child positively.
- **Program value versus other information sources** - The results from the 2015-16 session of the program indicate that participants rated the school (3.63), preschool/Head Start/child care (3.72), and parents with children of a similar age (3.58) as among the most useful sources of information for them on parenting and preparing their child for other school. However, **the Gearing Up for Kindergarten class and materials were rated higher than all other sources with a mean score of 4.02, indicating that participants felt the class was more useful to them regarding parenting and school readiness than any other information source assessed.**
- **Increases in children's school readiness as described by parents** - Among 19 indicators of school readiness assessed by parents regarding their children, **significant differences were measured on all of the 19 indicators between fall 2015 and spring 2016. This means that all of the indicators for school readiness showed positive growth in children participating in Gearing Up for Kindergarten.** In analyzing all increases, **the findings suggest growth in five primary areas: (1) social skills and positive interaction with others; (2) ability to function more independently and learn actively in a guided environment; (3) development of specific pre-academic skills or knowledge that applies to a school setting (knowing the alphabet and numbers, etc.); (4) ability to express themselves through art and hands-on creative activities; and (5) ability to manage emotions and adapt in a new environment.**
- **Parent knowledge of school readiness** - For parents in the program, **10 indicators of knowledge related to school readiness showed significant increases in their knowledge levels and ability to prepare their child for the school experience. For example, the parents showed increases of knowledge regarding social and emotional development in children, development of early reading and math skills, areas of competence for school readiness, and key elements of a supportive home learning environment.**
- **Parent confidence in child's preparedness for school** - For parents in the program, among 3 indicators of their confidence with a child's preparedness for school, **significant differences were measured on all 3 indicators between the beginning and end of the program. Findings showed that after going through the program, parents felt more confident in the child's level of preparedness for kindergarten, and also increased their confidence in the activities being done to prepare their child for school transition.**
- **Increases in children's academic readiness as determined by objective assessment** - Children overall and in each model of the program **made significant progress increasing their number counting ability, number identification ability, letter identification ability,**

and sound identification ability. These steps forward in early academic skills indicate children are making progress with regard to early literacy and early numeracy.

- **Parent-child reading interactions** – Parents indicated significant changes on a variety of parent-child reading interactions during the program. Areas of reading interaction that showed significant improvement were **parents became more likely to go to the library with their child, they were more likely to discuss contents of a book with their children, they read more often with children, and they were more attentive to finding age-appropriate books for their children. All of these items are important because they are actions that serve to facilitate a positive literacy environment for children in the home.**
- **Qualitative feedback on outcomes for parents in the program** – Parents who participated in the program shared a variety of comments that highlighted positive impacts in three areas:
 - *More Time and Active Involvement with Children*
 - I am doing more activities at home with him to help prepare for kindergarten.
 - Program was great, we read and share our day a lot more.
 - This program has led me to do more activities, especially ones that will help my son be ready for kindergarten.
 - I feel like we think differently about how we can teach things at home. You gave us many ideas for science and math, which are areas we need to work on.
 - We've learned that family game nights are great for learning experiences: math, social, reading.
 - *Improved Parenting Efforts in Specific Areas*
 - I liked when we talked about different parenting styles. We have been led to encourage our kids more and provide extra hands-on learning.
 - I have learned to be more patient when working with my child when I am teaching him stuff.
 - Our discussion about discipline has made me stop yelling as much and I have begun giving my child more responsibilities.
 - We've changed our T.V./ video game policies at home. That session was extremely interesting/beneficial.
 - After reading the sleep information, we moved everyone's bed time back 30 minutes, it has been very helpful.
 - We are more thoughtful in framing our conversations with our child in a way that will be encouraging and help her and us think through our actions.
 - I took the eating healthy information to heart and have changed all of my meal plans.
 - *Increased Awareness of Child's Specific Needs*
 - We learned we need to do better at reading to our child and practice more numbers/letters since she isn't in preschool.
 - I learned a lot about how communication differences between my child and I seemed to be causing many of our behavior issues. Since changing how I present issues many behavior issues have subsided.
 - I changed the bed time and eating time of my child due to the program.

- The parenting section of this program helped me to greater understand developmentally where my preschooler is and how to help her move forward to get ready for kindergarten.
 - The program helped me to recognize the different learning styles that my twin girls have and how to help them each differently.
 - My relationship with my child has dramatically changed to the better. He is free to express his feelings and is very eager to learn more and more.

- **Qualitative feedback on outcomes for children in the program** – Parents who participated in the program shared a variety of comments that highlighted positive benefits for children in three areas:
 - ***Increased Social Confidence and Positive Peer Interactions***
 - I think it was a good experience for my son to see how other (non-autistic) children interact with teachers, peers and their environment.
 - My daughter was terrified to go to school before this program, now she is willing to try it out.
 - She is much more comfortable emotionally about going to kindergarten. She is already familiar with her school and will know a few friends.
 - He has learned how to interact with other children as he does not go to daycare or preschool, so this was a good learning experience for him.
 - I worried about my daughter because she was painfully shy when Gearing Up started. She has really blossomed into a confident, self-assured person. It's been fun to watch the transformation.
 - She is very shy so just gaining some familiarity and comfort with the school, teachers, etc. has been great. She looked forward to attending every week.
 - ***Increased Pre-Academic Skills in Reading, Math and Other Subjects***
 - She has developed skills in sight reading, basic arithmetic and story structure.
 - When we started, my child knew very few letters. Now he knows all of them!
 - My son enjoys coming to Gearing Up because he loves learning new projects and he shows more interest in learning.
 - He has learned a lot more of his letters, numbers and sounds. He loves the interaction and new friends. He is becoming more patient with learning.
 - He is able to write his name, loves to draw/color and actively seeks out reading and learning activities.
 - He is more interested in reading and books than ever before.
 - ***Greater Awareness and Comfort with School Routines and Expectations***
 - My son did not know if he was ready for school until he came here to the school to meet the teachers and friends.
 - I like that my child has opportunity to become familiar with the school, teachers and peers so that she will be comfortable with this setting when she begins kindergarten next fall.
 - Hands on experience for my child. She was very “anti” kindergarten until we came to the first class. She has loved it since – I think this was a great asset for her.

- This program has been great because it allows the children to see where the school is, what it will look like and what the expectations will be for them and the parents.
- She is comfortable and confident in the school setting because of attending. Participating has gotten her very excited to start school.

The findings from the assessment process concerning changes in parenting and in children's social, emotional, cognitive, and practical abilities related to school readiness show that many changes are occurring for children and families enrolled in the *Gearing Up for Kindergarten* program. Many significant changes are occurring that strengthen parental knowledge and practices and move children toward greater school readiness. These findings indicate that the program has a number of positive impacts on children and their school readiness, and that it is making a strong contribution to the well-being of children, families and schools in North Dakota.