
Gearing Up for Kindergarten
Project Overview & Year-End Report for 2016-2017

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 11th year in 2016-17. *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 2016-2017 the program operated at 64 sites across North Dakota with 1,067 families enrolled. Fifty-one school districts participated and held a total of 88 course sessions. Response rate to the evaluation was 78.8%. This executive summary provides highlights of findings gathered through evaluation of the *Gearing Up for Kindergarten* program's sessions in the program year 2016-17.

- **Program participation – 90% of participants indicated involvement in 75% or more of the program sessions of the program during the year, while another 6.5% 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 **78% indicating it was very or extremely useful to them.** Among participants in the 2016-17 program, 76% 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 87.5% among all participants.

- **General impacts of program participation** - Among participants, **55%** indicated the program increased their knowledge of child development a lot or very much, **53%** noted it increased their knowledge of healthy parenting a lot or very much, **58%** felt it increased their confidence in being a good parent a lot or very much, and **51%** said it increased their parenting skills a lot or very much. Additionally, **80%** 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 2016-17 session of the program indicate that participants rated the school (3.78), preschool/Head Start/child care (3.78), and parents with children of a similar age (3.64) as among the most useful sources of information for them on parenting and preparing their child for school. However, **the Gearing Up for Kindergarten class and materials were rated higher than all other sources with a mean score of 4.07, 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 2016 and spring 2017. 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***
 - It reinforced the good things we were doing and also made me think about learning opportunities in everyday tasks and routines.
 - We are practicing letter sounds and higher numbers.
 - I have instituted a 20 minute family reading period at least 5 times a week.
 - I have been more intentional with the activities I do with my child to teach him specific skills.
 - Being in the program has made me more involved with preparing my child for kindergarten.
 - ***Improved Parenting Efforts in Specific Areas***
 - We've tried a few discipline techniques that seem to work for things when it wasn't working before.
 - The program has helped me to be more patient and seek to redirect negative attention as approval.
 - It helped us to pinpoint strategies and skills we could work on. It is also valuable to see our child in a school setting.
 - Putting my children to bed earlier to help them have a better day.
 - This class helped my husband to view things differently and helped us to understand more how we are as parents and things we can do together.
 - I have tried being more aware of my parenting style and to use different parenting strategies.
 - I have started to take more time to think about what I'm going to say, not raise my voice as often, enforce more consequences, and offer choices.
 - Bedtime routine discussion—we now stick to a strict routine.
 - ***Increased Awareness of Child's Specific Needs***
 - We have started talking about our feelings more often and started to understand our child's actions more.
 - This gave me a lot of information about my son and the type of child he is, while giving me tips about how to use the information to the fullest.
 - My child has autism. We finally created a chore chart and visual schedule.
 - I have learned more about my child's temperament and learning style.

- I think some of the information on child development helps me relate to my child a little better and understand his learning style.
 - It has made me aware of his trouble areas so I can work on helping him build his confidence.
 - I enjoyed watching my child interact with kids the same age doing the same activities. It helped me see where she is developmentally.
 - I feel more understanding of my preschooler and his learning. It also makes me want to be a better parent.

- **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***
 - My daughter has greatly improved. She has learned to socialize and is more knowledgeable about kindergarten concepts.
 - The experience overall has helped him to be more confident. He has made new relationships.
 - He's better at listening and adapting to new situations and activities.
 - She is more comfortable on her own and working and playing with other kids.
 - She loved it! She is shy at first but got more comfortable each time we came.
 - He has said several times that he was nervous about kindergarten. Now I feel he has a better understanding of school settings and hopefully he has less nerves about it.
 - We used materials to help [our son] cope, he is now more social and is managing his feelings without outbursts.
 - She is much more social and is able to interact better with others when I'm not around.
 - ***Increased Pre-Academic Skills in Reading, Math and Other Subjects***
 - My child can now write his own name and knows most of his letters.
 - She has learned her letter sounds, counting, handwriting, and self-confidence has improved.
 - He has been more engaged in learning letters and numbers.
 - Loved to take home library books, and has increased interest in reading.
 - She has learned more letters and numbers and waits patiently to take turns.
 - He is more enthusiastic about books, reading, and going to kindergarten.
 - She is not as nervous, ready to learn. Willing to sit and read together much more.
 - ***Greater Awareness and Comfort with School Routines and Expectations***
 - He would cry anytime we even mentioned the word "school" and now he's super excited and wants to go to school every day!
 - He's more aware of how things will work next year as well as definitely ready for the next stage of his education. Great program!!
 - School building, classrooms, parents, students, and teachers are now familiar to her and that takes away the fear and distraction.

- He was very apprehensive about kindergarten and did not want to go. He is now very excited about kindergarten.
- My child really benefitted from the experience with respect to getting comfortable with school and experiencing the classroom environment.
- Program allowed my child to get to know the school facilities, his teachers, and it was a great practice session for learning how to behave and participate in a school setting.

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.