
Gearing Up for Kindergarten
Project Overview & Year-End Report for 2014-2015

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 9th year in 2014-15. *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 2014-2015 the program operated at 57 sites across North Dakota with 973 families enrolled. Fifty-seven school districts participated and held a total of 71 course sessions. Response rate to the evaluation was 74.3%. This executive summary provides highlights of findings gathered through evaluation of the *Gearing Up for Kindergarten* program in the program year 2014-15.

- **Program participation – 88% of participants indicated involvement in 75% or more of the program sessions of the program during the year, while another 7.4% 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 **81% indicating it was very or extremely useful to them.** Among participants in the 2014-15 program, 78% 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 88% among all participants.

- **General impacts of program participation** - Among participants, **57%** indicated the program increased their knowledge of child development a lot or very much, **56%** noted it increased their knowledge of healthy parenting a lot or very much, **61%** 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, **82%** felt it changed their parenting behavior at least somewhat, and **87%** indicated that it influenced their relationship with their child positively.
- **Program value versus other information sources** - The results from the 2014-15 session of the program indicate that participants rated the school (3.71), preschool/Head Start/child care (3.83), and parents with children of a similar age (3.59) 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 4.07, 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 2014 and spring 2015. This means that 100 percent of the indicators for school readiness showed positive growth in children participating in the program.** 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; (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, **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 program model **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***
 - We are watching less movies and TV time and reading more often and longer stories.
 - This program helped me a lot because now I spend more time with my daughter (reading, playing) and I know the importance of helping [her].
 - I have enjoyed this program and I now find ways to increase the educational interactions with my son.
 - The activities provided were wonderful and kept kids’ attention longer than other activities we had tried.
 - I try to read with [my son] more often and ask him questions about the books.
 - ***Improved Parenting Efforts in Specific Areas***
 - We work more on counting, the alphabet and memorization (e.g., address). I was unaware of how high the expectations were regarding these things for kids just entering the school setting in kindergarten.
 - The program has shown me how to look at parenting from a different perspective.
 - The sleep session helped me realize how important and how much sleep is needed and encouraged me to really work on an earlier bedtime routine so we won’t have such a hard adjustment when school starts.
 - We have been striving to read more frequently to our child after attending this program, because we have learned the benefits of how important reading is to a child’s learning and development.
 - ***Increased Awareness of Child’s Specific Needs***
 - We are more aware of how we can help our child gain skills, practice safety and grow emotionally.
 - My daughter turns five right before the cut-off date, and going to the program has helped me see that she will be ready for kindergarten in the fall.
 - Yes, I learned different techniques for learning activities and how to ask questions without making the answer obvious.
 - I have been a lot better at listening and slowing down from “adult duties” to take time to focus more on his needs and desires.
 - Eye opener that our son was not completely ready for kindergarten! Thank you for this opportunity to make his schooling much better for teacher, student and parent!
 - I have a much better idea of how to approach teaching my children now.

- **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***
 - The program has improved his socialization skills and will help him feel more comfortable with the transition from daycare to school.
 - My child has benefitted most by learning how to act/ behave in a group setting. How to follow instructions, learn from others, etc.
 - Helped him become less shy and improve his group interaction skills.
 - My child’s excitement for kindergarten and all it has in store is much higher after attending these sessions. She is much more confident in herself.
 - My child won’t be as shy and scared about starting kindergarten in the fall. He is more excited!
 - ***Increased Pre-Academic Skills in Reading, Math and Other Subjects***
 - Interest in books, reading and decision making has improved. They love coming each week.
 - Wants to read more often, is getting better at waiting his turn and cooperating with others.
 - Learned structure, rhyming, cooperation and better understanding of numbers.
 - He has gotten very excited to be attending kindergarten this fall and his letter recognition skills have advanced.
 - She has learned patience with learning. At the beginning there was a lot of “I don’t know” followed by no trying. Now she will try longer and hasn’t been “giving up.”
 - ***Greater Awareness and Comfort with School Routines and Expectations***
 - Knowledge of the classroom, how to participate in a classroom setting, positive interaction with teachers and kindergarten activities.
 - I think this program has helped greatly in preparing him for the transition into kindergarten.
 - Becoming familiar with friends, teachers and the school will help with the transition. Also, he has learned a lot by attending this program.
 - Getting to know peers, classroom, teachers and some activities expected of her has been of great benefit.
 - He has been able to understand what the classroom experience will be like, so the transition will be much easier.

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.