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Here comes kindergarten

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Rona Anduha of Kane'ohe tries to make every moment a learning moment for Micah, her 5-year-old son. Whether it's going for a stroll, growing a flower garden or visiting a park, Anduha looks for ways to teach Micah something new.

Micah starts kindergarten in August. "I want him to be ready to do whatever he has to do in school," said Anduha, 42.

It's crucial for parents to take such steps to prepare their children for kindergarten, said Liz Chun, executive director of Good Beginnings Alliance, a local organization dedicated to ensuring children are ready to succeed in school.

"The better prepared children are at the start of kindergarten, the more likely they will be successful in school," Chun said. "With children entering a totally new environment in kindergarten, there are a whole new set of expectations for them, both socially and academically."

The worst-case scenario is that everyone involved — child, parents and teacher — will go through long periods of stress during this transition from home or preschool to kindergarten, said Iwalani Harris, curriculum coordinator at Kea'au Elementary School on the Big Island.

"This first impression can be a lasting one that can affect how the child views himself as a learner," said Harris, who is also a teacher with Keiki Steps to Kindergarten, a summer program for parents and children that prepares them for kindergarten. (See box on E1.)

Kindergarten is one of the first steps in a lifelong journey in education, Harris said.

"We all want this first experience to be positive," Harris said. "A part of that positive experience is being prepared for the social, emotional, physical and mental requirements of kindergarten."

Since Micah was an infant, Anduha and her husband, Mike, have incorporated educational books, music and toys into his play time.

Most recently, in addition to preschool, Anduha has helped Micah prep for kindergarten by continuing to read books with him, practicing writing letters together and singing songs about counting.

They also dedicate a certain time of the day to "play school" to get Micah used to the kindergarten routine and they often visit exhibits at Bishop Museum or Hawaii Children's Discovery Center.

"Just being able to turn something that can be pretty academic and serious, and making it fun, they love that," said Anduha, an educational consultant. "They want to do it and they want to spend that time with you."

Such early learning activities can help children come to school with a readiness and excitement about learning, Chun said.

"The more confident a child is, the safer they feel taking risks," Chun said.

And prepping your child for kindergarten is so much more than readying them for a new grade level, Anduha said.

"It's your child's future, your (child's) foundation for learning," Anduha said.

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GET YOUR KEIKI KINDERGARTEN-READY WITH THESE TIPS

During the years leading up to kindergarten:

- Encourage your child to make different shapes out of modeling clay.
- Cook with your child and allow him to help measure the ingredients and count as he stirs.
- Encourage your child to express needs with words. Model appropriate language yourself.
- Give your child opportunities to taste, touch, smell, listen to and see a variety of objects and materials.
- Share stories about your culture, family traditions and beliefs with your child.
- Provide a variety of materials your child can use for drawing, painting and constructing.

During the weeks and days leading up to kindergarten:

- Visit the new school ahead of time. Walk around the campus and point out the classroom, restroom, cafeteria, playground and drop-off and pick-up points.
- If needed, walk your child to the bus stop and point out some landmarks.
- Help your child memorize her full name, address and phone number, and your name.
- Help your child feel excited and comfortable about starting school by expressing your own excitement and listening to your child's thoughts and concerns.
- Familiarize your child with kindergarten routines by helping him share with other children, wait his turn and sit in a circle with friends or family for story time.

Once kindergarten begins:

- Make sure your child eats a balanced meal for breakfast.
- Talk with your child about her experiences at school and talk with your child's teachers regularly about how your child is doing. Create that home/school connection early.
- Attend parent meetings.
- Volunteer for school activities, attend family nights and attend field trips, if possible.

Sources: Good Beginnings Alliance, Keiki Steps to Kindergarten program, School Readiness Task Force, Gannett News Service.

WHAT NOT TO DO IN PREPARING YOUR CHILD

There are so many "dos" to prepare a child for kindergarten. But what should parents NOT do? Liz Chun, executive director of Good Beginnings Alliance, offers some advice:

- **Don't do everything for your children.** Parents won't be with their children in school, and children have to learn how to be independent to succeed in school. Parents can start teaching their kids to be independent by having them do things like bathe themselves or go to the toilet alone. "By growing small areas of independence, young children feel confidence in their own abilities, which in turn help their confidence levels as they develop social and academic skills," Chun said.

- **Don't keep your children up late at night.** The school day schedule can be a huge adjustment, so parents shouldn't put their children to bed late in the two weeks before school starts. "Gently begin to adjust your family to 'in school' bed time and waking up patterns so lack of sleep is not an added factor once school begins," Chun said.

- **Don't expect a seamless transition into kindergarten.** Children may experience "ups and downs" while settling in to their new school environment; for some, the adjustment can go on for weeks or even months. "As with so much of parenting, patience and consistency are key," Chun said. "Especially during a time of such change, parents should not be impatient with their children or expect them to be perfect."

READING LIST

Good advice for parents on prepping their keiki for kindergarten: Read to them every day.

While you're at it, consider these books to help ease the little ones into their kindergarten experience:

"Do You Want to Be My Friend?" by Eric Carle

"The Kissing Hand" by Audrey Penn

"Annabelle Swift, Kindergartner" by Amy Schwartz

"Owen" by Kevin Henkes

"Will I Have a Friend?" by Miriam Cohen

"Starting School" by Janet and Allan Ahlberg

"Vera's First Day of School" by Vera Rosenberry

"Miss Kindergarten Gets Ready for Kindergarten" by Joseph Slate

"Look Out Kindergarten, Here I Come!" by Nancy Carlson

"Sheila Rae the Brave" by Kevin Henkes

Source: School Readiness Task Force.

SOME HELPFUL WEB SITES

- www.goodbeginnings.org – the Good Beginnings Alliance site offers several helpful publications, including "First Five."
- www.inpeace-hawaii.org – the Institute for Native Pacific Education and Culture offers a program called "Keiki Steps to Kindergarten," a three-week summer program to help beginning students adjust to a school setting. Parents learn what is expected in kindergarten and find out how to help. To learn more, click on "programs" and scroll down to "Keiki Steps to Kindergarten."
- http://www.kidshealth.org/kid/feeling/school/back_to_school.html
- <http://doe.k12.hi.us/> – at the state Department of Education, click on "parents & community," then "preparing your child for kindergarten"
- <http://www.ed.gov/parents/landing.jhtml> – the U.S. Department of Education offers a PDF of the brochure, "Helping Your Preschool Child." Under "parents," click on "prepare my child for school," then "readiness for school." Scroll down to "helping your preschool child."