S9E4- Why are so many nursery children not ready for school and what actually helps?

Introduction: The Current Challenge

Welcome back to The Resilient Kid Podcast . Today's episode might feel a little uncomfortable for some, but it comes from a place of care, honesty, and deep respect for what children need. Across the UK, early years professionals—including teachers, speech and language therapists, and health visitors—are reporting that more children are starting school without being developmentally ready .

While the government has provided some funding to address this, the real work starts at home. This is not about parents or children failing; rather, it suggests that current systems, routines, and adult support structures do not always match what young children need to grow and be ready for the school environment. As a psychotherapist, I personally believe starting school at age four is too early, but since that is our current system, we must focus on how to best support children within it.

What Does "School Ready" Actually Mean?

There is often a misunderstanding about what "school readiness" entails. It is not about academic achievements such as:

• Reading or writing their name.

• Knowing numbers from 1 to 20.

Children go to school to learn those skills. True school readiness focuses on communication, emotional regulation, independence, social skills, and physical readiness .

The Communication "Tennis Volley" and Screens

We are currently facing a "perfect storm" that impacts development. One major factor is the reduction in face-to-face communication . Children learn language and interaction through human engagement, not screens. While iPads and phones are a reality of modern life, they cannot replace the "tennis volley" of back-and-forth conversation.

When conversation is reduced, children often have fewer words, struggle with turn-taking, and find it harder to express frustration, leading to meltdowns and dysregulation. Experts are seeing delays in expressive language and difficulty following instructions. To improve this, consider these steps:

• Ditch the "Digital Babysitter": Avoid iPads at the dinner table or keeping the TV on as constant background noise. Meal times are the richest opportunities for children to learn language, turn-taking, and how to show interest in others.

• Slow Down: If you are a fast talker, try to slow down. Wait for a response, even if it is just a facial expression or a gesture.

• Narrate Daily Life: Talk about what you are doing—whether it is seeing a bird or getting into the car.

• Don't Talk Over Them: Talking over a child signals that what they are saying isn't important, which may cause them to shut down and return to screens.

Building Independence through Scaffolding

Independence skills are appearing later in children because it is often easier for a busy parent to do things for them. However, if a child cannot dress themselves or swap their shoes, they may feel frustrated or fall behind their peers in school.

Instead of doing everything for them, use scaffolding : guide them through the process without taking over. For example, show them which foot a sock goes on and let them try to pull it up before you intervene. Feeling capable and independent is a significant gift that builds confidence and helps prevent future anxiety.

The Truth About Toilet Training

Toilet training is tiring and inconvenient, but it is a vital step toward independence. It is a task that should ideally be completed before a child starts reception so they do not miss out on learning or feel "different" from their friends.

Signs of Readiness include:

• Staying dry for longer periods.

• Awareness of needing to go (such as hiding to poo).

• Showing interest in the bathroom or toilet.

• The ability to follow simple instructions.

Consistency is Key: Once you decide to start, stick to it. Tag-team with a partner, ensure grandparents are on the same page, and avoid going back to nappies just because it is inconvenient, as this confuses the child.

Social Skills and Connection

Turn-taking is a foundational skill for making friends. You can practice this at home with simple board games like Dobble or even by taking turns scribbling on a piece of paper.

When going out to eat, try replacing the iPad with a "bag of tricks" containing pencils, card games, or puzzles. This maintains the connection between you and your child, which is far more valuable than the temporary quiet a screen provides.

Conclusion: Progress Over Perfection

This is not about being a perfect parent. If you get this right 30% of the time , your children will still turn out okay. It is about building strong foundations of connection, communication, and confidence so that children don't just cope with school—they thrive. Start slowly, be consistent, and focus on the basics.

Resources & Support

If you need support, you can reach out via social media or email ashley@theresilientkid.co.uk . We have an Anxiety Workshop coming up in February for £25, which includes a 60-minute session and a 30-minute Q&A. Sign up here - https://www.theresilientacademy.co.uk/parent-workshop