

Title: Ready! Set! School! Sets Out to Empower Parents to Get Their Children Ready for Kindergarten

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Ready! Set! School! Sets Out to Empower Parents to Get Their Children Ready for Kindergarten

Salt Lake City, Utah – Parents are their children’s first and best teachers. From this basic assumption, the Utah Family Center and Utah PTA, in partnership with the Utah State Office of Education, have worked to create a new program to empower parents of preschool children to prepare their children for school. Ready! Set! School! offers activities and resources that are designed specifically around the Utah Pre-Kindergarten Guidelines.

There are more than 93,000 preschool children, ages 3-5, in the state of Utah. Approximately 47,000 of those will enter kindergarten in the fall of 2006. While many children arrive well-prepared for entering the classroom, surveys of kindergarten teachers indicate that some children arrive underprepared for kindergarten which can often contribute to disruptions in the classroom.

According to Meg Buonforte, Early Childhood Specialist for the Utah Family Center, children don’t have to arrive without basic skills. “When parents are given user-friendly tools to understand the specific skills that their children need to enter kindergarten, parents can and will feel empowered to help their children develop those skills.”

Thus, Ready! Set! School! has set out to address the need for all parents of pre-school children in Utah to be informed and to be empowered about what skills their children need to enter kindergarten. Funded in part by a grant from the United States Office of Education, Ready! Set! School! stands alone because it is the only research-based program specifically aligned with the Utah Pre-Kindergarten Guidelines.

The Ready! Set! School! “toolkit” contains twenty core activities, along with a variety of extra activities, divided into four areas aligned with the Utah Pre-Kindergarten Guidelines, including Friends & Family, Words & Language, Numbers & Shapes, and Health & Safety. Each activity details specific “Benefits for Your Child,” lists a “Kindergarten Connection,” and provides a booklist related to the activity.

Ready! Set! School! activities include helping a child make a nameplate for his or her room to develop a recognition of letters; putting away groceries to see that everything has its place; making puppets to identify emotions and feelings; identifying patterns

throughout a child's environment to understand how things have order; creating an obstacle course to develop coordination; and many more.

As Buonforte says, "The great thing about Ready! Set! School! is that every parent can do it, usually with materials found around the home. Even with families' busy lives, these activities give parents great ideas that they can adapt and expand to meet the specific needs and level of their child."

Ready! Set! School! also allows parents various points of access by providing printed cards and a website, both of which offer the activities in English and Spanish. "One of the main objectives," says Buonforte, "is to ensure that parents of all backgrounds and income levels and ethnicities can access it, regardless of their comfort with technology." All activities are provided free on the internet and are available for checkout in libraries, family centers, health departments, and kindergarten classes throughout Utah. Parents can also purchase their own toolkits for a minimal fee on the website.

The activities, both in print and online, are accompanied by short DVD/video segments for parents to view in order to visualize and understand how other Utah parents are doing these activities with their children. "The DVDs, which are specifically designed for parents' usage, also end up being a great motivator for parents," observes Buonforte. "They can say, 'If those parents can do it, so can I!'"

The website, www.readyschool.org, provides additional resources for parents about kindergarten preparedness. On the website, parents can find links to the complete Utah Pre-Kindergarten Guidelines as well as a statewide calendar, "Around Town," that lists preschool-age appropriate events going on, categorized by region. The Resource Directory, also categorized by region, contains links to local libraries, school districts, and parks, as well as online resources for parenting, children's health, and child care.

Ready! Set! School!'s interactive web resources include the "Idea Exchange" discussion boards, which include several topics of discussion for parents, including an "Activity Discussion" and "Ask a Teacher." Also included is the "Playgroup Connection" page where parents can get tips on how to start or join a playgroup with their child and list them so that others can join in their area.

Buonforte and her colleagues hope that this parent-friendly research-based curriculum will make a positive impact on kindergarten preparedness as it spreads publicly throughout Utah and appeals to all parents of preschool children. In addition to the Utah State Office of Education, various other organizations have contributed and thrown their support behind the Utah Family Center's Ready! Set! School! as well, including Centro de la Familia, Head Start Utah, Utah State Office of Child Care, and the Children's Museum. "This has been a huge undertaking for all of these organizations, but we are so excited that it will be out there and available to all parents in Utah."

More information is available at the Ready! Set! School! website (www.readyschool.org).