



Episode #192:

**Dr. Karen Wilson on How to Know If Your
Child is Ready for the Transition to Elementary School**

January 21, 2019

Debbie: I'm thrilled to have you on the show. And as you probably know, PDA is a pretty new topic for at least my show. Most of my audiences in the US and a few months ago I had Dr. Melissa Neff on the show who connected you and I and I did an episode with her and I have gotten so much feedback and I'm just noticing there's just so much interest in this topic and so many parents are seeing PDA traits in

Debbie: Hey Karen, welcome to the podcast.

Karen: Hi Debbie. Thanks so much for having me.

Debbie: Of course. It was just such a pleasure to get to meet you in person at Bridges Academy a month ago and as I mentioned to you when we were talking, there are just so many aspects of your work that are relevant to my community and I almost didn't even know where to start because I want to talk with you about so many things, but I think we've come upon a really good topic for today's episode.

Karen: Yes, I think we did. I'm really excited about talking about these, these little kiddos before they enter elementary school.

Debbie: Yes. And this is a new topic for the show. So I know that for me personally, and if, if listeners have read my book, they know that it was a real question, you know, is my child ready for elementary school or not? Because as a parent of a twice exceptional kid, I knew that academically he was more than ready, but there were so many other factors and it was really kind of daunting to know what was the right decision. And then what to even look for in a school. So we are going to get into all of that today. And before we do that though, could you just take a few minutes .. I always like hearing in my guests own words a little bit about who they are in the world and why they do the work they do.

Karen: Sure. I'd be happy to do that. Um, what's interesting, Debbie, about my work is that when I was starting my studies in neuropsychology, I actually was working in dementia research. So I was on the other end of the spectrum working with older adults and I ended up doing a rotation in my training in pediatrics and working with kids. And I just found that that work was just so meaningful. It was an opportunity for me to have an impact early on and really help kids and families get on the trajectory so that their kids would experience more success. And I just continued on that path and never looked back. I just find that work so valuable.

Debbie: That's so interesting. And what do you love most about the work that you do today? Again, you are involved in so many different aspects of, of kids and education, but what's your kind of sweet spot?

Karen: I think, I mean most of the work that I do is assessment work. So I'm identifying the struggle kids are having. And I think for me the most interesting thing I do is really helping families and educators understand why a child is struggling.

Because oftentimes there can be so many misconceptions when kids have behavioral issues or they're struggling to connect with their peers or they seem to be underperforming and they get labeled as lazy or they're not trying hard enough or some other rationalization of the difficulty. And I have an opportunity to help parents and educators better understand so that they can better support kids so that they can be successful.

Debbie: Well, it's such important work. I mean, yeah, we need more, more people like you helping to bridge this gap because it is hard to figure out. And especially for this age group that we're talking about, because I'm sure you see this in your work, and I hear this from so many families, it is this transition often from preschool or even in preschool when these more quote unquote invisible differences start to show up in a myriad of ways. And then we're kind of confused about what's really going on. Is this an immaturity issue? And then how do I move forward? So let's start with looking at preschool students. And I guess first of all, to start with how do we know if a child is ready? If you know, a lot of kids are on the cusp, and there is some choice often in terms of if they're gonna have the same preschool another year, assuming they go to preschool or whether they should put them ahead. So what are the kinds of things that we're looking for to know that a student is ready to move on to elementary school?

Karen: Sure. And I think when you're talking about kids who are in preschool, oftentimes asking the preschool teacher, you know, where are my child's gaps? What are their strengths? That's an important conversation to have as you're preparing for that transition. And some of the things that you're looking for as parents, and I was looking for as a parent of a five and a seven year old when they were transitioning. As you're looking at their social emotional functioning, because oftentimes the emphasis is on those pre academic skills. You know, can they write their name, can they hold a pencil? And while those things are important in kindergarten, they'll eventually learn those things. But I think the social emotional factors are so important because children are going to be able, are going to have to begin participating in group activities. They're going to have to really exercise good social and behavioral regulation, regulation of their emotions.

They're going to have to understand others' feelings and show empathy. And I think those social emotional learning factors are so incredibly important. And then really looking at the ability to pay attention, attention and executive functioning. What's so interesting is we often think of executive functioning as being important in middle school and high school, but it actually begins so much earlier. So a child's ability to kind of shift their focus from one task in the classroom to another to go from circle time to a center table to do another activity that's executive functioning. And you know, what we're, we're learning more and more is that early difficulties with paying attention, following directions is often related to later difficulties with reading and math. And so we want to be able to kind of see where children are in their ability to focus, to pay attention, to follow directions. Because that is again, an early indicator, an early sign of or difficulty depending on where a child falls on kind of the continuum of those things.

Debbie: Gosh, as you're sharing those things to me that it feels like, Oh my gosh, that's a lot for a little person to be able to do is, I mean, I'm assuming there must be a learning curve for every child, not just neurologically atypical kids in that transition.

Karen: Absolutely. I think it's, it's something that's important for all kids regardless of their experience and regardless of their skill level. But kids will differ in terms of their ability to do those things. And that really tells you about the readiness. And of course there has to be a good match with the kindergarten classroom that they're going to be entering. But these are things to start to be mindful of early on and to ask preschool teachers about or if a child is at home with a babysitter to ask questions about following directions and, and things like that that we know are important later on. And of course we're going to be thinking about language development as well because children are going to have to be able to again, follow directions, which is language base, but also express what it is that they need and what it is that they want.

And can they do it in a way that doesn't cause them to be frustrated. And so a lot of these things interact with each other because of kids struggle with expressing their needs and their and their desires. Then they can become frustrated and have difficulty regulating their emotions. Right? And so they have a meltdown because they can't adequately express what it is that they're experiencing. So we want to make sure that we're looking at their language skills and it's often we think about are they ready? So do we hold them back or do we put them into kindergarten? But the other question is how do we prepare them for kindergarten. It may not be that we keep them in preschool for another year. It may be that we do something over the summer to make them better prepared for kindergarten when they do enter.

Debbie: There's a lot to weigh here. You know, there are a lot of moving factors and also kids are, you know, malleable. I don't know if that's the right word, but they do develop unevenly and they can have big leaps like a summer can make a huge difference in a child's development. And from what you're saying, it seems like that preschool fit is really important too if a child is going to preschool, that that's really kind of the place for them to do this more prep work and to, to start to develop these skills so that they are, I always did think of it as more academic readiness. You know, as you mentioned, being able to hold a pencil and do those things. But really this is kind of their training ground almost for kindergarten.

Karen: Absolutely. And then if you think about the social emotional learning that takes place in preschool, you know, learning to share and learning to establish friendships. I mean I think that is just as important, if not more important than holding a pencil and being able to write your name because those are skills you're going to need for life. And if you can start developing them early, the better off you are later on.

Debbie: So let's talk about then if you're, if you're in that place of indecisiveness, I want to talk about school choice later in this conversation, but you know, I'll just share

that when we were going through this process, and my son's 15 now, so this was a while ago, but he was an August birthday and there were some schools that had a September 1st cutoff where you had to be five by September one. There were some that had a July one cutoff. So depending on the school he was going into, it could have gone either way. And I did really rely on his teachers and it was a tough decision to make because he was reading at a middle school level at that point and was just academically in a different place. But he was really dysregulated in the classroom and did not show a lot of that social emotional awareness or maturity. So they were very much like, Oh no, this kid needs another year. And I really did trust them and am happy I made that decision. But let's talk about that, that decision. What are in addition to the kind of readiness that we're looking at, are there pros and cons for, for pushing ahead and or holding back for another year?

Karen: Right. I think that whole idea is so debatable and what you're talking about is really delaying school entry and it's often referred to as red shirting and parents of kids who aren't differently wired often do this for an academic or physical edge, right? But parents who have kids who are wired differently and are demonstrating some delays in some areas of functioning often do this to give kids the gift of time, right? I have to give their brains another year to develop those skills or to give people who are working on those interventions time to help those kids develop those skills. So it's really an individual decision. I will say that kids with ADHD who have been given that label are red shirted more than kids who do not have that label. And boys are red shirted more than girls. And so when the people are making decisions to delay school entry, boys are more likely to, parents of boys are more likely to delay school entry.

And what the research actually shows is that early on the kids can do better in kindergarten, but in the longterm it doesn't really make that big of a difference. And when they, when those kids reach adolescence, if they're older in the classroom, they actually end up having more struggles later on. And again, that's on average. There will always be kids or that holding them back and delaying school entry works beautifully for them, but they're showing on average, it doesn't really make a difference. It's really more about preparing kids for kindergarten when it's their time to go. But again, it's such an individual difference because there's so many, there's such variety and differences in the way kids are prepared and ready for that transition to kindergarten.

Debbie: Well, it's so interesting to hear too that that there are parents who are making this choice to give their kids an edge. And that makes me think of Malcolm Gladwell's book *Outliers*, which kind of blew my mind when I read it and I was the young kid, you know, I was the, I was almost a full year behind some kids in my grade. So I read it from that perspective of the kid who was so little compared to everybody else. But I found it interesting to hear what you just said too, that the research shows that often or sometimes these kids who might do better earlier but they may struggle more in, in adolescence. Um, is there anything more you can say about that? I'm just curious what kind of struggles. Is it just that they don't feel like they're on the same page maturity-wise as their same grade peers?

Karen: Yeah, I think there are a lot of things going on and they're older and so there's a mismatch with their cognitive development. There's this kind of asynchronous cognitive development or in some ways they're more mature than their peers and other ways they're a little more immature, which is the reason why they delayed school entry in the first place. And I think also a lot of the difficulties that students have persist even when you delay school entry. And so the kids who struggle with those early reading skills end up being adolescents who struggle with reading, but now they're the oldest kid in the class who's struggling with reading. So you see how it kind of follows them and that can create other difficulties for that child.

Debbie: Yeah, super interesting. So, okay, let's talk about school fit then. You know, this is something I have done an episode specifically on school fit and it's a huge topic, right? Because we as parents often have an idea of where we want our child to go to school, whether it's the neighborhood school or the school that we believe is going to give them that academic edge, competitive edge for college or whatever it is. But then there's the reality of who our child is. And so there's often parents who aren't really keyed into exactly what their child needs and are making a decision from more their ego or another point of view may find themselves a few years in really struggling because it isn't a fit. So what thoughts do you have about what we should be looking for? Assuming we have choice in where we're sending our child to elementary school, but what are we ideally looking for in a match?

Karen: Right. I think, you know, one of the things you said about having your own expectations and being aware of your own expectations and your reasons for wanting your child to go to a particular kind of school or a particular school. I think that's really important for parents to tap into their reasons because parents are going to have their own expectations of a school and the school is gonna have their own expectations for children entering kindergarten. And oftentimes there can be a mismatch between a parent's expectations and a school's expectations. So really understanding what are the school's expectations for your child entering kindergarten. Do they expect your child to come in knowing how to write their name and knowing how to, you know, identify the sounds that go with letters right there really in the early precursors to reading. I mean that is going to be incredibly important because you're going to know where your child is in those specific areas, whether it be language, whether it be those early academic skills or their social emotional functioning.

So if you know that a school has children coming into kindergarten who are already reading and your child doesn't know the alphabet yet, is that going to be a good fit? So that's a question to ask. And then it also depends on your child's preschool experience. Some kids don't have a preschool experience and they're entering kindergarten for the first time and this is their first time being in that kind of a structured environment. And you want to know how do the educators prepare the students for that kind of structured environment, particularly kids who've never had that experience before. So you want to be asking questions about how many of you get the students who enter kindergarten have had a preschool experience and those who don't, how do you prepare them for that

transition and see if they're prepared to do that. And have they had any experience working with kids who think what I often describe as think or experience the world differently.

And that may be in terms of delays in their language development struggles with focusing kids who are very bright but struggle in specific areas. What are their experiences working with these, you know, differently wired kids. And that's an important question to ask because some schools unfortunately will say that they're just not prepared or they're not equipped to work with kids who think differently, who feel differently or experienced the world differently. And that's an important thing to know when you're choosing a school for your child. I also think that a good question to ask is how much time will your child be spending engaged in structured reading and writing activities versus kind of socialized and play-based learning? Because you know your child and your preschool teachers have had your child for a while and that time spent in kind of structured activities versus play based learning is really important.

So you know how your child, what your child's day will look like and whether that's a good fit, given your child's strengths. And also your child's areas of weakness. So I think those are important things to consider when you're determining whether the school is a good fit. Are they equipped to work with kids who think differently, feel differently? Are they equipped to work with kids who may have not had a preschool experience or may have gone to a play-based preschool and now you're thinking about a very academic elementary school for your child. So again, the mismatch between your expectations and the child's expectations is an important factor to consider when deciding where to send your child for kindergarten.

Debbie: Such great questions. And I didn't really ask any of those questions. Um, so yeah, it makes total sense. But I do want to address this idea of if you do have a child who is moving through the world differently, a lot of parents in my community have younger kids who may not have any sort of diagnosis, but they know there are challenges. But there's also a bit of let's cross our fingers and hope that this works out, especially during this transition because we may be getting conflicting advice from pediatricians. And other people saying they'll grow out of it. This is a maturity thing. Every child's developing differently. And so there is a lot of optimism perhaps is the right word when we're transitioning into elementary school and just trust that this is going to work itself out. And so I guess what I'm asking is how much should parents disclose about challenges they may be experiencing at home or areas of struggle, of intensity perhaps or intense behavior in preschool when they're making that transition. Parents are afraid of putting a bullseye, a target on their kid's back. So what are your thoughts on that?

Karen: I think again, and it's such an important thing to consider and parents often don't know where to begin. They don't want to disclose too much because again, like you're saying, they don't want to have the new teachers have these preconceived notions about how a child is going to be in the classroom and you want to set your child up for success. And I think having that conversation with a preschool

teacher is very important. But you also want to give your child the best opportunity to be successful in kindergarten. And I'm hearing you say what a lot of educators have told many parents of kids who think differently that they'll grow out of it or he's just a boy. I just finished giving a talk about this. He's just a boy, he'll grow out of it or she's just a girl or she's just shy.

And oftentimes the rationalizations that we say are often keeping parents from moving forward with getting kids the right support that they need in order to be successful. And so a good conversation to have with preschool teachers and even with the pediatrician, if there are concerns with language development, for example, I'm going to use that as an example, then you may not need to alert teachers that you have a concern, but it may be something that you might want to consider doing some language therapy or doing, getting a language assessment done before entering kindergarten so that you can do the work that's needed to give your child the support they need when they enter kindergarten. So that may be something to consider because the fact is that one in five kids will have some differences in learning, communicating motor development or processing information. And so educators are used to seeing kids who think differently, who experienced the world differently, but they differ in their ability to support those kids.

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And so I think it's important to let educators know if you're seeing these difficulties significantly interfere with their ability to connect with their peers or participate in a group activity or learning at the preschool level. So if it's been significant and it's been seen in preschool, then you might want to let educators know, you know, my son is very bright, but he's has a little more difficulty paying attention because then that teacher can seat that child in a place in the classroom where there's minimal distractions. Or if a child is shy, compare them with another child who might be a little more outgoing, have a little more empathy. And so they can make decisions about where a child is in the classroom, who he is sitting with, where he's sitting and supporting that child on the playground, who might have more difficulty entering groups. And so it could be beneficial. So that supports are in place for a child to again be successful when they make that transition to kindergarten.

Debbie: So what are some of the other things then that parents can do to help with this transition? You mentioned maybe doing some extra work over the summer if we're not red shirting them to try to get them up to speed more where their peers are. What other kinds of preparations can we do? Not just for our kids but also for ourselves as parents?

Karen: Yeah, I think one of the things is really connecting with the community of parents who are also in the same boat. So, and you know, parents who are entering kindergarten for the first time or they have kids who think differently and are entering kindergarten. So getting in touch with other parents who are experiencing the same thing and also connecting kids who are entering kindergarten with peers. So finding parents who have kids who are going to be entering either the same elementary school or an elementary school will be good. So what you do, what you want to do is give kids an opportunity to play. And

oftentimes the focus is on coloring and forming letters and cutting out shapes when in fact giving kids opportunity to play with other children is a great tool for learning because they learn how to negotiate, they learn how to problem solve, they learn how to focus their attention, they learn how to shift their attention.

And so giving kids an opportunity to play with kids who are also going to be making that transition is incredibly important. And I think in addition to practicing skills over the summer or before they enter kindergarten, helping a child to know what to expect. So spend time talking to a child about what kindergarten would be like if it's a new school and a child has anxiety about making that transition, speaking to the teacher about meeting him or her before your child begins school. You know, driving by the school on a day when school is not in session so that they can familiarize themselves with, you know, the playground and the front doors and what the school campus looks like. All of those things help to alleviate anxiety for a child. So driving by the school, visiting the school, meeting the teacher, arranging playdates in a park with other kids who are going to be entering the school.

And I think one of the most important things you can do is to start establishing routines at home if you haven't already for children because school is all about routines. And so if you can start establishing those routines around bedtime, around times for reading at home, maybe even times for working on some of those pre academic skills, you know, in a fun way. So now we're going to have some drawing time. So having those routines in place before a child makes that transition can be incredibly helpful because they get used to what it is they're going to experience in kindergarten, which is a lot of routines. And so I think doing that is going to really set a child up for success because they'll be familiar with the idea of a routine when they make that transition. And the other thing is to make sure that kids are getting enough sleep. You know, kids between ages of three and five need about 10 to 13 hours of sleep, including naps. And when kids are getting enough sleep, they're better able to pay attention, they're better able to regulate their emotions. And kids who think differently need more sleep than typically developing kids. So it's even more important to establish those sleep routines early and to make sure that kids are getting enough sleep on a regular basis for optimal health and performance.

Debbie: Well, that's such a good reminder. And I didn't realize the differently wired kids need even more sleep. And yet I know many of our kids probably get less sleep because so many of our kids can't turn their brains off at night. So that's a whole other episode I need to have. I have been looking for a sleep expert to help us discuss that. But that's a great reminder.

Karen: Yeah, a lot of kids are really not prepared for a longer school day. Some kids had been in preschool for half a day or for a few hours in the day and now having to be at school for an extended period of time and having to focus for longer periods of time and so gradually increasing opportunities for children to pay attention and focus for extended periods of time is also helpful in preparing them for that transition. So that's just another thing I wanted to say.

Debbie: Yeah, such great tips. So I almost wish I could have a do over here, but I, this is such good insight for parents who are at this juncture and good timing too, because now I know when this episode airs is around the time parents are really making those decisions for next year. So before we say goodbye, any last tips? Anything that we didn't cover to some last words of wisdom for parents who are, who are about to start this transition and maybe feeling concerned about making the wrong decision?

Karen: Yeah, I would say that to really trust your intuition, you know, and, and parents are often, you know, deference to teachers and pediatricians, but you know, your child better than anyone else. And so when you're choosing a school, you're choosing a good match for your child, right? And, and again, you're making that decision based on your child's strengths and gaps that your child may have. And to not be afraid to ask preschool teachers and to ask pediatricians about what your child needs. And sometimes you may need to ask more than once. With my own son who's, who's five years old, he had articulation issues early on and initially it was very cute because he couldn't say some words and we would go to the pediatrician and she would say he's fine, you know, there's nothing to worry about. And I remember we were at the end of our appointment and my hand was on the door knob getting ready to leave and I said to her, do you think that we should consider speech therapy for him? And she said, Oh, you know what, he is having a difficult time kind of saying some of those words. And yes, it's something you should consider. And so we were getting ready to leave and had I not asked again, we probably would not have gone down that road of getting him to speech therapy while he was in preschool to prepare him for kindergarten. So sometimes you have to ask more than once and sometimes you have to rely on your own intuition. When you understand what your child says, but most other people don't, that you can get those early interventions because early intervention is so key to putting kids on the right path and the path to success, whether it be occupational therapy for sensory and motor integration issues or speech and language therapy for kids who are a little behind in their speech and language development, you know, we can intervene early and the outcomes can be so much better if we know what areas of struggle a child is dealing with and, and we address it early.

Debbie: Great. And yeah, that's so true, right? That we, I think especially if this is our first child, then we are so relying upon the experts in our lives to guide us and it's such a good reminder to remember intuition and to know that we know our kid better than anyone else and to trust that voice.

Karen: Absolutely. And kids have a lot of room for growth and sometimes there are kids who struggle in preschool and they do beautifully in kindergarten and that's something to keep in mind as well. The environment makes all the difference in the world. And so our kids have an ability to be successful in their own way when they're put in the right environment. We just have to make sure that we are aware of our child's strengths and their weaknesses and put them in an environment where they will thrive.

Debbie: Yeah. And sometimes it, it may take some time to find that fit and sometimes the fit, just keeping it real, is homeschooling for a few years until they can kind of come into their own. But yes, I agree that there are certainly environments that we put our kids in where they're really set up for failure. So it is important to be super thoughtful about these choices. So can you let listeners know where they can connect with you and tell us a little bit about Child Nexus and your other work?

Karen: Absolutely. Um, so I have a private practice in West Los Angeles and they can connect with me there at westlaneuro.com. And I also developed a web platform for parents who are looking for information about kids who think differently, feel the world differently, experience life differently. And it's a place where they can go to get information and then also connect directly with professionals who can provide services for kids. So speech and language, occupational therapy, psychotherapy, parent support. And it just came out of, you know, a lot of parents saying, I don't know where to get support for my kid. Where can I go? Who do I need to provide these services so that my kids can be successful? And I really wanted one place where parents could go to access information and also connect with providers who can provide the services they need to help their kids thrive. And so that's what Child Nexus is. It's really a web-based platform where parents can go to access information, they can search by a term like attention or language or social skills and find information about topics related to those areas. And also if they're searching for a provider, they can connect with providers who can provide those services. Right now, our providers are in Los Angeles, but we're looking for providers in other areas of the country, and so the parents all over the country can access that resource.

Debbie: It's such a great service. So listeners definitely check that out and yeah, I look forward to seeing that grow. That is just something that comes up every day in my Tilt Together group is I'm looking for this, I'm looking for this, where is an executive functioning coach here, I need this OT there, so I'm thankful for you creating this platform and I hope it continues to grow. It's awesome.

Karen: Thank you so much, Debbie.

Debbie: Well, Karen, I just want to thank you for, for sharing all of this with us today. I really loved this conversation and again, just happy to be sharing this. I think this is really valuable food for thought for so many parents in my community, so thanks for making the time to come on the show today.

Karen: Thank you so much for having me. It was an absolute pleasure.

RESOURCES MENTIONED:

- Dr. Karen Wilson's website
- Dr. Karen Wilson on Twitter
- Dr. Karen Wilson on LinkedIn
- ChildNEXUS