

Pressures in Preschool

by Robert Needlman, M.D., F.A.A.P. reviewed by Jeanne W. Lepper, Beverley M. Hartman and Debbie Whitmer

Education is competitive, and preschools are not immune. Ambitious parents often see the right preschool as the necessary first step on the path to an Ivy League diploma.

Some preschools have responded to the pressure for future success by incorporating more and more academic structure, curriculum, and teaching practices. Children are taught to memorize the alphabet and to spell simple words. They have mimeographed sets of math problem to do. A certain part of each day may be set aside for what is often called "seat work" (i.e., having to stay in your chair for an extended period of time and concentrate on an assigned task). All of these efforts are intended to prepare children for the next step of the educational ladder.

What's wrong with this approach?

Most young children are eager to please their teachers. Given a set of letter names to recite, they'll dutifully follow along. Many will actually learn the letter names. After a lot of repetitive drilling, they will even be able to read several words by sight. Some of the more advanced will be able to sound out simple words. Many of the children will be very impressive when they start in kindergarten.

Unfortunately, research shows that by the end of second grade, they won't be any better at reading than any other children. They will have spent a lot of time and effort with no long-term benefit. On the other hand, many of them may have decided that reading and math are terribly boring and hard, and nothing that they would ever do voluntarily.

It's all in the approach

This is not to say that letters and numbers shouldn't be taught, but these academic elements need to be part of experiences that are meaningful for children. For example, rather than doing drills with alphabet flash cards, listening to stories read aloud and talking about them naturally sparks children's interest in letters and words. With encouragement, children pay attention to signs and labels-things they encounter in real life that seem interesting and important. They make up stories and perhaps the teachers help write the stories down and read them back. There's active participation and a gratifying sense of accomplishment.

Preschool teachers know how to call attention to the writing and counting that are part of almost any activity. For example, if the classroom has a pet hamster, every child will know how to read the animal's name on the sign above the cage. The teacher might make a calendar showing feeding times, then help the children sign up for certain feedings and count the days until it's their turn. In such ways, children learn print and number concepts in the course of real-life experiences.

One problem with an overly academic approach to preschool is that it gets in the way of play, which is the real way children learn, develop social skills, and spark their creativity. A skill-and-drill approach to preschool education teaches young children that learning is something you do out of a sense of duty or obedience. **A play-centered approach teaches children to love learning.**

A better way for preschool children to learn

Instead of academically oriented lessons and pressure to memorize facts, preschool children learn best through play and teacher-guided play and exploration. The teacher leads children to ask questions and find out the answers for themselves: What happens when you mix together different colors of finger paint? What happens when you pour sand from a long, tall cup into a short, fat one? How can you use pulleys to lift something really heavy?

In this way, the teacher guides the children in her class to become scientists. They also develop the sense that they can create meaningful writing (dictated and then written down by the teacher) and art. They dance and make music. They build things. They solve problems together. They think and talk about what's right and wrong. All of these experiences create lasting lessons which, in the long run, are much more important than any facts they might memorize.