

Ready for Kindergarten

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As the director of an early childhood center in New York City, I am often met with parents' questions about their child's readiness for kindergarten. A misunderstanding of what kindergartens expect of entering students has perpetuated a myriad rumors and stories about what children "should" have mastered; these parents are bombarded with messages about skill building almost from the moment they leave the delivery room. Children should be able to "play an instrument by age 4," "draw a circle and write their name by 3," "recite the alphabet by 2 and a half," "recognize numbers 1-20"... The list goes on, but most of that information just isn't true and, even more concerning, isn't developmentally appropriate for young children.

Understanding Brain Development

Children are born ready to learn, and cultivate 85 percent of their natural intellect, personality and skills by age 5. At birth both the motor and sensory systems are already up and running. A newborn infant has enough motor control to feed and to move away from painful or unpleasant stimuli. In healthy children, these systems continue to develop during toddlerhood and preschool; they are joined by auditory and visual skills—both critical building blocks to reading, writing and other more "academic skills."

Research on early brain development tells us that trying to force "academics" during the preschool years actually runs counter to what we know about how children's brains grow. For many years, researchers have been aware of the incredible evolution that happens during the first 5 years of life, but only in the past 10 years or so has the field been able to crystalize earlier findings and provide clarity into what is happening in the brain as children learn.

Four specific discoveries from this research are helpful when thinking about school readiness:

- How the brain develops depends both on genetics and on the everyday experiences the child has from birth through age 5.
- The brain is not fully organized until the early teens—usually around ages 12-14—and development continues well into the late teens/early 20s.

- The process of brain development happens through synaptic connections, basically a hard wiring of connections between different areas of the brain. These connections can only take hold through repeated experience and hands-on interaction.
- Brain development is sequential. While different children move through these processes at slightly different paces, true mastery can only be achieved by learning step one before step two, step six before step seven, etc.

Unfortunately, this information, particularly with respect to the development of synaptic connections, has been misrepresented to suggest “more is more,” that the more we are able to train children to do certain skills, the more successful they will be in school later on. But this erroneous conclusion misses the critical point that brain development is sequential: Foundational skills must come before performance skills.

This misinterpretation has resulted in a deluge of programs and tools promising to provide advanced and enriched environments or experiences that will guarantee academic success. And, understandably, parents buy in; who wouldn't want to give their child every step up, every advantage or head start? But in reality, the cost to your child is too great. When you try to force children to run before they can walk, they will never be able to fully master walking.

Don't Rush Performance

The best example of this disconnect is likely reading, where success is often measured around oral reading fluency—how quickly and accurately a child can read words on a page. But, while flashcards and worksheets could push a child into being able to decode words, what would suffer is reading comprehension and perseverance. Children who are pushed into decoding before they are ready are actually less fluent readers by 4th and 5th grades. They report less enjoyment of reading and rarely see themselves as people who are “good” at reading. Skipping critical emergent, pre-reading literacy skills, such as letter naming, letter sounding, phonemic awareness and rhyming actually stunts their academic growth in the long run.

Writing presents a similar conundrum for parents. You can certainly train a child to correctly form letters on a page, but writing is actually an incredibly complex arrangement of many foundational skills—including fine motor muscle development, spatial orientation and hand-eye coordination. Without building each and every one of these first, children will never truly gain mastery.

It has been proven over and over that early mastery of performance or “hard” skills—like reading, writing, solving mathematical equations—is not the valid predictor of long-term school achievement. Instead, research

suggests that the more significant interdependent relationship is between academic success and social/emotional and conversational skills. Children who enter kindergarten with strong self-control and regulation, as well as social competence, are shown to be meaningfully more successful than children who score lower on these measures. But these “soft” skills are more difficult to identify and to quantify, so parents often fall victim to the rumors and stories that they hear on the playground, on Facebook or from programs that focus more heavily on “academic” skills.

What To Look For In a Preschool

So let’s step back from kindergarten and look at preschool and more specifically what type of preschool prepares children most effectively for these soft skills. In New York City, schools are often categorized as “play-based” or “academic.” I would contend that this paradigm is somewhat misleading, as children are certainly learning in both environments. But, for the purpose of this argument, let’s accept that there is a true and valid difference between those two ends of a range. In an “academic” school, the philosophy and curriculum might include things like structured reading instruction or a formalized handwriting program. These programs tend to be more teacher-directed and offer less time in the schedule for free exploration. In a “play-based” school, the curriculum tends to be more child-centered and may use terminology like “Reggio-inspired” or “project approach.” These programs often place a higher premium on socialization and, while they may focus on reading and writing for children who display an interest, it is not a goal or a given assumption that all children will read and write by the end of the year.

Given the brain research discussed earlier, both types of preschools could be appropriate, as long as the methodology aligns with what we now know about how children learn. Curriculum should be explorative and allow children multiple opportunities to try and fail, and try again. Teachers should be well-trained and versed in how to promote authentic language development, how to help children identify and manage a full range of emotions, how to model the negotiation of materials and ideas in play and how to identify developmental differences and adapt to each child in the class. Children should be encouraged to build independence—both in skills and in creative thinking; they should be offered opportunities to “exercise” their muscles—both cognitive and physical; and they should be exposed to books of all kinds, ones that they can look at themselves and ones that will be read to them. A child with this kind of background and skill will flourish in kindergarten and will continue to grow as a learner and student.

My Own Experience

I think that actual results can also be very illuminating and helpful as parents navigate their child's path through early education, and so I offer up my own experience—not only as an educator, but as a parent. My daughter recently attended a play-based preschool; she entered kindergarten at age 5 without any of the “academic” skills that parents have nightmares about. She had some number and letter sense—she could count to 20 and identify about 50 percent of letters, but was not close to reading. She could write her name fairly independently, but no other words. She showed some interest in writing stories, but they presented on the page as a series of scribbles with an occasional familiar letter thrown in. However, her self-perception around learning was strong. She considered herself to be an artist, a reader, an author and a chef—all images that were cemented in her during pre-K.

Despite my own training, when it comes to your own child “knowing” is “not knowing,” and I was nervous for her. She is an October birthday—and therefore young for her class—and I knew that many other children would be coming from places where the “hard” performance skills were stressed. Ten months later, at the end of her kindergarten year, she was reading fluently on a 1st grade level and—more important—loved reading. She wrote detailed and descriptive stories in clear, evenly spaced letters—although she still had some age-appropriate letter reversals (backwards S, particularly); her writing was legible and authentic. She could solve addition and subtraction problems, and had mastered several strategies to figure out equations that were difficult for her. And she was not alone; most of the parents in her class would report the same results, because the children were cognitively and developmentally ready for these skills. They came to the table with the foundational abilities that made this kind of learning possible.

Learning Should Be Participatory

Whether it's the moment your baby turns her head at the sound of your voice or takes his first tottering steps as a 1-year-old, children are learning at every moment—without a lot of intervention by adults. By the time your child is 5, she will have had thousands of experiences and opportunities to hard wire connections in the brain, but this can only be effective through active learning—not passive input. Education should be interactive and participatory, not as if there is information that needs to be put into your child's brain.

So, rather than investing in expensive programs or “educational” games or classes, think back to the brain research we discussed and take a walk

in the park to collect leaves—and then sort them by color or shape or size, make up silly rhymes as you walk down the street (car, bar, far, jar . . .), and read and sing with your child whenever you can. And most important, ignore the “talk” you hear on the playground or read in a blog.

References

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