

Play Based Vs. Academic Preschools: What the Research Says

By Kathryn Ems, M.S., President of Parent Cooperative Preschools International

Play-based preschool? Academic preschool? Academic preschool? Play-based preschool? Many parents spend hours agonizing over this decision.

In reality, based upon extensive, long-term research, we know that a play-based, developmentally appropriate preschool is, in fact, the best academic preschool.

How can that be, you ask, when “all they do is play”? Sure, it looks like fun, but where are the academics?

Research tells us that what children need for future academic success is definitely present in a play-based, child-centered program and is NOT present in an early childhood program of teacher-led instruction and worksheets.

One of the most extensive studies took place in Washington, D.C. over 5 years. Too many students were being retained in kindergarten and the school district wanted to know why they were not succeeding. Rebecca Marcon, Ph.D., decided to study the preschool and kindergarten classrooms and found they fell into three categories: child-centered (play-based); teacher-centered (direct academic instructions such as memorization and work sheets); and a combination.

The researchers looked at this large number of students again in 4th grade. Students who were in the play-based programs in their early years did substantially better than those in the academic programs. The children in the child-centered, play-based programs did best academically at the end of kindergarten, but most importantly, continued to grow and make academic gains over the next 4 years

The children in the academic-oriented classrooms declined in skills over the next few years to end up substantially behind their peers. Think about that – they learned in kindergarten, but declined 22% in relative skill level in the primary grades. The children in the programs with a mix of both did worst of all.

The gap in achievement was especially wide in mathematics. Play, and its connection with manipulating objects in the real world, provides a necessary base for later mathematical success. In fact Kyoung-Hye Seo and Herbert Ginsburg (Columbia University) did extensive observations of young children at play and found a significant amount and variety of mathematical activities during free play.

This research on the academic value of play-based early childhood education has been replicated in the US and Europe. One such study was conducted at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. They used Thelma Harms’ *Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale* (which supports a developmentally appropriate, play-based curriculum) to determine the quality of the preschools studied. Their results showed that children from classrooms with higher quality practices had better language and math skills in preschool and into elementary school.

A play-based, child-centered program includes both an extensive period of time for children to choose activities from a rich environment as well as planned activities, such as circle time and story time. The teacher has given much thought to the environment of the classroom so that children will have the opportunity to experience many types of activities that incorporate language, fine motor, problem-solving and other skills essential for academic success.

It is especially important to note that during free choice time the teacher is circulating among the children. She (or he) engages them where appropriate and expands their learning and vocabulary, she teaches children how to negotiate and resolve conflicts, and she observes so that she can meet the needs of each child. It isn't "just play," but play-based, allowing the young child to learn what he or she needs to learn in the best, most developmental way.

The Harvard Preschool Project found that children who developed best had experienced a greater amount of language from a caring adult directed to what the child was focused on at the moment. This is what teachers in a play-based program do – they use the child's interests, not imposed worksheets, to facilitate growth. They do that because they know that works best, and longitudinal research studies at Harvard support them.

The state of Missouri began its "New Parents as Teachers" program, now used in all 50 states, by surveying the research and basing its curriculum on "playing to learn." The American Academy of Pediatrics has stated that numerous studies show that unstructured play has many benefits, including adjusting to school settings.

Play-based, child-centered, developmentally appropriate instruction is the standard that early childhood professionals use, based on the best research. Yet some parents still resist. My hypothesis is that this is part of our "immediate gratification" culture. If the computer doesn't work instantly, it's too slow. We call people on our cell phones because we want to talk to them now. We want that reduction in anxiety and the pride that comes when our child learns to read, and we don't want to wait until he or she is six.

But raising children isn't about "now." It's a long-term project. We take our children in for well-baby visits at the doctor's and feed them nutritious foods because we want them to be healthy in the long-term. We also want our children to be educated for the long-term.

As parents and teachers our best chance at providing excellent life-time learning for our children is to allow the pre-frontal cortex to develop fully. That means we need to allow children's learning to grow in a steady fashion from the newborn's manipulation of any and everything into his mouth to the adult-oriented learning that includes lectures and reading.

We don't expect an adult to jump right into Solid State Physics without the prerequisite calculus class (and basic math before that.) In the same way the three-year-old needs the prerequisites of language development, phonological awareness (like rhyming), and sorting before she or he is ready for formal reading and math instruction. A play-based program complements the child's brain development and provides the basis for academic success.

When the research is so clear, let's proudly proclaim, our "learn through play" preschool is absolutely the best "academic" preschool your child can attend.