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# Want to get your kids into college? Let them play

By [Erika Christakis](#) and [Nicholas Christakis](#), Special to CNN  
December 29, 2010 7:57 a.m. EST

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**Editor's note:** *Erika Christakis, MEd, MPH, is an early childhood teacher and former preschool director. Nicholas Christakis, MD, PhD, is a professor of medicine and sociology at Harvard University. Together, they serve as Masters of Pforzheimer House, one of the undergraduate residential houses at Harvard College.*

## STORY HIGHLIGHTS

Erika and Nicholas Christakis says they see students at Harvard who have trouble getting along

They say kids better equipped to learn, interact, if taught using play-based curricula

"Drill and kill" skill-based learning, requires more social isolation, they say

Writers: Play-based learning builds empathy, better self-control, and problem solving skill

**(CNN)** -- Every day where we work, we see our young students struggling with the transition from home to school. They're all wonderful kids, but some can't share easily or listen in a group.

Some have impulse control problems and have trouble keeping their hands to themselves; others don't always see that actions have consequences; a few suffer terribly from separation anxiety.

We're not talking about preschool children. These are Harvard undergraduate students whom we teach and advise. They all know how to work, but some of them haven't learned how to play.

Parents, educators, psychologists, neuroscientists, and politicians generally fall into one of two camps when it comes to preparing very young children for school: play-based or skills-based.

These two kinds of curricula are often pitted against one another as a zero-sum game: If you want to protect your daughter's childhood, so the argument goes, choose a play-based program; but if you want her to get into Harvard, you'd better make sure you're brushing up on the ABC flashcards every night before bed.

We think it is quite the reverse. Or, in any case, if you want your child to succeed in college, the play-based curriculum is the way to go.

In fact, we wonder why play is not encouraged in educational periods later in the developmental life of young people -- giving kids more practice as they get closer to the ages of our students.

Why do this? One of the best predictors of school success is the ability to control impulses. Children who can control their impulse to be the center of the universe, and -- relatedly -- who can assume the perspective of another person, are better equipped to learn.

Psychologists calls this the "theory of mind": the ability to recognize

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that our own ideas, beliefs, and desires are distinct from those of the people around us. When a four-year-old destroys someone's carefully constructed block castle or a 20-year-old belligerently monopolizes the class discussion on a routine basis, we might conclude that they are unaware of the feelings of the people around them.

The beauty of a play-based curriculum is that very young children can routinely observe and learn from others' emotions and experiences. Skills-based curricula, on the other hand, are sometimes derisively known as "drill and kill" programs because most teachers understand that young children can't learn meaningfully in the social isolation required for such an approach.

How do these approaches look different in a classroom? Preschoolers in both kinds of programs might learn about hibernating squirrels, for example, but in the skills-based program, the child could be asked to fill out a worksheet, counting (or guessing) the number of nuts in a basket and coloring the squirrel's fur.

In a play-based curriculum, by contrast, a child might hear stories about squirrels and be asked why a squirrel accumulates nuts or has fur. The child might then collaborate with peers in the construction of a squirrel habitat, learning not only about number sense, measurement, and other principles needed for engineering, but also about how to listen to, and express, ideas.

The child filling out the worksheet is engaged in a more one-dimensional task, but the child in the play-based program interacts meaningfully with peers, materials, and ideas.

Programs centered around constructive, teacher-moderated play are very effective. For instance, one randomized, controlled trial had 4- and 5-year-olds engage in make-believe play with adults and found substantial and durable gains in the ability of children to show self-control and to delay gratification. Countless other studies support the association between dramatic play and self-regulation.

Through play, children learn to take turns, delay gratification, negotiate conflicts, solve problems, share goals, acquire flexibility, and live with disappointment. By allowing children to imagine walking in another person's shoes, imaginative play also seeds the development of empathy, a key ingredient for intellectual and social-emotional success.

The real "readiness" skills that make for an academically successful kindergartener or college student have as much to do with emotional intelligence as they do with academic preparation. Kindergartners need to know not just sight words and lower case letters, but how to search for meaning. The same is true of 18-year-olds.

As admissions officers at selective colleges like to say, an entire freshman class could be filled with students with perfect grades and test scores. But academic achievement in college requires readiness skills that transcend mere book learning. It requires the ability to engage actively with people and ideas. In short, it requires a deep connection with the world.

For a five year-old, this connection begins and ends with the creating, questioning, imitating, dreaming, and sharing that characterize play. When we deny young children play, we are denying them the right to understand the world. By the time they get to college, we will have denied them the opportunity to fix the world too.

*The opinions expressed in this commentary are solely those of Erika and Nicholas Christakis.*

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**winsomeazure** • 2 years ago

Wow. No offense guys, but a lot of you really aren't getting it. The point is that one dimensional "book learning" (while important) cannot replace the kind of learning that takes place during free play, or adult directed play. This doesn't \*just\* teach you manners and empathy, it teaches kids HOW to learn, and how to understand ideas. You can learn as maNY FACTS BY ROTE AS YOU LIKE, BUT YOU WILL NEVER BE TRULY INTELLIGENT UNLESS YOU CAN UNDERSTAND IDEAS. aND THIS REQUIRES EMPATHY.

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**Baug** • 2 years ago

You can learn more about a man in an hour of play than in a lifetime of conversation - Plato

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**LiteracySpec** • 2 years ago

Aloisae, Your comments make me assume you have not been into many schools lately. I teach at the university level and see many elementary classrooms each year. I can assure you that play-based education has not existed for several decades. When I visit classrooms I typically see kids in desks and rows (public schools) being quiet. No play-based learning:(

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**SevanSchwag** • 2 years ago

I think maybe this article is poorly written because most of the postings on here are missing the point. They are not arguing that kids need more play time and less learning. Their point is that learning through interactive play is not only a great way to learn but also has the benefit of learning social and emotional skills.

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**Bunnicola** • 2 years ago

This is why my kid goes to a Waldorf school. It provides a structured time line during the day, week and year to foster comfort and predictability so that during unstructured play and hands on activities they can be more open to learning. The methods are very old fashioned even though they sometimes get labeled as new agey.

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**opinalicious** • 2 years ago

"See one, do one, teach one" is the standard for learning in medical school and science graduate school and will work just as well in primary and secondary education. That incorporates elements of didactic and group praxis learning. It should not be called "play", which is misleading, but rather practice-based learning. It is more interesting and more effective.

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**Psychahology** → opinalicious • 2 years ago

"See one! Do one! Teach one!" Freud must be rolling over in his coffin. ; )

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**CoastCodger** • 2 years ago

Play, isn't that what kids did during those years when America was leading the world in business growth and innovations; you know, before Dr. Spock and child psychologists and "self-esteem" awards?


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College is a time to get your priorities straight and focus on school first, and playing comes second. This article will help you to have the best college experience possible. have fitness centers, pools, and other recreational facilities. You can also join clubs or groups centered around your hobbies, religion, and more.Â Try to get involved in many different activities during your college years. This will look good on your resume, and employers like to see a candidate with a variety of interests. Just don't flood yourself with too many activities as your school work is more important.Â Schedule breaks into your study time. Of course, studying is very important; however, so are adequate breaks. For every 60 minutes you study, take ten minutes for a break. âœlf you want to turn a vision into reality, you have to give 100% and never stop believing in them.â€” Arnold Schwarzenegger. My son isnâ€™t old enough to walk into a gym by himself, so I had to take him to the gym. Most gyms require children to be around the age of 16 years old. Iâ€™m no stranger to the gym since I have worked out since high school when I bought my own weight set from my newspaper route.Â Kids need encouragement from their parents. Coaches are there to play and win the game. Coaches will look at what they need to win and they may not have time to talk to kids one on one about everything. This is where you come in as a parent to fill this role. In a sense, you are a coach for your child helping explain certain things they may not be familiar with. Kid Into College. With more than 17 million students unrolled in undergraduate programs in the USA, and high school juniors and seniors applying to sometimes dozens of schools, each must find ways to make themselves stand out from an ever-growing pool of applicants. Here are six ways they say students can grab the attention of admissions officers, according to the panelists.Â Prospective students should decide whether they will be happiest in an urban, suburban or rural setting, and whether they want to attend a large research institution or a small, intimate liberal arts college. Students also need to consider how far away they want to be from their families, said Robert Mc Caig, vice president for enrollment management at Monmouth University in West Long Branch. Let them play. Every day where we work, we see our young students struggling with the transition from home to school. They're all wonderful kids, but some can't share easily or listen in a group. Play Based Learning Learning Through Play Fun Learning Learning Stories Effective Learning Teaching Kids Outdoor Learning. Learning English.Â Thereâ€™s so much more to kindergarten readiness than letter recognition. Maybe itâ€™s because Iâ€™ve always wanted to be a teacherâ€¦but it baffles me that families donâ€™t unâ€¦ Inquiry Based Learning Project Based Learning Hands On Learning Learning Through Play Reading Resources Teacher Resources Emergent Curriculum Teacher Inspiration Reading Centers. My First Five for Friday!