

## **Rigorous Academics in Preschool and Kindergarten? Yes! Let Me Tell You How**

Gaye Gronlund

A swelling tide of media coverage places early childhood educators in a difficult position. This coverage takes the complex issues involved in planning curriculum for three-, four-, and five-year-olds and distills the debate into pablum preschools and kindergartens versus academically rigorous ones.

Many teachers of young children are demonstrating their courage and convictions by standing up to this oversimplification. They carefully explain developmentally appropriate practice to families in their programs, to administrators and community members, to school boards and funding organizations. With pride they announce, "I support learning for young children! Let me show you how that learning takes place in my preschool or kindergarten classroom."

High-quality early childhood programs across the country address academics, including assessment, and are accountable to early childhood standards. Research and professionally recommended practices recognize that young children learn best through manipulation of materials and hands-on experiences carefully planned and facilitated by knowledgeable teachers. This learning looks very much like play—but play with purpose and intent.

The teacher initially defines that purpose and intent, but only after following the children's interests. She sets up a learning environment that has inherent structure and stimulation for children. She organizes and displays materials so that children use them to figure things out, practice skills, and learn new concepts. Children are allowed enough time to explore those materials again and again, so that through repetition and success they develop the confidence to take risks and try new activities with more complexity and demands.

Most important, the teacher is ever ready to teach. However, that teaching may look quite different for each child and for each particular situation that arises during a day with young children.

Much of the misunderstanding in the debate between pablum preschools and kindergartens and academically rigorous ones stems from the definition of what it means to teach young children. May people see a teacher only as an instructor, imparting concepts and skills to patiently listening young children. That instruction is teacher-directed; the children are passive receivers of the information that the teacher dispenses. The children demonstrate their understanding through paper-and-pencil tasks (usually workbooks or ditto sheets), and their progress is evaluated through on-demand assessments or tests.

Good early childhood practices acknowledge that three-, four-, and five-year-olds are wigglers and doers. To help children stay with tasks and learn important concepts and skills, teachers work with, instead of against, their individual developmental styles. The teacher's role then becomes one of observer as the child goes about exploring materials. He asks open-ended questions that stimulate the child's thinking: "What do you think would happen if you tried . . . ?" He helps promote vocabulary

development by describing what the child is doing: “I see you’ve used lots of colors—red, green, blue, and brown.” He models or demonstrates how to make shapes with the geoboards or count all of the big blocks. He illustrates how to crack open an egg or how much food to feed the fish.

Teachers of preschool and kindergarten are rigorously academic because they keep goals in mind as they continually interact with children in their play and exploration. To develop reading and writing skills, teachers read many stories each day to and with children. Through these reading experiences, children learn many of the conventions of written language, including left to right and top to bottom directionality; use picture clues; make logical predictions; and play with the sounds of language. Teachers help children learn to recognize their own names and encourage the writing of names and other words as children demonstrate interest. They provide a variety of alphabet activities and offer opportunities to act out familiar stories and draw and write daily. To meet the goals of developing young children as readers and writers, teachers embed literacy activities in meaningful experiences: writing letters to friends, reading the classroom helper chart, and labeling the classroom. They read favorite books again and again so that familiarity becomes a form of practice and more and more awareness of print is developed.

Preschool and kindergarten teachers pay close attention to academics when they also embed math, science, and social studies activities in children’s exploration and purposeful play. Counting and one-to-one correspondence are evident in daily routines of attendance and setting the table for snack. Geometry is explored in block building and use of many other manipulatives. Vocabulary and an understanding of measurement are taught at the sand and water table or in cooking activities. Scientific study and observation is developed in early childhood classrooms through projects and units of study about weather, seasonal changes, and plant and animal life. Social studies concepts of community and family life and the study of people and their differences and similarities are included in dramatic play, literature, and cultural celebrations.

What are not evident in high-quality preschool and kindergarten classrooms are skill-and-drill activities. Instead, the learning of all academic subjects is playful and exploratory. Children contribute their own ideas, use their own problem-solving strategies, and pursue their own interests. Teachers skillfully weave in the goals and objectives of traditional academics as they build on what children can do and challenge them to try new things. Children are not left to their own devices, nor is their development left to chance. Using classroom-based assessment practices such as careful observation and anecdotal documentation, as well as collecting children’s work (taking photographs or samples of children’s drawing, writing, and language), teachers continually evaluate the progress the children are making. This ongoing assessment process provides more reliable information than tests or on-demand tasks; teachers are accountable for what each child knows and can do, and they use that to make decisions on how best to teach each child.

Most teachers recognize that we must have expectations and standards for our early childhood programs. But they also know the nature of learning at this age, and they carefully define how academics are most appropriately and effectively incorporated into preschool and kindergarten programs. Because a program uses playful ways to build children’s success does not mean the

curriculum is not rigorous or academic. It means that it is just right for what's best for three-, four-, and five-year-old children.

Gaye Gronlund, MA, is a national early childhood education consultant from Indianapolis and an online faculty member for Pacific Oaks College. A former teacher of regular and special education, Gaye has cowritten a portfolio book with Bev Engel to be published by Redleaf Press in 2001.

---

Copyright © 2001 by the National Association for the Education of Young Children. See Permissions and Reprints online at [www.naeyc.org/yc/permissions](http://www.naeyc.org/yc/permissions).

**Posted with permission from the National Association for the Education of Young Children**

Let me tell you, you must understand and accept that it is necessary for your kids to go to preschool. Read on to understand the importance of preschool education. 1. Help Kids Learn Socialization. They often haven't learned the academic skills they need, like how to write their name, upper and lower case letters, numbers at least up to 20, counting, shapes and colors. They often don't know how to sit still and listen to stories, participate in group discussions, raise their hand, line up, eat lunch independently, and say goodbye in the morning without crying. Yes absolutely, preschool is essential for a kid as he/she learns many things there that parents are not able to teach properly. In a preschool, the kid also becomes ready for the school and its learning journey. How can I tell if my child isn't ready for kindergarten? Bob Cunningham, in-house advisor for Understood: The preschool teachers can usually give you a good sense of if your child is ready. They look at a bunch of things, like language skills, social skills, and how well kids follow directions. Amanda Morin, parent advocate and former teacher: There isn't one measure that can tell you for sure. Kindergarten readiness is a combination of many different skills. The preschool would need to do something to directly address these issues. If it doesn't, it's unlikely your child will make significant growth that wouldn't have happened in kindergarten. Delaying can make sense if your child gets extra help during that year, like the kind kids get through early childhood special education. Rigorous Academics in Preschool and Kindergarten? Yes! Let Me Tell You How - Posted with permission from the National Association for the Education of Young Children. Judy Harris Helm- Implementing Learning Standards. Judy Harris Helm, Ed.D. began her career teaching first grade then taught 4 year olds, directed, and designed early childhood programs and trained teachers.