

Play: The Best Way to Learn

An updated excerpt from *Preschool for Parents*

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Play Is Important

Many parents are concerned about what their children will learn in preschool. They want their children to enjoy preschool, but also to be well prepared for the more formal environments of kindergarten and elementary school.

The good news is that the best preschool teaching practices make the most of children's natural inclination to play. What's more, you don't have to choose between academic learning and enjoyable play experiences for your children. The idea that you must make a choice is in part due to different definitions. When some people talk about academics, they may be thinking specifically of teaching children their letters and sounds, numbers, colors, shapes, and so on. Our definition of academics is much broader. Academics should address such questions as:

How do children become literate?

How do children learn to think mathematically and like scientists?

How do children learn about the world around them?

How do children create through the arts and learn to think of themselves as creative problem-solvers?

Almost all current research on young children clearly indicates that when children play, they learn, and they learn social, emotional, and physical skills as well as academic content. Our view--that a quality preschool program is one that promotes learning through rich play experiences--is based on that research.

Play Is Children's Work

Many parents may wonder if a program that focuses on academics is better than one that emphasizes learning through play. It's unfortunate that people too often take polarized positions on this issue. Some who recognize the importance of play feel it is inappropriate to push academics. Others believe that children will fall behind if they are not taught academics at a young age. We believe this either/or thinking misses the point and does not reflect current knowledge.

Contrary to what one might expect, the benefits of rich play experiences during the preschool years are extensive and address academic goals for reading and writing, math, science, social studies, and the arts. Several decades of research show that high-quality preschool programs that aim to strengthen social and emotional skills through play have positive effects on all aspects of children's development--including their cognitive or intellectual development. What's more, these positive effects are long lasting. Programs that overemphasize academic learning through teacher-directed instruction in preschool may produce short-term results, but they fail in the long run to improve children's success in school and in life.

Children Learn Through Play

When children play, they take the initiative--choosing where they want to play, coming up with ideas, and trying them out. However, this does not mean that teachers do nothing but move around and watch. Rather, teachers have an important role in helping children learn through play.

Teachers set the stage for children's learning by selecting materials they know will engage children and

organizing materials effectively in interest areas. They provide guidance if children need help and ask questions to spark children's thinking while allowing and encouraging children to experience the power of feeling in charge of their own learning. In any one play period, your child might choose to work on a puzzle, build a block tower, look through a familiar book and retell the story, or play a game with a friend. When children are free to follow their interests--within an environment that supports and extends their exploration--learning happens.

Academic Learning Starts With Active Play

Many research findings indicate that there is a direct relationship between children's ability to pretend and their academic success. When children pretend, they remember past experiences or situations and replay them--the baby is sick so I have to give her medicine. They learn to use symbols (one object to stand for something else)--a block becomes a car. Children also develop problem-solving skills--deciding who will play what role or how to share props. And they learn about different perspectives as they play at different roles.

Why is this important? When children are older and study history, literature, science, and math, they also remember past experiences and knowledge they have learned and use symbols to represent ideas.

Many learning tasks require the ability to visualize and determine alternative ways to consider an issue or answer a question. For this reason, learning to use the imagination during the preschool years is crucial to children's learning in the future. In summary, research bears out the importance of engaging children in active learning--or active play.

For More Information

For Parents

Reading Right from the Start <http://www.teachingstrategies.com/pages/page.cfm?pageID=106>

"How Children Learn in Preschool"

<http://www.teachingstrategies.com/pages/page.cfm?pageID=176>

A Parent's Guide to Preschool

<https://www.teachingstrategies.com/bookshop/detail.cfmproductID=92&pg>

For Teachers

The Creative Curriculum® for Preschool

<http://www.teachingstrategies.com/pages/page.cfm?pageid=34>



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