



Why Choose a Play-Centered Preschool?

Better for Kids

Many child-development experts say kids learn better through play than through direct instruction. Here are some words from the experts:

"The opposite of learning within context [such as play or everyday interactions] is learning meaningless, disembodied facts. The motivation for this type of learning becomes pleasing the parent or teacher. The children who have to memorize and perform do more learning for love than loving to learn. Children want to please you. They will try to do as you ask. And they will try to act excited about an activity if you think it is important. But a deeper, more lasting education will take place if they have a context in which to place the newly acquired information. Learning within context is real, authentic learning. . . . For our young children, all learning should be fun."¹

"Research suggests that real success in preschool has little to do with learning the alphabet or other 'academics.' Success has to do with social and emotional well-being: your child looks forward to school; while there, she is engaged and involved with people and activities. Success is also a process: learning to engage in give-and-take with children and adults, to negotiate, and to start and maintain social relationships. Your child gains confidence in handling transitions and adjusting to new people and places—she can 'step up to the plate' and take a risk. Your child starts to have a life away from home. Ultimately, she is ready to socially and emotionally handle elementary school—and through that, more prepared for academic success."²

"Children learn in the context of relationships. They learn most effectively:

¹ Hirsh-Pasek, Kathy, Ph.D., and Roberta Michnick Golinkoff, Ph.D., with Diane Eyer, Ph.D, *Einstein Never Used Flash Cards: How Our Children REALLY Learn--and Why They Need to Play More and Memorize Less*. New York: Rodale Books, 2003, 257.

² Faculty of Tufts University's Eliot-Pearson Department of Child Development, *Proactive Parenting: Guiding your Child from Two to Six*, 315-7.

- when they have warm and secure relationships with parents and other caring adults;
- through play—alone and with peers;
- through their interactions with other children and adults; and
- in environments that are rich in language stimulation and where they can explore engaging materials.”³

Direct Instruction May Be Harmful

In studies, children who attended more “academic” preschools instead of play-focused preschools were found to be more anxious, less creative, and less enthusiastic about learning than the children who had learned primarily through play.⁴

“Supporters of academic early learning environments mistakenly believe that the best way to prepare young children for primary school success is through formal instruction, work sheets, and skill drills. Such practice predetermines the most relevant information and attempts to force young children to focus in ways that most are simply too immature to do successfully. The unintended consequence is often a child with low confidence and a negative disposition toward learning. It is clearly not useful for a child to learn skills if, in the process of learning them, the disposition to use them is damaged” (Katz 1993b).⁵

“Early childhood programs that implement a directed academic curriculum often replace essential, hands-on learning activities with skill-based performance and rote-learning tasks. In doing so, they risk the developmental growth necessary for children's future academic success. When rote-learning tasks are used in an early childhood classroom, they condition a child to concentrate on a very specific skill and . . . use parts of the brain that are immature, and although she may be able to practice and learn the task, experts believe the normal growth and development of the brain can be distorted by such practice” (Healy 2004). One pre-K teacher explains the principle to parents with a simple analogy: “We can make wine or we can make vinegar. Fine wine may take more time, but the flavor is well rounded.” Balanced developmental brain growth is crucial if a young child is to gain a broad base of knowledge and meaningful understanding.

“While some adult-directed or facilitated activities, such as reading stories, singing songs, and group dictation, are appropriate, traditional adult-directed academic

³ “What is School Readiness?” National Educational Goals Panel pamphlet from Washington School Readiness Summit, November 8, 2004.

⁴ Hirsh-Pasek, et al., 12, 128.

⁵ Blaustein, Mari, “See, Hear, Touch! The Basics of Learning Readiness” Copyright © 2005 by the National Association for the Education of Young Children. <http://www.journal.naeyc.org/btj/200507/01Blaustein.asp>, 2.

curriculum is for the most part inappropriate in early childhood learning environments because it:

- places emphasis on the teacher's goals, forces the child to tackle a problem that is unrelated to his or her environment or concrete experiences, and leaves gaps in the development of reasoning and logic;
- does not respect the child's individual objectives or allow the child to use intrinsic motivations to engage in learning;
- jeopardizes a child's attitude or disposition toward learning (Katz 1993a);
- limits opportunities for a child to practice and develop essential nonacademic abilities;
- reduces opportunities for the child to understand essential relationships between experiences and peers and to test newly learned concepts in his or her environment;
- risks placing inappropriate expectations and pressure on young children;
- decreases the development of the intuitive foundation of knowledge needed for complex abstract thinking in the future; and
- forces children to use immature neural pathways to complete tasks. . . ."⁶

[In one study, researchers compared the performance of students who had attended play-oriented child-initiated preschools (CI), more academically-directed preschools (AD), and mixed preschools (M): see the graph on the last page of this handout.] "By the end of the primary grades, there was little difference in the academic performance of children who had experienced three different preschool models. This finding was consistent with the developmental assumption that, by the end of third grade, most children will have attained the basic academic skills. . . .Through the primary grades, children are learning to read. An academically directed approach typically emphasizes the act of reading over comprehension. Beginning in fourth grade, children are reading to learn; comprehension is critical. In fourth grade, they encounter more abstract concepts that do not necessarily match up with their everyday experiences. Additionally, fourth-grade teachers expect children to be more independent in the learning process, to assume more responsibility for their learning, and to show greater initiative. Perhaps teachers foster this independence by stepping back somewhat and shifting their instructional approach to be less didactic. It is at this point that motivation and self-initiated learning become crucial for children's later school success. This is the point at which Elkind (1986) and Zigler (1987) worried that short-term academic gains produced by overly didactic, formal instructional practices for young children would be offset by long-term stifling of children's motivation. Important lessons about independence and

⁶ Blaustein, 3.

self-initiative are being learned in the early childhood years. Overly teacher-directed approaches that tell young children what to do, when to do it, and how to do it most likely curtail development of initiative during the preschool years. According to developmentalist Constance Kamii (1975, 1984), such an approach produces passive students who wait to be told what to think next. Therefore, it is not really surprising that children whose preschool experience may have curtailed initiative would find the transition to the later elementary school grades more difficult. The foundation of critical thinking may be found in early childhood experiences that foster curiosity, initiative, independence, and effective choice."⁷

Parental Involvement

"Research suggests that family involvement in education can boost young children's academic success (e.g., Henderson & Berla, 1994; Izzo, Weissbert, Kaspro & Fendrich, 1999; Marcon, 1999; Powell, 1989)."⁸

A Final Word of Advice from the Experts

"[W]hen you make choices for your children, select what looks like the most fun. Visit some of the classes or activities and see what the children are doing. Is the place one in which children can take a lead and show their creativity? Is it *child-centered*? . . . Also ask yourself what the purpose of the activity is. It should primarily be for fun and only secondarily for learning."⁹

⁷ Marcon, Rebecca A. "Moving up the Grades: Relationship between Preschool Model and Later School Success," *Early Childhood Research & Practice*: Spring 2002. Volume 4, Number 1. Available at <http://ecrp.uiuc.edu/v4n1/marcon.html>. This is a publication of the Clearinghouse on Early Education and Parenting; see <http://ceep.crc.uiuc.edu/index.html> for more information.

⁸ Krider, Holly. "Getting Parents 'Ready' for Kindergarten: The Role of Early Childhood Education." Harvard Family Research Project, April 2002.

⁹ Hirsh-Pasek, et al., 243.

Transition from Yr 5/Grade 3 to Yr 6/Grade 4

Preschool Model x Year

+ p ≤ .10 * p < .05 ** p < .01

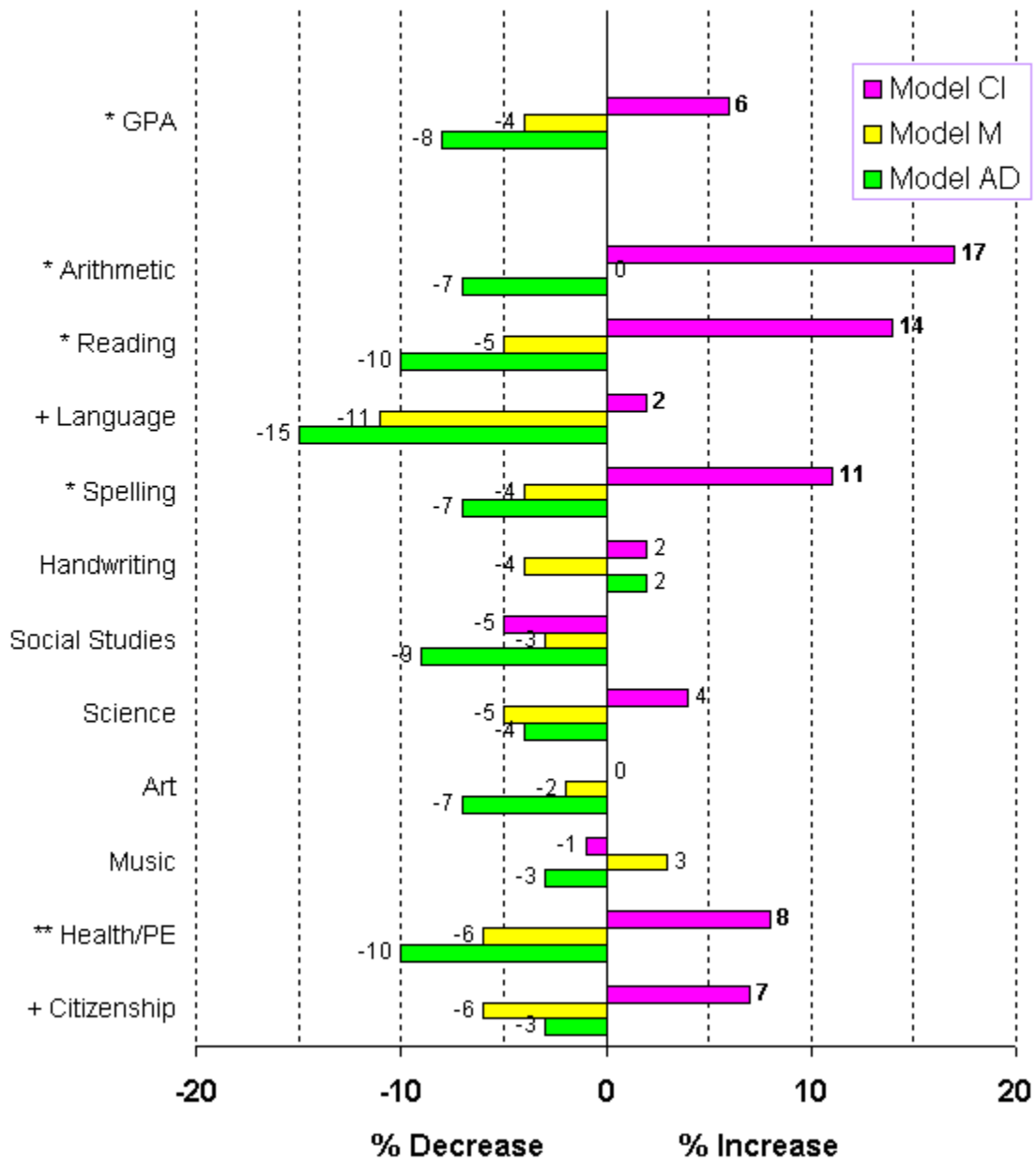


Figure 4

Children who attended play-oriented preschools (in pink) significantly outperformed their peers from other preschools in this study of performance in later elementary school.

For further explanation of this graph, refer to the lower block quote on page 3 of this handout.