

Why kids deserve a preschool that lets them play ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Standing at the creek's edge, my son carefully drops his wooden boat into the water. He follows his classmates along the banks, guiding their boats with the attached knitted string, a small parade of colorful sails and bright rubber boots.

The children occasionally look behind them and smile proudly at their parents.

It's Regatta Day at my son's preschool, and the teachers, parents and children have hiked into the woods behind the school to launch the little boats. It's a special day to celebrate the children's weeks of hard work on this project.

They've built the boats out of pieces of wood. They've knitted the boat's string. They've painted and sewed the sails.

They've learned about creating and following patterns, about using patience and self-regulation to persevere through mistakes and challenges, about understanding numbers through counting and sequencing, about asking for help when assistance is needed. They've strengthened their control over their little hands and fingers.

All without a work sheet, a flashcard or a vocabulary lesson at a tiny desk. If you ask my son what he did at school on any given day, he will say, "Play."

And he is right. He plays and does hands-on activities all day, but that doesn't mean he isn't engaged in serious learning. I chose a school for him that understands that play — as Fred Rogers famously said — is "the work of childhood." Children learn by running, building, imagining, climbing, storytelling, exploring, pretending and singing. It's how they build the foundation for the academic skills that are so critical later on.

Increasingly, as a society, we are in danger of forgetting that the chance to engage in unscripted, playful learning is one of the primary things that young children deserve from adults, as early childhood educator Erika Christakis writes in "The Importance of Being Little: What Preschoolers Really Need From Grownups." "Play is the foundational building block of human cognition, emotional health, and social behavior," Christakis writes. "Play improves memory and helps children learn mathematical problems in their heads, take turns, regulate their impulses, and speak with greater complexity."

Researchers have documented how kindergarten has become the new first grade (or even second), how recess has disappeared from too many American elementary schools, and how preschools are increasingly places where children are expected to spend large amounts of time "working" at their desks. As reported in the New York Times, a recent study has gotten a lot of attention for suggesting that this more "rigorous" academic approach to children's education might be better for kids. The study found that at the end of kindergarten, kids who had experienced at least one year of academic preschool outperformed those who attended play-based preschools by an equivalent of two-and-a-half months of instruction.

To me, this is hardly surprising, and no parent should conclude from this single study that their child would be better off attending a "rigorously" academic preschool. If children are given direct instruction in literacy, numbers and math concepts, they will do better on assessments than kids who haven't been exposed to those skills yet. The study, however, only examined the short-term impact of a type of program; it did not measure whether those gains stretch beyond kindergarten.

Other studies have found that early exposure to teacher-directed academic instruction can be harmful to kids' long-term development. For instance, one study comparing students who had attended "academic" preschools to those who had attended "child-initiated," play-based preschools over several years, concluded that "children's long-term progress may be slowed by overly academic preschool experiences that introduce formalized learning experiences too early for most children's developmental status. Pushing children too soon may actually backfire when children move into the later elementary school grades and are required to think more independently and take on greater responsibility for their own learning process."

Another study in Tennessee found that kids who attended academic preschools were more prepared for kindergarten than their peers who hadn't attended preschool. However, by second grade, the students who hadn't gone to these preschools were performing better.

The preschool-attending kids by this point had more negative attitudes toward school and worse work habits. Were they simply “burned out?”

We live in a fast-paced world full of global competition. Parents are busy and always looking for time-savers, “hacks” and quick fixes. We don’t want our kids to get left behind.

But child development doesn’t work like that. We can’t rush our kids’ brains to learn more, learn faster or learn in the style of miniaturized grown-ups. Early childhood trainer and advocate Amanda Morgan, who blogs at Not Just Cute, compares the early work of play to the foundation of a house. Morgan writes, “Learning foundations are built through play and experience. And we can’t afford to skip that. A push-down curriculum isn’t helping kids to get ahead, it’s simply ignoring the critical role of the foundation.”

Preschoolers should not spend their days at desks, filling out work sheets and learning sight words. Childhood is too important for that.

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