

Preschoolers need more play and fewer scripted lessons, says early childhood educator Erika Christakis ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

In her just-released book, "The Importance of Being Little: What Preschoolers Really Need from Grownups" (Viking), noted early childhood educator and Silliman College associate master Erika Christakis argues that most of today's youngest schoolchildren are spending their critical early-learning years in environments that ignore or misunderstand their needs. A former preschool teacher and director who has taught at the Yale Child Study Center, she makes the case that "schooling and learning are often two different things." She argues that preschool children would be better served if educators get "out of their way" by allowing for more play-based - and less formally scripted - educational experiences, and by creating less cluttered and visually demanding environments in which these naturally curious youngsters can explore and "think out loud." Drawing on research and clinical experience, Christakis also offers advice on how best to help these young thinkers learn and grow in these potentially formative years.

"'The Importance of Being Little' reflects Erika's deep and longstanding commitment to the education of young people," says Yale President and noted psychologist Peter Salovey. "Her book is sensitive and kind, and it reveals her aspiration that students of all ages will not only speak to one another but also listen. It is this same spirit that has animated her teaching, evincing faith in students' ability to grow through conversation and interaction."

Christakis shared some of her thoughts about preschool education with YaleNews before the publication of her book on Feb. 9. What follows is an edited version of that conversation.

How has your own work as a preschool teacher and director informed your thoughts about how we can best serve young children?

The more I observe young children in action, the more faith I have that they are capable and powerful. But our expectations are often mismatched: We ask too much of young children pragmatically, but too little of them cognitively. Preschool classrooms are needlessly noisy, over-stimulating, and aesthetically unappealing environments with rapid pacing and jam-packed schedules. There is too much teacher-directed talk on banal topics and insufficient uninterrupted stretches of time to play. The teachers I admire have learned to loosen the reins. But there is nothing ad hoc about their pedagogy; it takes real skill, knowledge, and professional collegiality to create classroom environments where children see themselves as engineers, physicists, sculptors, storytellers, entomologists, philosophers, musicians, and diplomats. That kind of teaching is not easy.

In your book, you argue that pre-school has "adultified" children. How so?

The physical and emotional terrain in which to be a young child is more constrained than ever. We construct children's environments at home and school with adult eyes and adult desires. We expect preschoolers to conform to our time-tables, our habits, our sleep schedules, our electronics usage, our whims. But I believe there is a way to be more child-centered, and we can do this without making parents and other adults crazy.

When we look at childhood from the preschooler's perspective, we see many surprises: The small person who dawdles impossibly getting out the door every morning turns out to be the very same person who can hold a newborn baby sibling with the utmost concentration and tenderness. The child who has to be cajoled to cut a piece of red construction paper to make a parent's Valentine's Day card can make a meticulous sketch of the grains of beach sand she's observed under a microscope. So, perhaps the child's environment needs to be re-sized just a little to leverage more of these special moments and to avoid the challenging ones. Greater attention to what I call the early childhood "habitat" is ultimately quite freeing for both children and adults: We can better see their capacity and power.

You say that one the most important predictors of preschool effectiveness is the relationship between teacher and child. What makes for a beneficial relationship between the two?

Teachers need to know children well on two levels. They need to know the kinds of things to expect from a typical 3-year-old and also to know those 3-year-olds as individuals, each with unique strengths, challenges, and idiosyncrasies. In order to understand young children in

this comprehensive way, teachers need to be versed in sound developmental principles and to have the time and opportunity to get to know children in their natural habitat, which is to say in a play-based, language-rich setting involving relationships with adults who cherish them.

In particular, teachers need to take the time to listen to children's stories, to laugh with them, to get down on the floor, at their eye level, and figure out what makes them tick. This kind of respectful observation of what children can (and can't) do is rare in early childhood settings, where instead too many children receive calibrated doses of highly scripted, one-size-fits-all instruction on boring themes like "food groups" or the making of an egg-carton caterpillar.

There is a concerted educational focus on closing the achievement gap. How do you think that has impacted the preschool experience, and has it worked?

Children in poverty face a double burden: They are at risk for family stresses that make it hard to provide responsive, language-rich environments at home, and they are then twice as likely to be in lower-quality preschool programs where play and conversation are in short supply.

Some experts estimate that our current preschool system only closes the achievement gap by around 5%, compared to the 30%-50% reduction we could produce if we adopted the widespread use of scientifically validated best practices. This is a lost public policy opportunity of epic proportions. Unfortunately, much of the attention on closing the ability gap has focused on shallow, one-dimensional learning outcomes, such as color and shape recognition, rather than more complex skills such as symbolic thinking or causal inference that come from exploratory, play-based learning. What we want to see is an early childhood pedagogy based on ideas. It's important to understand that simple skills, such as alphabet awareness, should be the byproduct of good learning, but they shouldn't be the end point itself.

Has too much stress been placed on accountability in our preschools?

All children are entitled to a year of demonstrable progress in preschool, but we've focused on the wrong kinds of accountability measures. We know that children will use higher-level language structures when they are playing grocery store than they will use when gathered around a table counting pictures of grocery carts. We know that children learn optimally when they have secure attachments and deep friendships. We need to re-focus our standards on preparing the classroom environment so that children can thrive: Do teachers understand principles of child development? Are they using a warm, responsive teaching style that elicits inquiry and problem-solving? Are they engaging multiple learning domains simultaneously or just teaching simple skills? These are questions good standards need to address. Many people wrongly assume that such standards can't be quantified, but they can. Walter Gilliam and Chin Reyes at the Yale Child Study Center are among the researchers at the frontier of creating accountability measures that reflect the cognitive and social-emotional aspirations we should have for young children.

How are preschool curricula affecting children's enthusiasm for learning?

Preschool teaching is still focused on a content-based curriculum rather than on transferable skills that kids can apply to a variety of dynamic settings. This is a problem because many preschoolers spend three or more years in institutional care before they even hit kindergarten. There's some evidence that children exposed to the same preschool tedium for multiple years - for example, the dreaded daily tracking of the calendar or unvarying class rules at Circle Time - may actually lose interest in school and fare worse on academic learning outcomes in the later years. We should encourage kids to find recyclable materials around the classroom to make a dinosaur from their imagination rather than taking a pre-fab craft project from the teacher's box labeled "Dinosaur Unit." We need to give them a cognitive sequence to follow in every new situation, whether it's playing in a pile of mud for the first time or holding an injured bird at the nature museum: "observe, question, explore, reflect."

You mention Finland as a country that gets pre-school education right. What's different there?

We have to be careful about comparisons, because our countries are so different, but Finland improved its performance by professionalizing its workforce with better pay and other investments. Importantly, Finnish teachers do not have specific performance expectations for young children, but they do have a strongly mission-driven pedagogy with well-articulated "orientations" - what they call "ways of knowing" that are unique to children - such as artistic expression and imaginative play. Within these orientations, the children engage in all the big domains we should care about, such as oral language and number sense and, of course, social skills. In fact, a great many Finnish kindergartners read quite well, even though they aren't required to start literacy instruction until age seven.

The Finnish approach reveres the physical and conceptual space in which to be a young child. They have giant room-sized clothes dryers for snow suits so the kids can be outdoors multiple times during the day. This approach reflects a rather un-American respect for early childhood as a life stage worthy in its own right and not merely as a training ground for an adult future.

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