

The cruel and pointless push to get preschoolers 'college and career ready'^[1]

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EXCERPTS

In case you missed it, April 21 was officially Kindergarten Day. This obscure holiday honors the birth of Friedrich Froebel, who started the first Children's Garden in Germany in 1837. Of course, life has changed tremendously in the 179 years since Froebel created his play-based, socialization program to transition young children from home to school — and so, too, has school itself. But what hasn't changed in all this time, not one iota, is the developmental trajectory of the preschoolers Froebel was thinking about when he created what we now call kindergarten.

Froebel, a German teacher, strongly believed that children learn through play and by using open-ended materials like blocks, which he called "gifts." His approach was a radical departure from the way children were viewed and taught at the time. Prior to Froebel, children were thought of as mini-adults who were educated through lectures and rote recitation. How ironic that today kindergarteners, and even preschoolers, are once again being subjected to these inappropriate methods of instruction. This despite all we have learned about child development in the 20th and 21st centuries.

Through research, we now have a clear understanding of how young children learn best. According to child psychologist Alissa Levy Chung (who happens to be my daughter):

"Preschoolers learn through the language of play and through movement and active participation. When children play, they integrate cognitive, social, and emotional gains. They build their language skills by communicating their ideas with their peers and then challenge themselves cognitively to integrate others' ideas with their own. In play, they also have to regulate their excitement, anger, frustration, and sadness through the course of their games and interactions. All the while, they are building their social skills by learning what kinds of behaviors attract friends and keep others in the game and what kinds of behaviors upset others or push them away. In self-directed play, children learn that their towers stay up better when they put the bigger blocks on the bottom. When they are in teacher-directed activities, children learn better when they can tie their knowledge to their real lives, to things they can see, hear, smell, taste, and touch. They may be young scientists, learning about plants by putting seeds into the ground and taking care of them, seeing what happens with water and sunlight. While reading books with adults, they are encouraged to ask questions about the stories, to predict what might happen next, and to make connections to their own lives. They learn how to tell their own stories, the seeds of future writing projects. All of these foundational skills are critical for later learning. It may look like they are "just playing," but it is the critical work of childhood. Numbers, letters, and seatwork come later, but without these foundations for how to ask questions, how to integrate ideas, how to be part of a community, and how to regulate emotions in a social context, learning will only be superficial."

I recently received a heartbreaking example of how backward we are now getting early education from a source of educational materials I greatly respect: Handwriting Without Tears. Its spring 2016 catalog announces a new pre-K curriculum called Get Set for School. Sadly, a company I greatly admire for its approach to teaching children how to print their letters, designed for occupational therapists to use with children who are developmentally delayed and for elementary school educators, appears to have now drunk the Kool-Aid on early childhood education.

For the record, there are many wonderful materials in this new catalog. I greatly appreciate the Handwriting Without Tears approach to learning cursive writing and even bought a workbook for my granddaughter when her school stopped teaching this skill. The keyboarding curriculum for grades kindergarten through five teaches a very necessary skill for today's elementary school students. Many of the math materials are wonderful and inspired by Froebel's hands-on approach that featured blocks for children to manipulate. But the workbooks and worksheets in the Get Set for School curriculum are just plain wrong for preschoolers.

My First School Book and Kick Start Kindergarten, targeted to the preschool population, are in fact workbooks more suitable for late kindergarten or the beginning of first grade. They ask children under the age of five to trace and copy letters, write neatly on lines, and discriminate between upper- and lower-case letters. Most preschoolers lack the fine motor coordination to accomplish these tasks. And as

cute as the illustrations are, these are still passive learning materials that require too much sitting and rote instruction for young children.

Just out of curiosity, I downloaded some sample pages from the book to see what three- and four-year-olds were being asked to do. The first one was a worksheet with an orange crayon on top and a row of three objects: a pumpkin, traffic cone and carrot. I guess a preschooler is expected to learn that these things are orange and color them as such. (But I also know allowing the child to explore, touch and play with a real pumpkin, traffic cone and carrot would teach far more than the color “orange.”) In the next row, a circle, a triangle and a rectangle appear below the pumpkin, the traffic cone and the carrot. I guess the pumpkin corresponds to the circle, but the traffic cone drawing consists of a triangular shape on top of a square. And in what universe is a carrot shaped like a rectangle?

The other pages ask very young children to trace and then write the letter “v” (upper and lower case) for “van,” and to trace and correctly form a lower-case “p” (both on and below the line) for “puppy.” Again, this is a good exercise for a child several years older than a preschooler.

The final sample asks the young child to write her name in “title case.” This means that first the teacher will demonstrate how to do this, using a capital first and lower case for the rest of the name. All of this will fit in a box (for the capital first letter), and between the two lines (for the rest of the name). To ask this of a 3-year-old is heartbreaking. Some children at this age simply cannot print their names yet. Others write their names backward or flowing all over the page. Critically, this is a normal part of development, as many kids this age lack the fine motor control to do otherwise. Yet these exercises set them up for failure by making demands that many cannot meet.

Even more distressing, in order to attempt these tasks a preschooler needs to a) sit at a table for a long period of time; b) grip a pencil properly; and c) copy a model created by an adult. This expectation does not seem too different from the early 19th century view that play had no purpose in learning and children needed to be molded to fit society’s expectations. The very model that more than a century of research has told us is wrong.

I’m guessing this wonderful company decided to adapt its approach to give the people who determine our preschool curricula what they seem to want these days: materials to prepare kids for the “college and careers” trajectory. I just wish Handwriting Without Tears had resisted the temptation to cash in on this Race to the Top version of early childhood education. Froebel, who believed so deeply in the idea that children are naturally creative and imaginative and learn best through play, would have hated watching preschoolers struggling to complete developmentally inappropriate worksheets. We should all be similarly aghast.

In Froebel’s vision of kindergarten, he describes play as, “the highest expression of human development in childhood, for it alone is the free expression of what is in a child’s soul.” Surely, before preschoolers even arrive at the start of their formal education, play-based learning should be what they receive. To do otherwise, by pushing down on them educational approaches meant for children three or four years older, represents a fundamental misunderstanding of child development and the way preschoolers learn. Stop the madness.

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