

## Play-based preschools and the push for academics

Written by Suki Wessling - Last Updated Thursday, 31 March 2016 21:58

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A three-year-old moves about her preschool classroom, busily engaged. In one corner, she stacks blocks from largest to smallest. Across the room, she arranges Legos in piles based on color and shape. She removes children's shoes from the rack and sorts them according to style and color.

An adult might see the child's actions as disruptive. She's not following the rule that students must clean up after themselves. She's not using the toys as intended. She's using items of clothing as toys.

A teacher trained in play-based preschool education sees something completely different.

"That's a lot of math concepts that she's working with," points out Vanessa Garcia, teacher and site supervisor at Nuevo Dia Child Development Center. "When you're treating it as a problem, a challenge to the classroom environment, you don't see it as something you could build upon."

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As preschool teachers are pushed to document academic learning to prove kindergarten readiness, they are under more pressure to justify the type of preschool education that research has proven is most effective: play-based learning.

“I would argue that play-based learning *is* academic preparation,” Garcia explains. “Through play they’re learning self-regulation and language skills. The learning is holistic—it happens on every level of development.”

Play-based preschools emphasize immersing children in a rich learning environment, supported by adults who help them navigate what may be their first forays into group learning. What adults see as ‘just playing’ is in fact children doing what is developmentally appropriate and necessary.

“The more involved with an act of play a child becomes, the more their brains are lighting up, and the more neural connections are being formed,” explains SeanTayah Hiwe of the Santa Cruz Forest School.

“Preschool may be the first social learning where I’m not the full focus all the time,” says Nancy Samsel, teacher at Soquel PENS. “[I learn that] I have needs, other family members have needs, other children have needs, and the adults have needs.”

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Samsel says that recently a child at her school wanted to connect a tricycle and a wagon. The child asked a teacher for a rope, and then the teacher watched while the child attempted to bring about a design and interest other children.

“The child initiates the idea and practices skills: thinking about how the wagon could be attached, using their cognitive skills, and using their social skills,” Samsel explains.

Teachers in play-based preschools may present curriculum, but often the curriculum presents itself in a day of exploration.

“We watch what the children are doing and how they’re playing and try to extend their learning through the interests that they show us that they have,” explains Melissa Wiley, program director of Family Network Preschool.

One school day, a child digging in a garden box found a worm and started asking questions about it. The teachers got worms from their worm farm and set up trays so the children could play and explore through their senses.

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“We gave them popsicle sticks so they could gently sift through and gave them magnifying glasses so they could take a look,” Wiley narrates. “The next step to that project was getting out paper and crayons and suggesting they draw what the worms look like.”

Some of the children draw with enthusiasm; others lose interest and progress to another activity. It is all in a day’s work for play-based learning.

The Universal Pre-K Initiative, which was created to expand access to preschool education through funding by the federal government, sounds like a great idea on its surface. But proponents of play-based learning point out that it’s hard to quantify the skills that children learn during the preschool years.

Garcia, who has worked in both state-funded and private preschools, sees documentation as the challenge looming ahead as access to state programs like hers is expanded.

“The struggle has been, how do we make it easier for us to provide the documentation that the state is looking for versus providing a truly play-based curriculum?”

As an example, Garcia offers one of the most common things children do when they are 'just playing.'

"Developmentally, the most valuable thing that children can do is pretend," she explains. "Children are able to access knowledge and behave in ways that are beyond their developmental ability. There's a lot of cause and effect, social skill development, and cognitive development. If you're not allowed to pretend, how else do you figure things out?"

Victoria Nobles, head teacher at Family Network Preschool, says that parents see clear evidence that their children have been 'working' hard each morning while they play.

"There's a reason children go home and take those heavy naps after preschool!" she says. "Their minds are growing as they learn different ways to use a toy, or learning to interact with different people."

The idea behind universal preschool is to help more children attain kindergarten readiness. However, many adults would be surprised at what kindergarten readiness means to people who work with young children.

Samsel says that learning to postpone gratification is one of the most important skills.

“Postponed gratification allows me to be part of a group and to learn that my needs can get met in a group setting,” Samsel explains. “All of classroom learning is group learning, so I’m learning an important social skill for my later learning.”

The teachers at Family Network add other non-quantifiable skills to the kindergarten readiness list:

- Being able to express feelings appropriately
- Being able to take care of needs such as going to the bathroom
- Sitting still and listening

Samsel notes that in her thirty years of teaching, the forms she fills out to assess kindergarten readiness have changed. These days, they ask specifically which letters children can recognize, whether they know their numbers, and whether they can write their names.

“There’s tremendous pressure on teachers and on parents to have children learn more faster and younger and earlier,” she points out. “But developmentally you may not be ready for that if that’s pushed on you too early.”

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Advocates of play-based learning know that they are facing a strong cultural push from the other side, but they are determined to resist in light of continuing research that shows that moving academic, abstract learning earlier does not result in better-educated adults.

“Academic itemized learning can easily be acquired a little later in life,” Hiwe explains. “[In] the European model, children do not begin a stitch of academics until the age of seven or eight, and then quickly catch up and excel beyond their American peers by the age of ten.”

“A lot of people, when they think about play, see it as a break from work,” says Victoria Nobles. “We talk about this with our parents, saying that play *is* the work of children.”

*Suki Wessling is a local writer and the mother of two children. She recently published her chapter book, Hanna, Homeschooler. Read more at [www.SukiWessling.com](http://www.SukiWessling.com).*