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## Play-Based Learning vs. Academics in Preschool


Play and learning should be one and the same, experts say.

By [Laura Longhine](#)

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Experts say the best preschool programs take a “playful learning” approach, teaching early academic and social-emotional skills together through play and exploration.  (GETTY IMAGES)

As pressure to raise scores on standardized tests has trickled down to the lower grades, kindergarten and even pre-kindergarten classrooms have focused more on

[academic skills](#). But debating whether a kindergarten or preschool classroom should be play-based or academic is the wrong question, experts say.

“We need to get beyond this notion that young children are either playing or learning, because the truth is that they learn best through the process of playing,” says Suzanne Bouffard, a developmental psychologist and author of “The Most Important Year: Pre-Kindergarten and the Future of Our Children.”

“Young children are naturally curious, and play really builds on that natural curiosity and helps them to explore the world around them and build their knowledge and build their skills.”

Yet for some administrators, parents and teachers, academics still looks like direct instruction in letters and numbers, and play looks like something “extra.”

“I think for some parents, they probably assume, ‘Oh, if you’re playing all day, you must not be learning,’ and your learning has to be discrete, like you know your numbers, you know your letters, you know these discrete facts,” says Iheoma Iruka, a research professor at the [University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill](#) and a fellow at the university’s Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute.

At the other end of the spectrum, some parents get anxious about any mention of academics because they associate that with “kids sitting at desks doing worksheets,” says Deborah Stipek, a professor emerita and former dean of the [Stanford Graduate School of Education](#). For some parents, “the notion of doing academics – math and literacy – is synonymous with worksheets, flash cards and passive, teacher-directed, not-very-fun instruction.”

But experts say the best [preschool](#) programs take a “playful learning” approach, teaching early academic and [social-emotional skills](#) together through play and exploration.

[ **READ:** [How to Choose a Preschool.](#) ]

## **Beyond Surface Learning**

In a white paper for the LEGO Foundation on “[learning through play](#),” researcher Jennifer Zosh of [Pennsylvania State University](#) and co-authors distinguish between “surface learning” – memorizing key facts and principles – and “deep learning” – applying and understanding that knowledge through real-world experiences.

But even in early education, many schools measure only surface learning, experts say.

"If you look at the preschool learning standards in most states, they focus on what you might call fairly superficial skills, like, 'can count to 20, knows at least 10 letters of the alphabet,'" says Stipek.

When schools focus only on those basic skills in isolation, kids can miss out on developing the deeper cognitive concepts and skills they need to succeed.

"If you look at math, for example, I know kids who can count to 20, but if they have two cookies and you give them another one and you say how many do you have, they don't know what I'm talking about," Stipek says. "They have learned the rote counting, but they don't have a basic concept of number."

Dale Farran, an early childhood education researcher and a professor emerita at [Vanderbilt University](#), has been studying preschool programs for more than 40 years. She says that in many classrooms she's observed that focus on teaching basic academic skills, "kids are not being encouraged to think and problem-solve and to be curious and to trust themselves to figure things out. Those are the kinds of skills that are going to be lasting and predictive of school success."

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## The Problem With 'Academic' Preschool

Farran notes that the expansion of public pre-k programs over the past few decades was meant in part to help children from low-income families catch up to kids from higher-income families, who tend to begin kindergarten knowing more letters, letter sounds and numbers.

But knowing those basic skills should be a byproduct of more important, deeper kinds of learning, she says.

"What we misunderstood was that the reason that children from higher-income families knew these skills was not that their parents had sat them down in a group and drilled them," she says. "They learned them through interactions with adults who were interested in them. Who would point out letters and numbers in the context of other things they were doing."

When schools teach these basic skills in a didactic way, without that rich interaction, "they no longer signal that you have these deeper skills of curiosity and persistence

and language and working memory, and all the things that, actually, children from higher-income families were gaining along the way with the interactions they had,” she says.

Farran is one of the authors of a [randomized study](#) of Tennessee’s state-run pre-k program, which found that although children in the program made some initial gains, by sixth grade they were worse off than their peers who had not gotten spots in the program, with lower test scores and significantly higher rates of suspensions, expulsions and referrals for special education.

While the cause of those poor outcomes has been a source of [debate](#) among researchers, and Tennessee has since taken steps to improve its program, Farran says treating preschool like an early extension of elementary school – with an emphasis on whole-group, teacher-led instruction, lots of transitions and too little time to play – is the wrong approach.

“Children just don’t need that sort of rigid instruction,” she says.

[ **READ:** [What Is Reggio Emilia Education?](#) ]

## What Play-Based Preschool Looks Like

Removing the focus from basic skills and direct instruction doesn’t mean that children aren’t learning, or that they won’t be prepared for kindergarten.

“For young children, they’re going to learn, and the best way they learn is through play,” says Iruka. “Through interaction with peers, through manipulation of materials, through exploration of the outdoor space or indoor space.”

A recent [meta-study](#) found that guided play – in which teachers set up play activities with a learning goal in mind and guide children while they explore it – was more effective than direct instruction at teaching young children (ages 3-8) basic math skills and some executive function skills like task switching.

And there’s a wealth of [evidence](#) that play – both free play and guided play – helps children develop the cognitive and social-emotional skills crucial to long-term school success.

“We’re trying to develop children’s critical thinking skills, and a lot of that is not really about reading and math,” Iruka says. “It’s really about: Can they problem-solve? Are

they persistent during activities?” SEL skills like attention and self-regulation will help kids in kindergarten and beyond, she says.

Especially after the disruptions of the pandemic, Bouffard says, “there’s more necessity than ever before to make sure that we are helping kids develop their SEL skills, and their self-regulation and executive functioning skills, and helping them to know how to be part of a community.”

By building on children’s interests and joy in discovery, play-based learning also encourages kids to be more curious, Bouffard says. “And personally I think that’s the most important outcome of early childhood education. Because if you have a child who’s curious and who loves to learn, they are going to keep learning.”

## Best States for Early Education

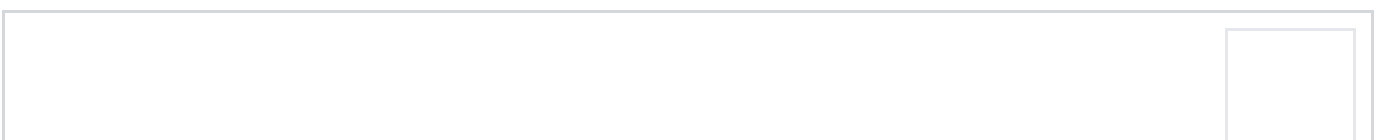


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