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READINESS FOR SCHOOL: BEYOND NUMBERS AND LETTERS

The Need for a Balanced Approach to Prepare Students Pre-K and Up

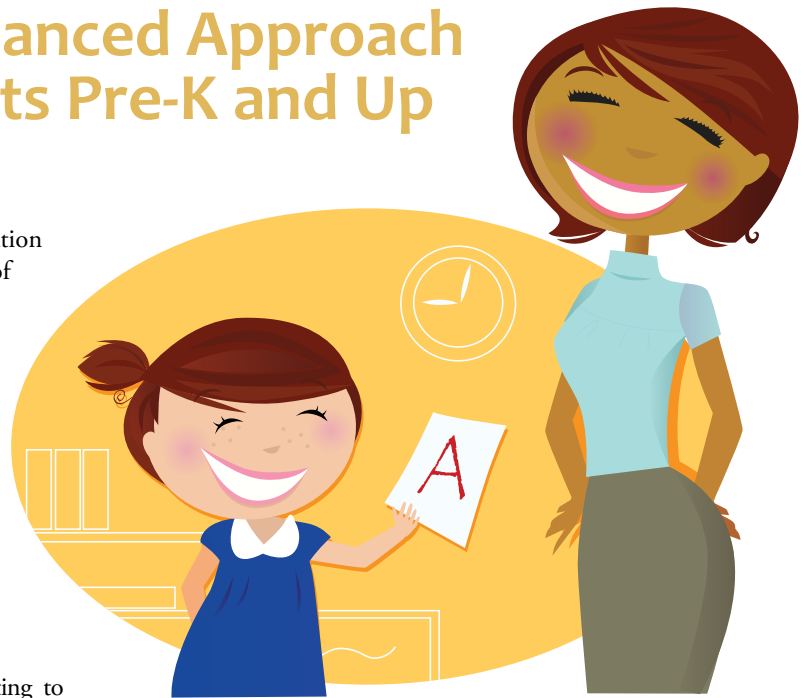
By Jo Kirchner

The national conversation about K-12 education today seems to revolve around the holy grails of math and reading achievement. Schools are held accountable and graded by students' test scores, and more and more classroom time is dedicated to drilling square roots and vocabulary, even as art and music programs fall by the wayside and recess is dismissed as unnecessary "play time." The pressures of academic achievement have even trickled down to early childhood — more parents are asking if their children should be reading by age 5, or if they need to "red shirt" children by holding them back a year to have more time to prepare for kindergarten.

In the midst of these pressures, cracks are starting to show: anxiety-related complaints and stress — problems that don't normally appear until the teen years — are cropping up in young children, and rising incidences of school bullying and behavior problems have left parents and educators wondering if perhaps our educational system has missed something in its one-dimensional pursuit of academic excellence.

It's true that pre-K has become more learning-focused, but it is not true that early childhood educators should focus exclusively, or even predominantly, on academics in order to prepare children for later success. High quality early childhood education takes a broader perspective: the focus is on supporting and advancing the development of prepared, happy, confident, well-rounded children, which goes far beyond teaching and testing numbers and letters.

According to the National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, "The early years lay the foundation for a wide range of later developmental outcomes that really matter - self-confidence and sound mental health, motivation to learn, achievement in school and later in life." A report from the National Research Council, *From Neurons to Neighborhoods*, confirms that from birth to age 5, development in all areas is rapid. Nurturing guidance and attention to every part of a child's development during this crucial stage helps them acquire not only math and reading proficiency but also compassion, strength, independence, resilience, and a love of learning — qualities that are easy to take for granted but that need to be taught and encouraged for success beyond preschool.



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Thus, a balanced approach to developing physical, social-emotional, creative and academic skills is key to preparing young children for school and life:

Physical Development

As physical education classes get shorter and the risk of childhood obesity increases, the importance and value of movement is being increasingly recognized by early childhood educators. The National Association for Sport and Physical Education has presented research that shows movement plays an important role not only in health, but in the future development of a child. During physical activities, children use multiple senses (touch, sight, smell, etc.), which create neural connections that wire the brain for future learning as well as improve the rate of learning and the development of executive functions (brain processes like planning and abstract thinking). In a practical example, Naperville School District 203 in Illinois provides a compelling case for the need for physical education: the district has limited educational funding, but its schools consistently rank among the top ten in the state. The only major difference is the district's inclusion of daily exercise in its curriculum.



Social-Emotional Development

While parents have always encouraged children to "get along with others," a growing body of scientific work has documented the necessity of social and emotional development for future success. According to the Child Mental Health Foundations and Agencies Network, "Children who do not begin kindergarten socially and emotionally competent are often not successful in the early years of school — and can be plagued by behavioral, emotional, academic and social development problems that follow them into adulthood." Noted psychologist Ross A. Thompson points out that early relationships are necessary to develop "healthy" brains, with healthy and supportive relationships shown to buffer stress in children. Parents and teachers who model appropriate social skills for children prepare them to not only "get along" in the world, but to be kind and respectful, show compassion and care about others.

Creative Development

Often overlooked as "frills," art and music programs that promote creative expression and development are nonetheless an important part of a balanced approach to early childhood education. Young children naturally engage in "art," or spontaneous creative play, but when educators involve and encourage children in arts activities regularly from an early age, they lay the foundation for successful learning. Research conducted by Americans for the Arts shows that arts education plays a central role in preschoolers' cognitive, motor, language and social-emotional development. Arts activities develop the imagination and critical thinking, strengthen problem-solving and goal-setting skills, build self-confidence and self-discipline for completing tasks, and nurture values like team-building and respecting different viewpoints. According to Edwin E. Gordon's book *Learning Sequences in Music*, early exposure to music also sets the stage for enhanced brain development that increases neural connections, boosts IQ scores and improves musical aptitude.



Academic Development

Today's academic standards have focused relentlessly on math and reading skills, but what we teach in our preschools should go beyond mere numbers and letters. Needed language skills encompass listening, speaking, reading and writing. Can the child articulate thoughts and ideas? Does he love books and appreciate the pleasure and knowledge they bring? Similarly, math and science skills should move beyond rote repetition to mastery of concepts. Can the child think mathematically — beyond facts — and have a true sense of numbers and concepts? Is she curious about the world, and can she think scientifically - observing, forming and testing hypotheses? And in today's technology-rich world, does the child have a grasp of the power of technology as a tool for creative expression and problem solving?

Early childhood education should nurture a love of learning and support learning in multiple ways - through listening, seeing, hearing, touching and play. Preschool curricula should not train children to take tests and push them to academic extremes, but should include purposeful, engaging activities that are developmentally appropriate and support children's natural curiosity to explore and learn about the world.



The benefits of a balanced approach to early childhood education are well documented. Over 50 years of research from the Pew Center on the States shows that high-quality pre-K improves children's cognitive, social and emotional skills, increases their educational attainment, closes the achievement gap, and enhances the quality and productivity of our nation's workforce. These results require a holistic teaching philosophy that incorporates the development of children's physical, social-emotional, creative and academic skills. Only when we start valuing these abilities and work toward finding valid ways to evaluate and track their development will we begin to truly prepare children to be happy and successful in life. *

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