

Let them PLAY! How academic preschools are ruining your child's development

Penny Flanagan | February 23, 2016

Calm down everybody, your preschooler doesn't need to read, count to 1000 and speak five languages to achieve 'school readiness.' The research is in and the findings are stupidly simple.

Many moons ago when I did the rounds of childcare centres looking for a place for my first child, I recall being regularly bored rigid as the centre directors told me in great detail about their 'learning programs.'

All I wanted to see was the playground.

It never felt right to me, this breathless obsession with learning programs for three-year-olds and while I put Max's name down on all the waiting lists (out of necessity), I secretly hoped something better would come along.

Then one day I was walking to the shops a different way and I came across a little local preschool tucked away a quiet street. Like some sort of preschool oasis, it just seemed to materialize out of nowhere and present itself to me: the preschool of my dreams.

It was a small place with a big playground out front - a cubby house, a sandpit, a pathway to ride trikes around on, lots of big trees.

The following week I went in to see the 'director'; a softly spoken older woman with a firm sense of old-school teaching wisdom about her.

She didn't say one thing about learning programs or 'school readiness outcomes.' She just showed me around her heavenly non-academic preschool space. There was a quiet little book nook with bean bags, a home corner with toy appliances and dolls, shelves with trucks and diggers and a central rug where they had 'group time' for happy-clappy songs and games.

I was sold.

Now I'm not saying, 'I told you so,' (*actually*, I am) but even back then, I had some instinct that all the hysteria around 'learning programs' in preschools was a BIG OLD LOAD OF HOGWASH!

And now it seems I have been vindicated.

The research is in and we are making a meal of this parenting thing

According to a recent article in the *Washington Post*, [The decline of play in preschoolers - and the rise in sensory issues](#), by occupational therapist Angela Hanscom: "Research continues to point out that young children learn best through meaningful play experiences."

In the article, Hanscom confesses she was once a parent who was obsessed with academic success for her child, before realizing too late, she had gone about it all wrong. After putting her child in a preschool that was 'academic in nature' (focused on numeracy and literacy skills) she also sought to 'enrich' her daughter's life with music lessons, dance classes, organized playdates and visits to local museums.

In short: she was totally over-thinking the parenting thing and missing the bigger picture.

Hanscom's 'wake-up call' came when her daughter's preschool teacher said to her: "Your daughter is doing well academically ... but she is having trouble with basic social skills like sharing and taking turns."

Hanscom admits her daughter also "had trouble controlling her emotions (and had) developed anxiety and sensory issues."

And her's wasn't an isolated case.

A preschool director of 40 years reported to Hanscom that she had seen "major changes in the social and physical development of children in the past few generations."

"... they are more easily frustrated – often crying at the drop of a hat ... fall out of their seats at least three times a day (and are generally) less attentive and running into each other and even the walls."

Issues she had never seen in the past. And why?

These kids are not playing enough as preschoolers

Dr Kristy Goodwin, who has a PHD in early childhood education and has been researching a book called, *Raising Your Child in a Digital World*, says that here in Australia, pediatric medical professionals are reporting the same decline in preschoolers' sensory skills.

"Kids don't have the dexterity, the fine and gross motor skills. They don't have the (required) sense of their vestibular system - which is basically their sense of balance - and kids literally get that through rolling and rocking, all these sorts of incidental play experiences that they're not getting."

As reported anecdotally by Hanscom's preschool director, Goodwin says that this underdeveloped vestibular system in preschoolers is quite literally affecting their ability to sit still and pay attention to the teacher in class.

Hence all the falling off chairs Hanscom's teacher reported.

The rise of academic creep

Goodwin attributes a lot of these issues to what she calls, "academic creep."

"We've got curriculum documents in preschools now, so concepts that were once introduced into kindergarten are now being introduced at a preschool level."

Ah, yes. I concur. These are the very things I was being bored with back in the day.

Above all ...

School readiness does not mean academic skills

With all the hysteria around 'school readiness' programs in preschools, it seems we have misinterpreted the message. School readiness does not mean: an ability to read and write and speak five languages before they get there.

"The scientific evidence tells us this," Goodwin says. "Studies show that children who go to a very unstructured, play-based preschool program actually outperform their peers by about Year 4,

because they have had all those play-based language-rich experiences. Whereas children who are engaged with that very strict academic focus don't perform as well in the long term."

In terms of school readiness, Goodwin says: "Having resilience, being able to problem solve, having really good language skills are much better predictors of long-term school success than those formal regimented academic concepts."

And guess how kids best develop all these things?

Playing. Unstructured, incidental playing. Playing outside, playing with trucks, playing with dolls, playing with other kids, playing in the sandpit. Just bog standard, good old-fashioned what-toddlers-and-preschoolers-do-best, playing.

So, everybody calm the f*** down and stop telling me how your three-year-old can already read and write and speak Mandarin. I am not interested, and neither should you be.

The answer is so simple it's stupid

Like everything with modern parenting, we are over-thinking it and totally cocking it up. It is actually instinctive this parenting thing and if you think your preschooler is happiest and most productive when he's playing, guess what?

You are right.

In her article, Hanscom cites the importance of "whole-body sensory experiences," which she says is, "best done outside where the senses are fully ignited ..."

Goodwin agrees with this and also attributes the lack of sensory skills problem with "too much screen time and not enough green time."

But I know what you're doing now, so back away from the computer and stop googling 'how to give your child sensory experiences' because the answer Dorothy, has been and continues to be right under your nose the whole time.

Just take your kid to the park and let your kid play. Don't enroll them in things, don't try to 'stimulate' them, stop drilling them on the ABCs and send them outside to the sandpit with a friend. Find a nice little preschool with a cubby house and an 'old school' preschool director, one who doesn't have a fancy degree in childcare learning outcomes and your job here is done.

Just the other day my (now 16-year-old) son said to me: "What was the name of that preschool I went to?"

"Little Ark," I said.

"Man, I loved that place!" He said wistfully.

"Why?"

"I dunno, I just remember being so happy there," he said.

See? My job here is done. *pats self on back*

Dr Kristy Goodwin writes about early childhood education and school readiness on her website: everychancetolearn.com.au. Her book, Raising Your Child in a Digital World: Finding a healthy balance of time online without techno tantrums and conflict, will be published by Finch Publishers in July 2016.