

# Let children be children

*Preschool programs do the best job of preparing children for school when they create environments geared to young children*

By Claudia Miller

The four-year-old daughter of Bay Area parents had enjoyed attending preschool. But soon after "graduating" to her preschool's classroom for older children (four- to five-year-olds), she began coming home unusually tired and was unhappy about going to preschool in the mornings. "One day she came home crying because her teacher made her sit at the table to finish a worksheet of addition and subtraction problems," says her mother. "She couldn't finish it in time like the rest of the kids and the teacher embarrassed her in front of everyone else."

The teacher, who told the parents she was feeling pressure to prepare the children academically for kindergarten, "kept erasing mistakes on her worksheets and making her do them again; there was so much focus on getting the correct answer."

As a result, says the mom, her daughter "became very worried about kindergarten. We would pass her [future] elementary school and she would say, 'kindergarten is going to be too hard for me, mommy.'" The child's interactions with her classmates suffered. "She was mortified that she was the only one who had to sit at the table while everyone else could play."

## LONG-TERM HARM

Increasing pressure to raise school test scores has brought a push for preschoolers to do more "academic" work. "What scares me is that some young children are experiencing high levels of performance anxiety," says Jane Rosenberg, director of the children's school at Pacific Oaks College in Pasadena. "Parents need to learn to allow their children to be children."

"Learning to read at an early age doesn't increase your proficiency as an adult reader," she adds. "Learning needs to be a joyous experience. While you can teach reading to a three-year-old, I have seen it kill the joy in children."

Too much academic instruction can convince children that school is boring or make them "docile learners," says Pacific Oaks professor Betty Jones. "Lots of academic preschools use workbooks—that's just rote learning. You can drill children on their numbers or the alphabet. But just because they've memorized it, doesn't mean they know what it means. In order for children to understand things, they have to do them."

While children from academic preschools will often do well for the first several years in an elementary school, Jones warns that by third or fourth grade, they often struggle. "When teachers ask them to think about what they've read, they don't know how."

## WARNING SIGNS OF TOO MUCH PRESSURE

■ **Artwork done by the teachers.** "Anytime you walk into a preschool and see artwork that's all the same, it was usually done by the teacher," with children following a form or coloring a pre-drawn picture, says Jones. In addition to children's unique artwork, Jones likes to see photographs

of the children, their families and the teachers. "If you can't tell who is enrolled in the program, I worry a bit."

■ **Children sitting at desks or tables while the teacher talks.** Rather than sitting down at a table to learn the alphabet with flash cards, children could be on the floor making letters with their bodies, says Nathan Sarnoff, early childhood education instructor and lab school teacher at Merced City College. "Preschool teachers need to respect that children's brains are different and they process information differently," he says: rather than being told that applesauce is made from apples, children need to make the applesauce.

■ **Circle times where attendance is mandatory.** Sydney Gurewitz Clemens, a Bay Area early childhood consultant, likes to see circle times where teachers are flexible and can react to the children's interests. "For two-year-olds, the teacher should simply announce, 'I'm going to read a book,' and whoever wants, will listen to the story." That means another teacher (and additional space) should be available to play with the others. Older children can be expected to sit in the circle but allowed to leave if they need to. "And rather than the teacher asking children what their favorite color is, I like to see children asking each other questions," Clemens says.

■ **Preschools that are too clean and quiet.** Preschools and the children in them should be a little bit messy by the end of the day, says Jones. It shouldn't be unhygienic, but the school's environment should be designed so that spilled paint or juice can be easily wiped from the floor.

## GOOD SIGNS OF AGE-APPROPRIATE LEARNING

■ **Lots of different activities occurring simultaneously.** Sarnoff likes schools that have an open activity or free play time for approximately two hours each day, giving children plenty of time to get involved in activities they choose. There should be several choices each day, ranging from a science center (which could be simply a bowl with bubble water and straws), to blocks, outdoor play, dress-up, art, and a reading center, he says.

■ **Sensory materials.** Jones says there should be a sandbox (or table), water play, playdough, and finger paints readily available: "Children need to have all those things that go squish in their hands."

■ **Teachers acting as facilitators, not instructors.** "Facilitators come in to school a half-hour early, think creatively, and bring out materials for the children to explore," says Sarnoff. "Rather than teaching a lesson, the



JANET BROWN MACCRACKEN

teacher gets down on the floor to play with the blocks, talking to the children about blocks and letting the children get involved at their own level. Kids learn best when they're social with their peers."

■ **A "print-rich" environment.** That "sets the stage for reading," says Rosenberg. It's most important for adults to spend time every day reading aloud to children, but words in posters and labels on shelves help too.

■ **Children dictating stories to teachers.** "After taking a walk around the block, teachers should ask children what they saw—or ask them about their paintings," says Rosenberg. "Then the teacher can hang up their words on the wall and read them back later in the day." This helps children get the connection between spoken and written words.

■ **Time to play outdoors.** Physical movement is necessary to young children's learning. "There should be plenty of places to climb, run, dig, all the things they do with their muscles," says Jones. ■

.....  
"Preschool teachers need to respect that children's brains are different and they process information differently.... Rather than being told that applesauce is made from apples, children need to make the applesauce.

—NATHAN SARNOFF,  
Early Childhood  
Education Instructor,  
Merced City College



JANET BROWN MACCRACKEN