

A Special Time for Learning

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The preschool years, age 3-5 years old, is a very special time since children at this stage are learning a lot of things at a remarkable rate. This is the period when the children acquire and refine basic skills necessary for the higher or more complex skills later in life.

Physically, a preschool child can walk, run, jump and climb but still stumble and fall a lot of times. They can open, poke and pound things but may also experience difficulty in tying shoelaces, stacking up blocks or cutting paper; even their drawings of people look more like ghosts! Preschoolers begin to understand their feelings as well as find out how to interact and relate with others. Furthermore, preschool children are just beginning to recognize letters and numbers; and discriminate shapes and sizes as well as weights and lengths. Preschool children are discovering concepts on time, weather, food, animals and a lot more things.

Brain research in the last 10 years or so found that early experiences in the first five years of life greatly affect a child all the way into adulthood. Therefore good education experiences during the preschool years have a positive and lasting impact on school learning. Consequently, what should be taught in school at this very special time? What about the method of teaching?

Let us look at how preschool children think and learn. Thinking at this stage is different from adults. Thinking is still perception-based so that children rely on the touch, smell, sound and appearance of things. This means that preschool children must touch, examine, and experiment with concrete objects in order to learn. Therefore, a preschool program must provide first-hand experiences through hands-on activities and materials that allow exploration, manipulation, inquiry and discovery.

Teachers prepare the environment by carefully selecting materials and activities that are developmentally appropriate. This means that the materials and activities offered to the children are suitable for their age and abilities as well as provides for the individual differences among the children. The teacher's role then facilitates and supports children's interaction with the activities and materials by engaging them in abstract thinking, problem solving and investigation.

In addition, early childhood specialists have also emphasized the essential role of play in young children's learning. Play provides a wide range of skills that include literacy, mathematical reasoning, creativity and social skills. Teaching then should be playful, fun and non-threatening. Therefore, the traditional scope and sequence approach to teaching with emphasis on drill and practice of isolated, academic skills have no place in a preschool program.

The 3 R's – Reading, wRiting and aRithmetic, which most parents look for in a school, is taught in a more appropriate way. Remember preschool children think differently! Preschool children must be exposed to a print-rich environment and ample activities and materials that develop visual and auditory discrimination necessary for reading. Furthermore, a good selection of story books available to the children is required to further develop their love of reading. Writing activities are not presented in worksheets but in activities that allow the child to express their thoughts and feelings such as writing in journals, coming up with original stories or letters to love ones. While arithmetic is performed daily in relevant activities such as counting friends, distributing papers to classmates, in addition to the hands-on math activities and materials planned by the teachers.

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The preschool program must not only focus on early language development and early literacy, mathematics, and other academic subject matter but equally provide opportunities for the children to build on the other aspects of development. A preschool program must encourage the growth of children's self-esteem, their cultural identities, their independence and their individual strengths. Children's interaction with their peers and adults help them learn social skills such as sharing, taking turns, and cooperation.

Last but not the least; a good preschool program must have the support of the parents. A good home-school partnership will surely enhance the overall development of the child and ensure the continuity of appropriate learning from school to home.

With all these things set in a preschool program, children will develop the love and passion for life long learning and at the same time celebrate and enjoy their childhood.

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