

# Parent & Child

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## Sense and nonsense about what preschool

### can do for a child.

The satirist Dave Barry suggests that parents select a preschool with a strong prebusiness curriculum that emphasizes blocks, not a liberal arts curriculum that emphasizes gerbils.

His joke reflects both the increased diversity of programs available to very young children and the growing concern among parents that choosing the wrong early-childhood education program will put their children at a competitive disadvantage, not just in elementary school but also in adult life.

Although Mr. Barry has purposely carried the concept to extremes, many parents searching for a preschool or a kindergarten wonder how much emphasis should be put on traditional academic skills like arithmetic or reading preparation. Experts in early-childhood education have found that preschools that try to put children on the fast track by mimicking elementary schools may be doing more harm than good.

"Pushing early academics is counterproductive," said Dr. Edward Zigler, a professor of psychology at Yale University and director of the Yale Center in Child Development and Social Policy. "It turns children on to learning at a very early age. Learning, instead of being fun, becomes an onerous, bad task."

At first blush, however, pushing early academics appears to make sense. Simple logic suggests that a child who has memorized basic sums and who can recognize the letters of the alphabet at age 4 would have a leg up on less knowledgeable students who are struggling with those tasks in the first grade.

But the precursors to later aca-

dem skills, according to research in early-childhood education, are often different from what many parents think.

"Memorizing letters doesn't necessarily help a preschooler learn to read later," said Dr. Barbara Willer, a child development specialist with the National Association for the Education of Young Children. "The precursors for reading are having stories read to you, making up stories and seeing labels on objects so that you can make the connection between a printed word and the object itself. For mathematics, it's less important to memorize numbers than for children simply to play with blocks."

One of the major tasks facing preschool children is mastery of the very complex concept that abstract symbols can relate to objects in the real world. It is a concept to which adults hardly give a second thought.

But preschoolers must learn that although the word "banana" can represent or symbolize a particular fruit, the word itself is not a banana and cannot be eaten. Similarly, 5 is a larger number than 2, even when the 5 refers to a number of strawberries and the 2 refers to a number of ele-

phants, or when the symbol 5 is an inch tall and the symbol 2 is a foot tall.

Only when this concept is understood do letters and numbers begin to make sense. Giving preschoolers words to memorize or sums to calculate before that concept is mastered is a waste of time at best, researchers in early-childhood education say.

"Well-intentioned parents and teachers think that unless a 4- or 5-year-old is sitting with a workbook in front of him that the child is not being well served," said Dr. Howard Gardner, a professor of education at Harvard University who specializes in early childhood.

"The truth is exactly the opposite," he continued. "If you try to jump the gun by teaching symbols before children know what the symbols stand for, you're dooming them to a superficial understanding. You're building the second floor and the roof before you've built the foundation and the first floor."

All too often that early introduction to traditional academics leaves children feeling flustered and incompetent rather than masterly.

"The most critical lessons that children will learn in kindergarten or preschool is that they can be effective and successful learners," Dr. Willer said. "They need to feel good about themselves."