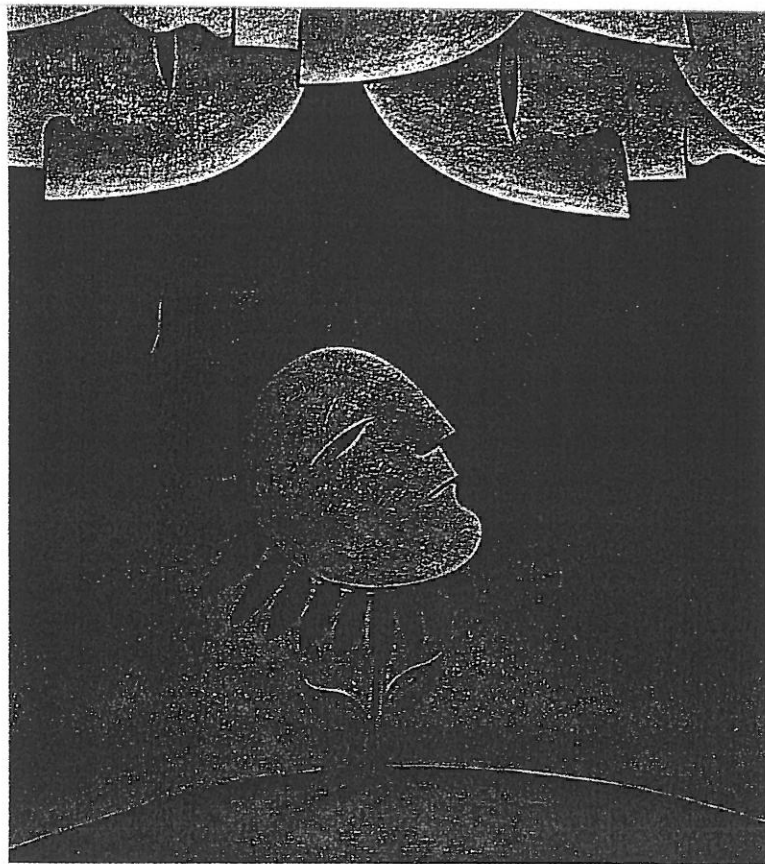

Roxanna Villa/SIS

RESEARCH REPORT

HOW DO YOUR CHILDREN GROW?

By Susan Black

The best preschool programs allow children to invent, experiment, and play

THE RESEARCH ON EARLY-CHILDHOOD EDUCATION LEAVES NO ROOM FOR DOUBT: Preschoolers learn best—and they become better students in later grades—when they follow their natural dispositions. They need to explore, wonder, question, create, and—most importantly—play.

In a compelling study of early-childhood programs in the District of Columbia Public Schools, Rebecca Marcon, a developmental psychologist and professor of psychology at the University of North Florida in Jacksonville, found that educators cannot assume that "just any

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preschool curriculum will achieve positive results." As Marcon discovered when she was called in to investigate high rates of retention in the district's first grades, many youngsters weren't getting smarter with each year they spent in school. In fact, Marcon soon determined, many kids were failing even though they'd been enrolled in readiness programs such as Head Start, prekindergarten, and kindergarten.

As Marcon says, she and others involved in her study were "filled with surprises" at how little consistency they found when they investigated preschool programs serving 4-year-olds in the D.C. schools. Based on information collected from teacher surveys and classroom visits, Marcon sorted the district's preschool programs into three categories: (1) the child-initiated model, in which teachers encourage children to choose and develop their own learning and in which a child's social and emotional needs are considered more important than academic learning; (2) the academically directed model, in which teachers stress academic learning and readiness for the upcoming grades; and (3) the "middle-of-the-road" model, which borrows features from the other two.

Which of these programs works best for kids? As Marcon's data conclusively show, only the children in the child-initiated preschools benefited (in both the short-term and the long-term) from their early experience in school. (Each time Marcon replicated her study, in fact, only the children in the child-initiated model continued to master basic skills and to excel in upper grades.) In contrast, children from the academically directed preschools lost ground, especially in first-grade reading and math. In addition, children in the academic preschools lagged in social development, and boys, especially, fell behind in their overall academic achievement and development. (Girls, Marcon notes, were more ready than boys for academic experiences, but girls did better in classrooms that valued social-emotional development instead of academic preparation.) The middle-of-the-road preschools offered no discernible benefits: Children in these programs were found to have significantly lower mastery of basic skills, especially language skills, and they were slower to develop their social and motor skills.

When she followed the 4-year-olds through the upper grades, Marcon found that by age 9 the effects of a child's preschool experience were clearly apparent. For instance, by fourth grade, children in the academic programs were earning lower grades and passing fewer reading and math objectives. By fourth and fifth grades, these same children were behind their peers developmentally, and they displayed more maladaptive behavior, such as hyperactivity, depression, anxiety, and defiance. According to Marcon's research, these children had more difficulties adjusting and learning than children whose first school experience is in a supportive social-emotional setting. (For Marcon's recommendations for early-childhood programs, see the sidebar on page 19.)

Smarter each year?

If your school has an early-childhood program—or if your district is contemplating adding a program for preschoolers—that research means you need to lay down the law for both teachers and parents: In the early-childhood program at your school, you need to say, preschoolers are not going to be thought of and treated simply as smaller versions of older kids. And they won't be filling out workbook pages and ditto sheets or studying so-called academic subjects (such as math and science) the way older students do. (The National Association of Elementary School Principals, or NAESP, criticizes such an approach, saying preschoolers don't need "bite-sized nibbles" of what older children are getting.) Children in your early-childhood program, you should insist, will be doing what they do best—playing.

You'll also want to make NAESP's two priorities for preschool programs clear to staff members and parents: One goal is that, through play, your 3 and 4-year-olds (as well as younger children if they're also being cared for in your school) will develop a genuine pleasure in learning; the second is that your young charges will develop self-confidence in their ability to learn and to accomplish challenging tasks.

"I try to show—not just tell—parents and teachers what an early-childhood program should look like, sound like, and feel like," says a curriculum specialist who coordinates preschool programs in her school district. "In our classrooms, we provide children with all sorts of interesting toys and supplies, such as water tables, sandboxes, interlocking blocks, and dollhouses. We also give the children lots of time and encouragement to invent and experiment as they play. And we offer constant social and emotional security by making our centers happy and secure places where kids feel respected and loved."

But, as Kathleen Glascott, an assistant professor at Middle Tennessee State University at Murfreesboro, claims, there's more to running a high-quality early-childhood center than making sure you have the right

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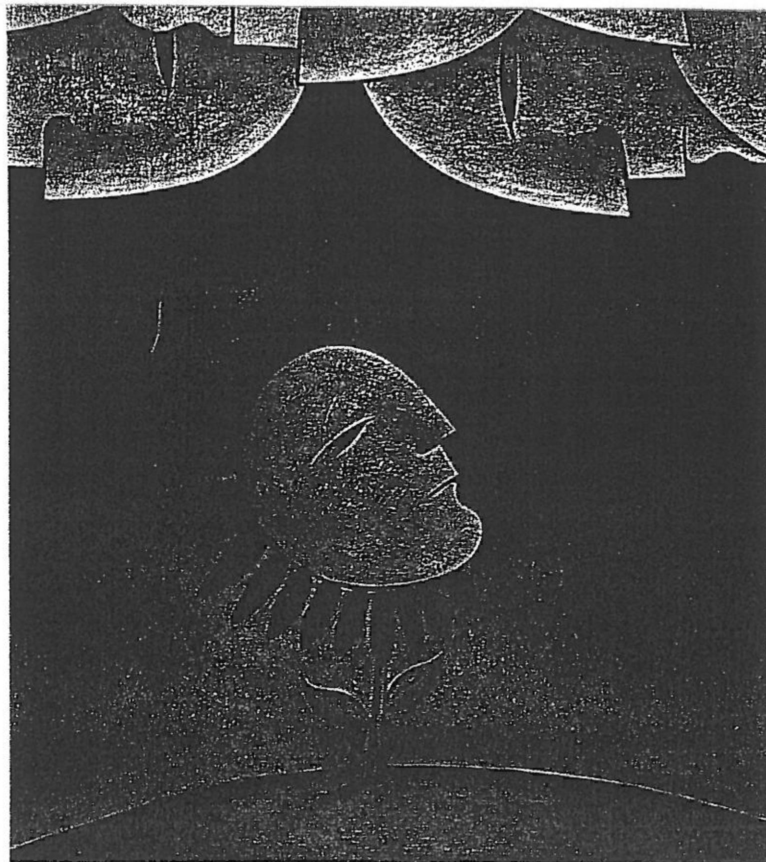

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But, as Kathleen Glascott, an assistant professor at Middle Tennessee State University at Murfreesboro, claims, there's more to running a high-quality early-childhood center than making sure you have the right

equipment and that you focus on kids' social and emotional development. Far too many teachers "don't completely understand the theory behind their classroom practice," says Glascott. If teachers can't describe the research on early-childhood education—especially the research that says kids learn as they play—it's likely their efforts won't be taken seriously, Glascott maintains. Teachers ought to be able to link their methods—such as providing uninterrupted playtime and having children select their own play activities—with research findings for two reasons, Glascott contends: For one thing, most parents and educators unfamiliar with early-childhood education need to be persuaded—with sound research evidence—that for very young children, play *is* learning; for another, teachers need to demonstrate that play during early childhood pays off in terms of increased academic achievement in later years.

But even those teachers and school executives who have a handle on the research that supports a more relaxed and playful approach to learning for young children have their frustrations. As they tell it, convincing parents that time spent playing is better for their children than studying can be difficult. "I spend countless hours explaining to parents that the best programs concentrate on 'kid stuff,'" says an early-childhood consultant. "Teachers and parents sometimes get impatient with letting kids play freely. They want to force kids to do more grown-up 'school stuff' even though the kids aren't ready to read, print, or listen to a teacher's instructions."

Playing up play

Although approximately 50 percent of 3 and 4-year-olds are in some form of preschool today—and predictions show more school districts plan to adopt early-childhood programs—there's still a "muddled understanding" of what constitutes learning for children this age, says Gary Salyers, former president of NAESP, in his essay "The Critical Preschool Years." Somehow, educators keep missing the boat when it comes to the youngest learners, according to Salyers. Instead of promoting learning that is "developmentally appropriate"—that is, the way a child learns at each stage of growth—schools too often push the kindergarten and first-grade curriculum down into preschool. Unfortunately, the tendency to start preschoolers off with more controlled learning is wrong, Salyers notes, and so is the idea that kids are learning only when they're seated quietly and studying school subjects.

In "The Importance of Play," an essay published in the *Atlantic Monthly,* Bruno Bettelheim, the noted child psychologist and researcher, describes the role of play in a young child's life. Drawing from observations first recorded by Freud, Bettelheim says that children work through and master "complex psychological difficulties of their past and present" as they play. For children, play—especially when it's freewheeling, without rules or goals, and chosen for pure enjoyment—is a "royal road" to their conscious and unconscious inner worlds, says Bettelheim.

Play is actually an intellectual activity, Bettelheim maintains. Through play, children learn cognitive skills (such as numbering and sorting), motor skills (such as balancing), and personal habits (such as perseverance). But it's important, Bettelheim cautions, for adults to allow young children to "own their own struggles" as they play. Teachers and parents who interfere—by suggesting a "right" way to use a toy, for instance—actually rob children of their chance to solve their own problems, resolve anxieties, and experience the joy of learn-

AN EARLY-CHILDHOOD CHECKLIST

Rebecca Marcon presented the following recommendations for early-childhood education to the administrators and school board members of the District of Columbia Public Schools. The recommendations are based upon her study, "Early Learning and Early Identification Follow-Up Study: Transition from the Early to the Later Childhood Grades":

1. Preschool programs should be individualized to match children's levels of development and natural approaches to learning. Activities in preschool programs should be child-initiated (rather than teacher or subject-initiated).
2. Early-childhood education should focus on children's social and emotional development instead of academic learning. Children who are pushed into academic learning too soon are likely to develop social and scholastic problems by fourth grade. It might take time to see the benefit of a developmentally appropriate early childhood program, but it is worth the wait.
3. Kindergarten should be an extension of preschool rather than a jump start on first grade. Kindergarten should not rush children into academic learning.
4. Schools should concentrate on identifying and assisting children in early-childhood programs who have problems with social, emotional, behavioral, and learning problems. Early intervention—rather than retaining students in kindergarten or first grade—is a better policy and one that is more likely to help students overcome school problems.
5. Schools should encourage and welcome parent involvement in their children's early-childhood education. Parents can positively affect children's scholastic achievement, classroom behavior, and later school success.
6. Schools should plan smooth transitions between early-childhood and later-childhood grades. School personnel should communicate the changes in curriculum and instruction, expectations for students, and information about classrooms and facilities to students and parents.
7. Schools should provide comprehensive counseling and psychological services to all young children. Services should include screenings and evaluations for maladaptive behaviors; staff training on developmentally appropriate teaching and learning; help for students who are anxious and depressed; and community-based outreach programs to help families help their children succeed in school.—S.B.

ing. And, Bettelheim and others note, children invariably lose interest and abandon their activity as soon as adults intrude on their play.

What's more, Bettelheim reminds us, a child's play often doesn't make much sense to an adult, but a child's decisions while playing—such as pushing around a cardboard box or climbing into a wagon and pretending to sleep—fulfill needs that can't always be seen. Remember, researchers say: Play is a constructive activity that allows children to act out problems and dilemmas in their lives, recreate enjoyable moments, and discover their own interests and personalities.

"It's hard to stand back and watch toddlers try over and over to build a tower out of blocks," says a teacher with a roomful of 3-year-olds. "But I've learned not to underestimate these little ones. Instead of rushing to their rescue, I realize now that it's a wonderful moment—one worth waiting for—when they finally get that top block in place and the tower sways but doesn't tumble." Learning that some tasks take considerable time and effort is a valuable lesson kids can get from their play, Bettelheim states. Kids as young as 3 can learn not to give up when things don't go right the first time.

According to the research, schools are on the right track when they give children plenty of time and plenty of room to move, play, and try out ideas. As Bettelheim puts it, teachers should provide ample play opportunities to help kids develop their own "inner life of creativity and imagination."

Howard Gardner, the cognitive psychologist who studies how children and adults learn, urges teachers to take note of what kids choose to play and how they go about playing. According to Gardner, teachers should use the data they collect from observing kids at play to encourage a state of "happy concentration" in their regular studies, such as music and history.

In Indianapolis's Key School (which is organized according to Gardner's theories) youngsters attend a "flow room" each week where they go about the serious business of playing board games, making models, and participating in other activities of their own choosing. According to Gardner and other researchers, play helps put kids into a "state of flow"—a psychological term that describes a point at which learning is neither too easy nor too hard, and solving problems and meeting challenges are extremely satisfying. (For more information on Howard Gardner's research, see the Research Report in the January 1994 issue.)

Ready to receive

According to Rebecca Marcon and many other early-childhood researchers, schools also should be wary of the national education goal that insists: "By the year 2000, all children in America will start school ready to learn." (That school-readiness goal is the first of six goals drafted by the National Governors' Association, supported by Presidents George Bush and Bill Clinton, and passed legislatively as Goals 2000.)

As Frank Newman, president of the Denver-based Education Commission of the States (ECS), notes in his essay "School Readiness and State Action," schools across the country are trying to figure out what readiness means and how they should go about getting young children ready to learn. As an elementary principal in Maine puts it, "We talk about getting kids ready to learn in our school, but, the truth be told, we don't have a systematic plan to get every child ready for kindergarten or first grade. So far, our best effort involves sending calendars home to parents with suggestions for daily activities they can do with their preschoolers—such as going to a library story hour and touring a local sailing museum. It's a nice touch, but it isn't exactly a readiness plan."

But, researchers such as Lorrie Shepard of the University of Colorado and Mary Lee Smith of Arizona State University say the goal of school readiness should be turned around. Instead of "shoehorning children into programs that don't fit them," Shepard and Smith say, schools ought to concentrate on helping teachers design ways to teach kids as they come. The last thing a school should do is prepare a "readiness checkoff," these researchers say: Thinking that all children can be lumped into a "mythical homogeneous group" in which everyone learns the same way at the same time denies children's natural racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity, Shepard and Smith say.

As for the national goal for school readiness, Frank Newman says school administrators and teachers need to ask a fundamental question: "Readiness for what?" In Newman's view, getting preschoolers ready to do kindergarten work and kindergartners ready for first-grade reading and other subjects, is a "hollow reform." Reflecting on the findings from her research in Washington, D.C., Rebecca Marcon notes that politicians and educators need to shift their thinking from getting kids "ready to learn" to getting schools "ready to receive" eager young learners. "I've had a serious turnabout in my thinking," says a veteran preschool teacher who agrees with Marcon's position. "I now welcome all my little ones with open arms—just as they are—instead of mentally sorting them into groups of learners and non-learners during the first week of school."

A kindergarten teacher in an inner-city school offers this observation: "My teaching partner and I used to moan and groan about kids coming to school not knowing how to hold a book and not ever having counted out buttons or blocks. But now we use this information as a starting point for their learning. We've learned to backtrack when we have to. So, for some kids, we hold them on our lap and show them a book—right side up—and we point out the cover, the title, the print, and the pictures. There's a big difference in where we start with our kids now. I guess you could say we, the teachers, have to be ready to learn." EE