

BRAIN-BASED LEARNING

Teach Kids When They're Ready

A new book for parents on developing their kids' sense of autonomy has some useful insights for teachers as well.

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Our friend Marie's daughter Emily just entered kindergarten. Emily went to preschool, where the curriculum revolved around things like petting rabbits and making art out of macaroni noodles. Emily isn't all that interested in learning how to read, but she loves to dance and sing and can play with Barbies for hours.

Emily's older sister, Frances, was reading well before she started kindergarten, and the difference between them worried Marie. Emily's grandparents thought it was a problem, too, and hinted that perhaps Marie should be reading to Emily more often. When Marie talked to another mom about it, her friend shared the same concern about her own two daughters, wondering if it was somehow her fault for not reading to her younger daughter enough. Would these younger siblings be behind the moment they started kindergarten?

This scenario drives us crazy because it's grounded in fear, competition, and pressure, not in science or reality. Not only are parents feeling undue pressure, but their kids are, too. The measuring stick is out, comparing one kid to another, before they even start formal schooling. Academic benchmarks are being pushed earlier and earlier, based on the mistaken assumption that starting earlier means that kids will do better later.

We now teach reading to 5-year-olds even though evidence shows it's more efficient to teach them to read at age 7, and that any advantage gained by kids who learn to read early washes out later in childhood.

What was once advanced work for a given grade level is now considered the norm, and children who struggle to keep up or just aren't ready yet are considered deficient. Kids feel frustrated and embarrassed, and experience a low sense of control if they're not ready to learn what they're being taught.

The fact is that while school has changed, children haven't. Today's 5-year-olds are no more fundamentally advanced than their peers were in 1925, when we started measuring such things. A child today can draw a square at the same age as a child living in 1925 (4 and a half), or a triangle (5 and a half), or remember how many pennies he has counted (up to 20 by age 6).

These fundamentals indicate a child's readiness for reading and arithmetic. Sure, some kids will jump the curve, but children need to be able to hold numbers in their head to really understand addition, and they must be able to discern

the oblique line in a triangle to recognize and write letters like K and R.

The problem is that while children from the 1920s to the 1970s were free to play, laying the groundwork for key skills like self-regulation, modern kindergartners are required to read and write.

Brain development makes it easier to learn virtually everything (except foreign languages) as we get older. Work is always easier with good tools. You can build a table with a dull saw, but it will take longer and be less pleasant, and may ingrain bad building habits that are hard to break later on.

One of the most obvious problems we see from rushed academic training is poor pencil grip. Holding a pencil properly is actually pretty difficult. You need to have the fine motor skills to hold the pencil lightly between the tips of the first two fingers and the thumb, to stabilize it, and to move it both horizontally and vertically using only your fingertips. In a preschool class of 20 we know of in which the kids were encouraged to write much too early, 17 needed occupational therapy to correct the workarounds they'd internalized in order to hold a pencil.

Think of it: 85 percent of kids needed extra help, parents spent extra money, and parents and kids felt stressed because some adult thought, "Hey, wouldn't it be swell if we taught these 4-year-olds to write?" without any regard to developmental milestones.

We see this early push all the way through high school. Eighth graders take science classes that used to be taught to ninth graders, and kids in 10th grade read literature that used to be taught in college. In Montgomery County, outside Washington, DC, the school district attempted to teach algebra to most students in eighth grade rather than ninth grade, with the goal of eventually teaching it to most kids in seventh grade. It was a disaster, with three out of four students failing their final exam. Most eighth graders don't have sufficiently developed abstract thinking skills to master algebra.

Historically, kids started college in their late teens because they were ready; while there have always been exceptions, on the whole 14-year-olds weren't considered developmentally ready for rigorous college work. Ironically, in the attempt to advance our kids, our own thinking about these issues has regressed.

Ned fields requests from many parents who want their kids to start SAT prep in the ninth grade. Ned tells them that it's a mistake to spend their kid's time and their money for him to teach them things that they will naturally learn in school. It's far better to wait for them to develop skills and acquire knowledge at school, and then to add to that with some test preparation in their junior year.

Starting test prep too early is not just totally unnecessary, it is actively counterproductive. It's like sitting your 14-year-old down to explain the intricacies of a 401(k) plan. It's not going to register.

The central, critical message here is a counterintuitive one that all parents would do well to internalize: Earlier isn't necessarily better; and likewise, more isn't better if it's too much.

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