

Crises in the Kindergarten

Why Children Need to Play in School

Joan Almon

Editor's note: The following article is an executive summary and recommendations from a new and significant report from the Alliance for Childhood. The full report may be found at the Alliance website,

www.allianceforchildhood.org.

According to the website, "The Alliance for Childhood promotes policies and practices that support children's healthy development, love of learning, and joy in living. Our public education campaigns bring to light both the promise and the vulnerability of childhood. We act for the sake of the children themselves and for a more just, democratic, and ecologically responsible future."

Kindergarten has changed radically in the last two decades in ways of which few Americans are aware. Children now spend far more time being taught and tested on literacy and math skills than they do learning through play and exploration, exercising their bodies, and using their imaginations. Many kindergartens use highly prescriptive curricula geared to new state standards and linked to standardized tests. In an increasing number of kindergartens, teachers must follow scripts from which they may not deviate. These practices, which are not well-grounded in research, violate long-established principles of child development and good teaching. It is increasingly clear that they compromise both children's health and their long-term prospects for success in school.

The traditional kindergarten classroom that most adults remember from childhood—with plenty of space and time for unstructured play and discovery, art and music, practicing social skills, and learning to enjoy learning—has largely disappeared. The latest research indicates that, on a typical day, children in all-day kindergartens spend four to six times as much time in literacy and math instruction and taking or preparing for tests (about two to three hours per day) as in free play or "choice time" (30 minutes or less).

Kindergartners are now under great pressure to meet inappropriate expectations, including academic standards that, until recently, were reserved for first grade. At the same time, they are denied the benefits of play—a major stress reliever. This double burden, many experts believe,

contributes to a rise in anger and aggression in young children, reflected in increasing reports of severe behavior problems. Given the high rates of psychiatric disturbances among children today, it is critically important that early education practices promote physical and emotional health and do not exacerbate illness.

High-stakes testing and test preparation in kindergarten are proliferating, as schools are increasingly required to make decisions on promotion, retention, and placement in gifted programs and special education classes on the basis of test scores. While some testing of children under age eight may be useful for screening, it is a highly unreliable method for assessing individual children. Observational and curriculum-embedded performance assessments should be used instead. The argument that standardized testing takes less time and is therefore more efficient is called into question by new data suggesting that teachers now spend 20 to 30 minutes per day preparing kindergarten children to take standardized tests.

The nine new studies and analyses on which this report is based all point to the same conclusion: Kindergarten, long a beloved institution in American culture, is in crisis. If the problems are not recognized and remedied, the same ills will be passed on to preschools and even to programs for children ages birth to three.

The implications of these radical changes in early education practice reach far beyond schools. Until recently few people were talking about the long-term effects of the disappearance of children's play. Now, while many politicians and policymakers are calling for even more tests, more accountability, and more hard-core academics in early childhood classrooms, the leaders of major business corporations are saying that creativity and play are the future of the U.S. economy.

Daniel Pink, author of *A Whole New Mind*, and who writes about the "imagination economy," says, "People have to be able to do something that can't be outsourced, something that's hard to automate and that delivers on the growing demand for nonmaterial things like stories and

design. Typically these are things we associate with the right side of the brain, with artistic and empathetic and playful sorts of abilities.” How can we expect our children to thrive in the imagination economy of the future when we deny them opportunities for play and creativity in kindergarten?

We recognize that the restoration of child-initiated play to early education will not by itself solve the complex problems of helping all children—especially those with special needs or in poor families and neglected schools, as well as English-language learners—to reach their full potential. We are not calling for a simple return to the practices of an earlier time. We now understand much better the kinds of rich experiences that young children need in order to become avid learners. Teachers need to understand the ways in which child-initiated play, when combined with playful, focused learning, leads to lifelong benefits in ways that didactic drills, standardized tests, and scripted teaching do not.

In a healthy kindergarten, play does not mean that “anything goes.” It does not deteriorate into chaos. Nor is play so tightly structured by adults that children are denied the opportunity to learn through their own initiative and exploration. Kindergartners need a balance of child-initiated play in the presence of engaged teachers and more focused experiential learning guided by teachers. We call for educators, their professional organizations, and policymakers to develop as fully as possible the two central methods in the continuum of approaches to kindergarten education (illustrated below):

The creation of a healthy balance described above has been blocked by current policies and government-imposed practices and programs, including No Child Left Behind and Reading First. These well-intentioned but fundamentally flawed mandates rely on testing and on didactic and scripted approaches—especially for teaching children from low-income backgrounds—in spite of the fact that these practices are not well-supported by research evidence. Indeed, many of the current approaches to kindergarten education are based on unfounded assumptions and preconceptions about what is best for children and schools.

“The problem is not political but ideological,” writes Lilian Katz, who directed the ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education for 30 years. “Ideologies are deeply held beliefs that fill the vacuum created by the unavailability of hard data. Our best strategy in such situations is to make our ideas and the data that we do have readily available to others who can subject them to vigorous argument and debate.”

If we are to best serve children and to foster the full professional development of early childhood educators, we must reject an ideological approach to teaching young children, consider all the evidence of decades of research and experience—not just the results of a few narrow tests of suspect validity—and begin a thorough reassessment of our kindergarten policies and practices.

Based on our reading of the evidence, we call on policymakers, educators, health professionals, researchers, and parents to take action as follows:

The Kindergarten Continuum			
Laissez-Faire, loosely structured classroom	Classroom rich in child-initiated and child-directed play	Playful classroom with focused learning	Didactic, highly structured classroom
Ample play but without active adult support, often resulting in chaos	Exploring the world through play with the active presence of teachers	Teachers guiding learning with rich, experiential activities	Teacher-led instruction, including scripted in teaching, with little or no play

1. Restore child-initiated play and experiential learning to their rightful place at the heart of kindergarten education, with the active support of teachers .

- Provide time and space for play to kindergartners every school day, both indoors and during recess.
- Make room in kindergarten for all types of play that contribute to children's development, including make-believe, sensory, language, construction, large- and small-motor, and mastery play.
- Engage parents and educators in discussion of the role of play and experiential learning in healthy and effective kindergartens, so that they can advocate for play with school administrators and policymakers.

2. Reassess kindergarten standards to ensure that they promote developmentally appropriate practices, and eliminate those that do not.

- Replace one-size-fits-all kindergarten standards with flexible guidelines based on well-grounded knowledge of children's cognitive, social, emotional, physical, and creative development.
- Recognize the differences between the kindergarten child who is an emergent reader and the first-grade child who has become an early reader. Recognize similar differences in children's learning of math, science, and other topics. Do not expect kindergarten children to achieve academic goals best suited to first-graders.
- Change conditions that cause normal child behavior to be wrongly labeled as "misbehavior."
- Eliminate the practice of kindergarten retention based on inability to meet rigid standards or to pass particular tests.

3. End the inappropriate use in kindergarten of standardized tests, which are prone to serious error especially when given to children under age eight.

- Use alternatives to standardized assessments in kindergarten, such as teacher

observations and assessment of children's work. Educate teachers in their use and in the risks and limitations of standardized testing of young children.

- Do not make important decisions about young children, their teachers, or their schools based solely or primarily on standardized test scores.

4. Expand the early childhood research agenda to examine the long-term impact of current preschool and kindergarten practices on the development of children from diverse backgrounds.

- Evaluate current kindergarten practices with qualitative as well as quantitative methods. Such research should assess children's overall health and their cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development until at least fourth grade.
- Replicate on a much larger scale the quantitative studies of kindergarten use of time and materials described in Chapter 2 of this report so that a representative sample of teachers in many different areas contribute to the full picture of current kindergarten practices.
- Investigate the links between developmentally inappropriate kindergarten practices and behavioral and psychiatric disturbances and other health problems among young children.

5. Give teachers of young children first-rate preparation that emphasizes the full development of the child and the importance of play, nurtures children's innate love of learning, and supports teachers' own capacities for creativity, autonomy, and integrity.

- Make course work in child development and the use of play in the classroom mandatory in early childhood education programs.
- Give teachers professional development, mentoring, and other support in learning how to encourage and support play, especially with children who have had limited opportunity to engage in creative play or who have poor self-regulation skills.

- Help teachers communicate with parents about the importance of play and ways to support it at home and in the community.
6. Use the crisis of play's disappearance from kindergarten to rally organizations and individuals to create a national movement for play in schools and communities.
- Work across traditional boundaries of profession, geography, and interest group to advocate for play in classrooms, after-school and camp programs, parks and playgrounds, neighborhoods and cities.
 - Establish local, state, and national play policies that recognize the importance of play for children of all ages—including the ways that play enhances physical, social, emotional, and cognitive development.
 - Address the obstacles to play, such as unsafe neighborhoods, over-scheduling of children's lives, excessive screen time, toys linked to entertainment media, and education that emphasizes skills, drills, and homework and undermines creativity, imagination, and overall well-being.

Respect the child, respect him to the end, but also respect yourself. Be the companion of his thought, the friend of his friendship, the lover of his virtue--but no kinsman of his sin. Let him find you so true to yourself that you are the irreconcilable hater of his vice and the imperturbable slighter of his trifling.

—Ralph Waldorf Emerson, from “Education”