



# Parenting from Womb to Adolescent

IAP GDBP Academy

## **Pre-School Education: ABCD or Skill-Based**

 **Suneel Godbole**

**Developmental Pediatrician, Chiranjeev Child Diet & Development Centre, Pune**

There is a growing debate about the goals of early childhood education. Traditionally, academic success depends upon a child's basic ability to read, write, spell, and do math equations (arithmetic's)-abilities commonly known as the three Rs. With growing pressure of early education, soaring expectations, bombardment from media, explosion of knowledge due to internet and glamorous advertisements of new generation pre schools-the parents tend to push their tiny tots at an early age in 'the rat race' as early as 18 months! (If this continues; don't be surprised if you read an advertisement of 'In utero Schooling!')

Various researchers, teachers, psychologists and even pediatricians have expressed the necessity of pre-school education (though the earliest age to start remains a matter of debate) to have strong 'Learning Foundation'. The real issue is to choose between Academic Learning' or 'Skill-oriented Play based learning'?

In a well-designed study Rebecca A. Marcon from University of North Florida, it was observed that by the end of their sixth year in school, children whose pre-school experiences had been academically directed earned significantly lower grades compared to children who had attended child-centered pre-school classes. Children's later school success appears to have been enhanced by more active, child-initiate daily learning experiences. In many other studies, children who attended more "academic" pre-schools instead of play-focused pre-schools were found to be more anxious, less creative, and less enthusiastic about learning than the children who had learned primarily through play.

### **Limitations of "Academic Pre-schools"**

Early childhood programs that implement a directed academic curriculum often replace essential, hands-on learning activities with structured, formal instructions, work sheets, skill drills and rote-learning tasks. This leads to multiple learning issues:

1. Forces children to use immature neural pathways to complete tasks. The normal growth and development of the brain can be distorted by such practice;
2. Forces the child to tackle a problem that is unrelated to his or her environment or concrete experiences, and leaves gaps in the development of reasoning and logic;
3. Does not allow the child to use intrinsic motivations to engage in learning;
4. Risks placing inappropriate expectations and pressure on young children;
5. Decreases the development of the intuitive foundation of knowledge needed for complex abstract thinking in the future;
6. Limits opportunities for a child to practice and develop essential nonacademic abilities;
7. Lower in conduct and work-study habits; and
8. More distractible, less willing to follow directions.

## Developmentally Appropriate Skill-based Play-school

Many child-development experts say toddlers learn better through play than through direct instruction. Here are some reasons for the same

1. Play is how children begin to understand and process their world;
2. 2 Children's play unlocks their creativity and imagination;
3. When playing with other children or adults, child will listen and learn the language he/she hears without even realizing;
4. Children can solve complex problems that arise as they play and learn a few mathematical concepts as well;
5. Play can provide many opportunities to work on strengthening muscles without your child even being aware of it!
6. Play-school focuses on 'Learning within context' rather than learning meaningless, disembodied facts. A toddler can remember 'Tables' in an 'academic-pre-school' but the application of 'Tables' is missed! But in a 'Play-school the child will devise a 'Table' while sorting or grouping blocks and balls!
7. 7 In a 'Play-school' a child may not learn alphabets or numbers; but he/she will learn to engage in give-and-take with children and adults, to negotiate, and to start and maintain social relationships. Ultimately, the child is ready to socially and emotionally handle primary school and through that, more prepared for academic success.
8. When toddlers master abilities through play, they exhibit a higher language level, more innovation, greater empathy and cooperation; better problem-solving strategies, and longer and greater attention spans-all essential characteristics of learning readiness.



## The Three 'Is of Pre-school Education

Mari Blaustein; an early childhood content and curriculum designer; in 'The Basics of Learning Readiness' strongly recommends use of three 'Is of intrinsic motivation as the backbone of pre-school education over the three 'Rs of primary/ secondary school education.

- 1. Interaction:** All children; right from infancy up to adolescence; want to socialize; interact with other children and adults. Successful interactions not only expand a child's personal knowledge base, social skills, and language abilities but also build self-esteem and create the confidence. But this needs freedom and free time to interact with other children this is possible only in play based pre-schools; that too when the teachers are



aware of these concepts.

**2. Imagination:** According to Mari Blaustein, creative and imaginative play opportunities motivate toddlers to imagine, wonder, and explore ways to organize and use new knowledge, test the learning environment, seek possible explanations, and practice new skills safely. Rather than focusing on an activity with only one correct outcome, the imaginative play motivates children to consider alternative possibilities by applying organization, logic, and symbolic thinking.



**3. Integration:** In play-based pre-schools; toddlers integrate acts of sight, sound, and touch with language as they experience, explore, question, and use new knowledge. This integration builds understanding and insights into the concrete world; generates new ideas; and allows children to wonder about, discuss, and explore different outcomes. For 'Integration' children require an open-frame environment, opportunities to interact and try their new skills and most importantly motivated facilitators-the enthusiastic teachers!



## The Craze of 'Fast Schooling'!

Parents are nowadays crazy about 'putting their tiny tots in an aggressive academic oriented pre-school, in spite of awareness of child-centered education, knowing the importance of 'learn through play' and advice by pediatricians and child-friendly educationists. Probably this attitude comes from our "immediate gratification culture. We; in our modern, fast, computer based world; expect to change the world by 'a touch of finger'. Similarly the parents want their children to achieve great academic fits at an early This pushes the child on a wrong track; which ruins their beautiful childhood! Here we should remember a simple analogy-the artificially ripened mangoes may look more attractive than the mangoes which take time to ripe on the tree-but when you taste them; you know the difference!

## Pediatrician's Job!

1. Educate parents right from infancy during well-baby visits
2. Help parents choose the right school appropriate for their family culture.
3. Discuss pros and cons of early schooling, 'play versus academic pre-schools'
4. Growth and development assessment of children at an early age may help the parents to know the potentials of their child and select the pre-school



accordingly. A developmental pediatrician can help the parents with this assessment.

5. If pediatrician's can keep a registry of child-centered, play based, skill oriented pre-schools we can direct the confused parents to the best possible option.
6. Most importantly; we should spare some time from our busy practice to counsel parents as these initiatives will make the better tomorrow!

## Parenting Tips

The pre-school forms the foundation of education and career of the child. Parents should be careful about choosing the 'right' pre-school for their child. Parents should:

- a. Visit the school before admission
- b. Confirm whether the school has required permissions and license.
- c. Talk with school authorities, teachers and even support staff
- d. Talk with senior parents about their experiences of school.
- e. Compare the school expenses with the financial status of the family.
- f. Use following checklist to select the 'right' pre-school for your child.



## The Checklist for Ideal Pre-school

1. Child-friendly school: Small group of children with more resource persons.
2. Premises: Open, airy, spacious, well-lit.
3. Teachers: Well educated, competent, affectionate, calm, lively, interested in children, positive attitude.
4. Philosophy of education should match with that of child's family. Promote problem solving, independence, creativity and encourage the child to try new things that help value learning and social skills.
5. Learning material: Building blocks; props for pretend play; picture books; paints and other art materials; and table toys such as matching games, pegboards, and puzzles.
6. Child safety, stringent health and hygiene norms
7. Cultural activities, field trips, projects, exhibitions, hands on learning activities.
8. Outdoor play and activities: Adequate space, dedicated ground and play-gym adhering to safety guidelines.



9. Distance from residence: School should be within 3 kilometers.
10. Communication: Free, transparent, supportive communication between school authorities, teachers, support staff and parents.

### **Points to remember**

1. Growing pressure of early education, soaring expectations, bombardment from media, glamorous advertisements of new generation preschools-the parents tend to push kids in rat race.
2. Developmentally appropriate skill-based play school accelerates learning through play.
3. Play helps child understand the world.
4. Play unlocks creativity and imagination.
5. Play can solve complex problems, few mathematical concepts, focus on contextual learning, and strengthen muscles without child even being aware of it.
6. The three Is' of pre-school education are Interaction, imagination and integration.
7. Parents should visit school before admission, confirm whether the school has required permissions and license, talk with school authorities, teachers, support staff and even senior parents.
8. Ideal pre-school should have teachers who are well educated, competent, affectionate, calm, lively, interested in children and positive attitude.
9. School should have good premises, learning material, etc.
10. Child safety, stringent health and hygiene norms.
11. School should be closer to the residence.
12. Effective communication between school authorities, parents, teachers and support staff.