

Edward Miller and Joan Almon (2009). **Crisis in the Kindergarten: Why Children Need to Play in School.** College Park, Maryland: Alliance for Childhood.

http://www.allianceforchildhood.org/sites/allianceforchildhood.org/files/file/Kindergarten_Report.pdf

Preface

The argument of this report, that child-initiated play must be restored to kindergarten, will be dismissed and even ridiculed in some quarters. In spite of the fact that the vital importance of play in young children's development has been shown in study after study, many people believe that play is a waste of time in school. School, they say, should be a place for learning. There's plenty of time for play at home.

Skepticism about the value of play is compounded by the widespread assumption—promoted by hundreds of “smart baby” products—that the earlier children begin to master the basic elements of reading, such as phonics and letter recognition, the more likely they are to succeed in school. And so kindergarten education has become heavily focused on teaching literacy and other academic skills, and preschool is rapidly following suit.

The common misconceptions about young children's play fall apart when we look closely at what is really going on. We begin to be able to differentiate between superficial play and the complex make-believe play that can engage five-year-olds for an hour or more, fueled by their own original ideas and rich use of language. We start to distinguish between the sound of a chaotic classroom and the hum of energy when children are deeply absorbed in the flow of play.

Young children work hard at play. They invent scenes and stories, solve problems, and negotiate their way through social roadblocks. They know what they want to do and work diligently to do it. Because their motivation comes from within, they learn the powerful lesson of pursuing their own ideas to a successful conclusion.

Research shows that children who engage in complex forms of socio-dramatic play have greater language skills than nonplayers, better social skills, more empathy, more imagination, and more of the subtle capacity to know what others mean. They are less aggressive and show more self-control and higher levels of thinking. Animal research suggests that they have larger brains with more complex neurological structures than nonplayers.

Long-term research casts doubt on the assumption that starting earlier on the teaching of phonics and other discrete skills leads to better results. For example, most of the play-based kindergartens in Germany were changed into centers for cognitive achievement during a wave of educational “reform” in the 1970s. But research comparing 50 play-based classes with 50 early-learning centers found that by age ten the children who had played excelled over the others in a host of ways. They were more advanced in reading and mathematics and they were better adjusted socially and

emotionally in school. They excelled in creativity and intelligence, oral expression, and “industry.”* As a result of this study German kindergartens returned to being play-based again.

China and Japan are envied in the U.S. for their success in teaching science, math, and technology. But one rarely hears about their approach to schooling before second grade, which is playful and experiential rather than didactic. Finland’s children, too, go to playful kindergartens, and they enter first grade at age seven rather than six. They enjoy a lengthy, playful early childhood. Yet Finland consistently gets the highest scores on the respected international PISA exam for 15-year-olds.

It is true that poverty does not afflict Finland’s children as it does children in the U.S., and that children of poverty need special attention in preschool and kindergarten. But what they need is extra support to reap the full benefits of a play-based, experiential program. They may need more structure to begin with and guidance for entering into play, for many are inexperienced with it. They need a solid introduction to books, which most middle-class children have from infancy onwards, and they need to hear language used in conversation, storytelling, song, and verse. Equally important, they need to use language. Play is the foremost way that children use the language they are hearing.

In an effective play-based kindergarten the teacher has a strong though subtle role. She understands child development— cognitive, physical, and social-emotional. The teacher is attuned to the children’s play themes and builds on them, introducing new content and play materials to stimulate their minds. She knows the needs of individual children and helps them overcome obstacles in their lives that hinder learning. In other words, she is a well-trained professional who is part of a learning community where teachers support each other in their growth and where administrators appreciate her work. She expects much from her children and knows how to create a classroom that supports excellence.

All young children, not just those living in poverty, need this kind of support. For the fact is that most children today don’t have enough playtime even at home. Many affluent children now need help entering into creative play because of the surfeit of media and organized activities in their lives. They struggle to bring their own ideas to the fore. As one kindergarten teacher put it, “If I give the children time to play, they don’t know what to do. They have no ideas of their own.”

This is a tragedy, both for the children themselves and for our nation and world. No human being can achieve his full potential if his creativity is stunted in childhood. And no nation can thrive in the 21st century without a highly creative and innovative workforce. Nor will democracy survive without citizens who can form their own independent thoughts and act on them.

The power of play as the engine of learning in early childhood and as a vital force for young children’s physical, social, and emotional development is beyond question. Children in play-based kindergartens have a double advantage over those who are denied play: they end up equally good or better at reading and other intellectual skills, and they are more likely to become well-adjusted healthy people.

Every child deserves a chance to grow and learn in a play-based, experiential preschool and kindergarten. Play works.

* These findings are summarized in “Curriculum Studies and the Traditions of Inquiry: The Scientific Tradition” by Linda Darling-Hammond and Jon Snyder, in the *Handbook of Research on Curriculum* (1992), edited by Philip W. Jackson; New York: MacMillan, pp. 41-78.

Foreword: *David Elkind*

Early childhood education, the care and instruction of young children outside of the home, over the last half century has become a downward extension of schooling. It is now the first rung on the educational ladder. In many respects, however, this most recent addition to the pedagogical hierarchy is quite different from its elementary and secondary predecessors.

The early childhood curriculum is the most holistic and least differentiated at any level of education. It is also the most solidly grounded in philosophy, in clearly articulated methodology, and in theory and research. Those who contributed to the discipline of early childhood education came from occupations and professions outside the academic domain. What they had in common was an understanding of children. And that is what makes early childhood education unique; it starts with the child and not with the subject matter.

The philosophical foundations of early childhood education were provided by John Amos Comenius, John Locke, and Jean Jacques Rousseau. Its curriculum and methodology were created by Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi, Friedrich Froebel, Maria Montessori, and Rudolf Steiner. Most recently it was scientifically grounded by the research and theory of Sigmund Freud, Jean Piaget, and Erik Erikson.

While there are differences in the approaches of these progenitors of early childhood education, the differences are overshadowed by one common principle: *that young children are growing and that early childhood curriculum and practice have to be adapted to the maturing needs, abilities, and interests of the child.*

Today, however, as is made so heartbreakingly clear by the Alliance for Childhood report, the rich legacy of the grandmasters, supported by an overwhelming amount of contemporary research findings and classroom experience, is dismissed as irrelevant. Instead we have had a politically and commercially driven effort to make kindergarten a one-size-smaller first grade. Why in the world are we trying to teach the elementary curriculum at the early childhood level?

The answer, I am afraid, is that what we do in education has little or nothing to do with what we know is good pedagogy for children. For example, we could significantly

improve education at all levels and in all parts of the country with one change in policy—reducing class size to 18 or less at all grade levels. It is a basic truism of education that the more one-on-one time a child has with a teacher, the better the learning and educational outcome.

Yet in practice educational policy is determined by political, economic, cultural, and personal ego concerns. This happens because children and adolescents do not vote, and have little or no say in their own governance. And we, who speak for children and youth, have not been able to muster the political muscle to make the educational needs of children either heard or responded to.

The data and arguments offered in this report are both powerful and compelling. But if they are to have any impact, we need to find champions in the media, in the arts, and in politics who will make the case for us. After all, what do we know? We are just the teachers of young children—who just happen to be the future of our nation.

Executive summary

Kindergarten has changed radically in the last two decades in ways that few Americans are aware of. 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 are compromising 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 being denied the benefits of play—a major stress reliever. This double burden, many experts believe, is contributing 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 not exacerbate illness.

High-stakes testing and test preparation in kindergarten are proliferating, as schools increasingly are required to make decisions on promotion, retention, and placement in gifted programs or 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 are now spending 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.

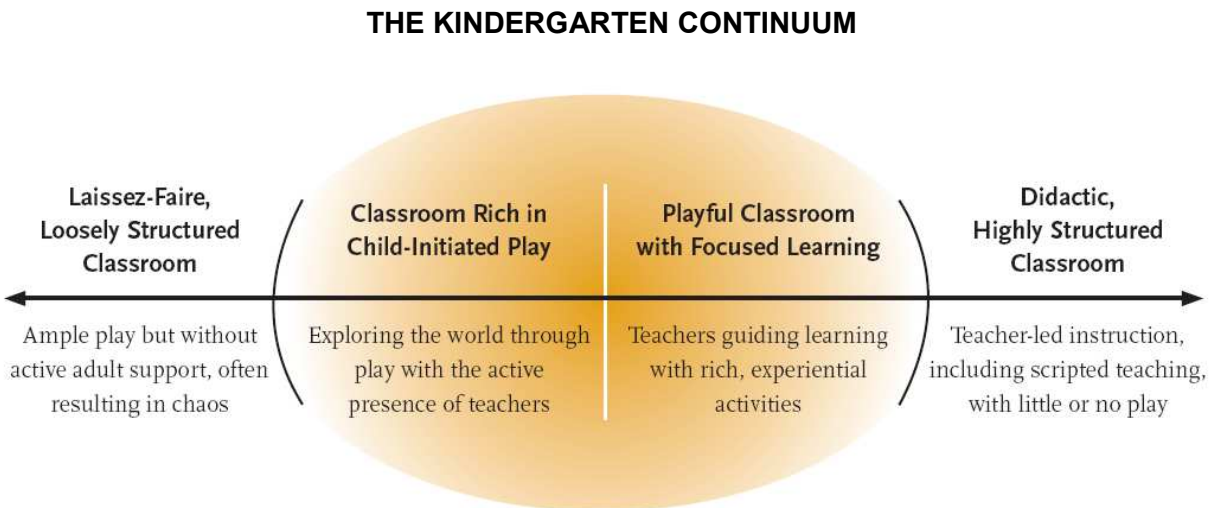
The implications of these radical changes in early education practice reach far beyond schools. Until recently few people were talking about the long-term effects of the disappearance of children's play. Now, while many politicians and policymakers are calling for even more tests, more accountability, 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*, writes about the "imagination economy," and says that "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 if 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 "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 childinitiated 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 (illustrated below) of approaches to kindergarten education:



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:

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

2. Reassess kindergarten standards to ensure that they promote developmentally appropriate practices, and eliminate those that do not.
 3. End the inappropriate use in kindergarten of standardized tests, which are prone to serious error especially when given to children under age eight.
 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.
 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.
 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.
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- *See full report*

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