

The Rush for Success: Is it too Much?

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“Send your child to school as soon as you can and as much as you can so they can build a solid foundation and get a head start academically!” This advice is pervasive. It is heard in parenting circles, from school districts, from politicians, and in the news. When people think of pre-K programming, they see their child getting a jump-start on academics, they imagine the meaningful interactions their child will have with their peers and the instructors, and they put their trust in the institution, in hopes that it will reap great benefits for their child. They are not ill-informed, as there are numerous studies that seem to display higher academic achievement and better preparedness for the future of those children who begin their academic “career” at an early age. However, what society does not see highlighted are those studies that show how early education may actually be detrimental to a child’s future. I’d like to propose that rigorous, academic-focused preschool leads to student stress and long-term negative outcomes both emotionally and educationally, that preschool programs are generally not developmentally appropriate, that people should think more critically about studies that seem to glamorize pre-K education, and that funding for universal pre-K might not be as profitable as it may sound.

When pre-K programming is endorsed by government and certain professionals, what they have in mind is a rigorous, academic-based program that will push students toward higher achievement, usually measured by test scores. Measuring by test scores seems to be a clear way for parents to know their children are succeeding. What parent doesn’t want to see their child score highly? I would like to suggest that a less rigorous approach to preschool serves pre-K students better than a heavy focus on academics for several reasons. According to a child and adolescent emotional and behavioral health agency, there was a Swedish government study that

tested the IQ difference between children who went to an academic-focused preschool and those who went to a comprehensive (play based) preschool. The results came back and showed that although the children who went to the academic preschool had increased short-term knowledge, by the time they reached later grades, the increase disappeared, and the children's scores were no different than those who had gone to the comprehensive preschool (Evolve 2020). I interpret that this result shows that play centered education at that age can benefit a child the same or in some cases, even more than academic-based options.

When people think that preschool attendance may strengthen their child's chances of attending college and/or higher education, they think preschool will surely pay off in the long run. The largest study supporting this theory was explained by Dizikes (2023). The city of Boston did a randomized trial with a control group and then compared those who participated in preschool to those who did not. While their findings did not show any difference in academics, they did find that those who attended preschool were more likely to eventually attend college (Dizikes 2023). I would like to point out some flaws in this study and present a stronger study that shows just the opposite. Critics of the Boston study point out that since tremendous amounts of money were poured into this program, it was an unrealistic amount and is not a sustainable model for general preschools because of its cost. Another note was that this study took place in the late nineties when preschool looked quite a bit different than it does now. Namely, it was more play-based and less academic-focused. A newer, more realistic experiment was done in Tennessee, observing children through sixth grade. First, the Boston study was city-wide whereas the Tennessee study was state-wide. The Tennessee study was done with a better representation of socio-economic levels. "After third grade, pre-K students had lower test scores, more suspensions and poorer attendance than non-pre-K students" (Naylor 2022). After looking

at these two studies, it does in fact seem that the Tennessee study overrides what the more well-known Boston study originally claimed. The Tennessee study was extremely important. Since this was done, it now shows evidence to lead to better and future preschools. Often times, you need to dig deeper to find the true results and meanings.

Parents often believe that preschool will set their child up for better behavior and emotional control because of the structured environment and the guidance from a professional educator. While a child can certainly learn these things, I'd like to point out that the negative outcomes in this regard are often greater than the positive ones. Since most preschools are actually within larger buildings (sometimes in public schools), the need for the children to be "controlled" is greater which leads to spending half their day lining up and being told to be quiet in the halls. This highly controlled environment leads to emotional and behavioral problems and stress. Children develop better attitudes when they can be creative, think freely, and have the energy that a child is meant to have at that age (Kamenetz 2022). In my opinion, in the end, they are just four-year-olds. They need the freedom to fail, get their energy out, make messes, and practice their motor skills. Putting too much control on kids who are doing developmentally normal things can backfire.

When Biden campaigned to be president, a large part of the promises he made focused on pouring more money into early education. He argued that it would be good for everyone. It would boost test scores, college attendance and, in the long run, the economy, since children's preschool attendance would enable their mothers or caretakers to enter the workforce (Eden 2021). In all, it sounded promising in every way, and in some ways, it could be, if it were done well. What wasn't pointed out was the evidence that both preschool and daycare attendance, namely children being away from parents, has been shown to cause depression, anger, and stress

in families. Children are more often sick, parents are more likely to consider themselves bad parents, children struggle with aggression and behavioral problems (Eden 2021). I would suggest that the money intended to fund pre-K programs is better spent elsewhere. The funds could be put back into the hands of parents, for example, in the form of vouchers or tax credits to use as they see fit. Whether their choice is to enroll their child in preschool, send them to a daycare center, or keep them home, I believe it will reap more benefits than the alternative.

The push to show the benefits of pre-K often forces programs to focus heavily on academic gains, usually as shown by test scores. Due to this, early childhood educators are put into a predicament and are forced to place unrealistic expectations on children. Should our children be the victims of misguided policies? The reality is that currently there is too much pressure placed on these children. We should only ask what is developmentally appropriate to ask. Based on the results of the Tennessee study mentioned earlier, Dale Farran (director of the study) concluded that “We might actually get better results from simply letting little children play” (Kamenetz 2022). Parents and policymakers are demanding to see academic gains and achievements, but they are overlooking the internal, more important, and often “invisible” achievements that benefit a child more at that age. Perhaps the blame is less on the educator and more on the programming that is often tied to government funding and therefore must “prove itself”.

Politically, funding for preschool programs remains a hot topic. If a candidate wants to capture the attention of voters, they just need to commit to pouring money into early childhood programs. Many voters loved Biden’s plan for spending \$200 billion for universal preschool. On the surface, it sounds good, but government money always comes with strings attached. And while some studies show positive results of preschool, all are on a smaller scale than what Biden

is proposing (Rosalsky 2021). Replicating a high quality, high-cost program is just not feasible nationwide.

In conclusion, pre-K programming, the way government is able to run it, may not hold all the promises that people expect. Academic advantage seems to be questionable, and it does not necessarily give a child a higher chance of college attendance. Parents need to know that preschool attendance may very well be stressful for the whole family. Digging deeper and looking particularly for studies that counter what headlines tell us will help us to see a more realistic picture. After researching this topic, I have seen that having universal, academic-based preschools not only takes tremendous amounts of people, but also money. My parents chose not to send me nor my brother to preschool and instead, focus on the more important things. Quality time together, playing, being outside, and even helping them cook! I truly think that having those experiences helped my future immensely. With such mixed reviews on the benefits of preschool, do we really want the government pouring so much money into it? Is it not better spent putting it back into the hands of parents? As future generations come to the point of having to make this decision for their children, they should carefully consider whether sending their children to school so early in life is truly the best idea.

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