PRESCHOOL ACADEMICS: IS IT TOO MUCH TOO SOON?

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[Assignment: Write an essay that uses logic to change the reader's mind or to strengthen an attitude that he or she already has. Choose a controversial subject, and support your viewpoint with evidence garnered from your research.]

(1) In the 1950's the average preschool room consisted of doll houses, play kitchens, little rugs to have naps on, jugs of Kool-aid and a smiling teacher with a bun at the nape of her neck who would laughingly tell Joey to stop pulling Sally's hair. However, as time and technology have marched on, preschool rooms have slowly changed from a place to color pictures to a place where children learn how to do word problems on IBM computers. It has been hotly debated in the past few years whether early academics are actually helping or hindering America's children. Though parents are pushing for success--the earlier the better--most psychologists agree that strict academics at too early an age can kill creativity and motivation and can also cause physical problems. It is also true that children who are allowed to express themselves at an early age instead of being force fed others' ways of thinking are less likely to rebel against authority at a later age. Overall, it has been proven that pressured academics at the preschool level can deter later learning and can also be harmful to the psychological and physical health in children.

(2) The first day of school arrives "for an unprecedented 2.5 million children" at the age of three or four this year (Salholtz 57). That consists of 40% of all the potential preschoolers in the nation and is more than triple the number of preschoolers that attended school in 1965 (Salholtz 56). The number of licensed preschools has grown 234% in the last ten years, as has the state support for preschool programs (Elkind, "Miseducation" 11). More than half of the states are already funding or developing preschools, at "a cost of more than $250 million annually" (Thomas 34).

(3) One reason why the rate of attendance in preschools has gone up so dramatically is that modern parents are pushing for success. Parents are having fewer children in the 1980's, so their chances of having a child of whom they can be proud are lower than when families were larger (Elkind, "Superkids" 61). Also, the cost of raising a child has gone up dramatically, and a successful child protects a money-minded parent's investment. Another reason is that in a decade of intense competition between "yuppies," a successful child can be an ultimate proof of success (Elkind, "Superkids" 60).

(4) The second reason for the rise of preschool attendance is that more mothers are working and preschool is another place for them to put their child while they
work. Mothers think they are getting a great deal—they get day care and a chance to increase their child's IQ all in one shot.

(5) Both of these reasons for the rise of preschool attendance involve the parents' needs and not the child's. If parents knew the whole truth about some preschool programs they would not be so anxious to get their children involved. Strict, early academics have been proven to cause a lack of motivation in learning. Little attention is given to individual development and individual learning styles, and in most cases the pressures of accelerated programs "do not allow children to be risk takers as they experiment with language" (Elkind, "Miseducation" 13). Also, too little attention is placed on reading for pleasure. All of these things make children associate school and reading in a negative way, and therefore their desire for higher learning is killed.

(6) Creativity also suffers when academics are emphasized at too early an age. Many of the most brilliant achievers of history, such as Albert Einstein, did not get good grades in school and scored low on IQ tests. However, Einstein had such a high level of creativity that he conceived of the most brilliant theories in the history of modern civilization. For children to be able to cultivate their own creativity, they must be given the time and opportunity to explore themselves and the world around them. This was shown through a study of the academic-oriented preschools that Maria Montessori created. "A pure Montessori classroom is likely to have children working with academic materials, such as flash cards, as opposed to the trucks, dolls and similar toys found in traditional American preschools. The quiet atmosphere and concentration of the children is often a stark contrast to the rough-and-tumble play of other schools," said Sarah Glazer in her article "Too Much Too Soon" in Editorial Research Reports. This kind of atmosphere does not allow a child to find her own creative outlets. Children who went through the Montessori system scored significantly lower on creativity tests later on in grade school than children who went through less rigid programs (Glazer 56).

(7) Strict academic programs cannot only harm children psychologically, they can also cause severe physical problems. The number of stress related diseases in children has doubled in the past five years. David Elkind tells the story of a child who developed a severe facial tick at age eight because of the stress put upon her by her parents to succeed in a highly competitive private grade school. Another example he cites is of a child who developed insomnia at the age of seven because he felt he "didn't have time to sleep" because he had three after-school activities plus a rigid school
program. Problems like these are becoming more and more common as pressure to excel falls on children at an earlier and earlier age.

(8) Another serious effect children under early pressure have shown is the tendency to rebel against authority later on in their life. Researcher Dr. Lawrence J. Schweinhart of the High/Scope Educational Research Foundation states that "... the preschool program using direct instruction, when compared to groups receiving preschool programs that encouraged children to initiate their own abilities in a specially prepared environment, evidenced substantially higher rates of self-reported juvenile delinquency and associated problems ..." (Glazer 60).

(9) The defenders of strict preschool programs point to studies that show that rigid early schooling can compensate for cultural and educational deprivations in underprivileged children from poverty-stricken or broken homes (Lacaye 62). In one study 123 poor black youths were followed from ages three to nineteen. The half of the children who attended preschool received higher scores on IQ tests and tended to have less trouble with the law later on in life (Lacaye 62). However, the other half of the children did not attend preschool at all, academically strict or not. These children, it seemed would have benefited from the attention and teaching available to them in preschool because such attention was not available at home. Their parent (or parents) were out working, trying to support their family. It is likely that they would have benefited by being placed in a traditional pre-school but perhaps the benefits would have been even greater had they been placed in a loving home where a parent gave them attention and encouragement.

(10) All of this evidence seems to point to the fact that children from loving, caring homes with at least one parent home to allow them to explore the experiences around them do not need any kind of preschool experience at all. However, in modern times when more than half of all families in the U.S. have two parents working before their children reach preschool age, this is not a very realistic solution to the preschool problem. It has been proven that the traditional type of American preschool program involving creative outlets and freedom of individual choice to the children can be an acceptable alternative to the at home system. Children should not, however, be exposed to a strict academic preschool program that could deter later learning and be harmful to the psychological and physical health of the child.
Works Cited


