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'Negative' pre-K results are 'alarming'

JANUARY 28, 2022 BY JOANNE 5 COMMENTS

Now that kindergarten is "the new first grade," parents are encouraged to sign up their four-year-olds in pre-K. It's supposed to get even disadvantaged children off to a flying start.

Two years of tax-funded preschool and pre-K is an "investment in America's future," said President Biden.

But what if pre-K makes things worse?

Disadvantaged children who attended Tennessee's state-funded pre-K program [were doing significantly worse by the end of sixth grade](#) in achievement, behavior and special education referrals, concludes a multi-year [study](#), reports Hechinger's Jackie Mader.



Credit: Prawny/Pixabay

"At least for poor children, it turns out that something is not better than nothing," said Dale Farran, a professor in Vanderbilt University's Peabody College, director of its Peabody Research Institute and one of the authors of the [study](#). "The kinds of pre-K that our poor children are going into are not good for them long term."

The study compared low-income children chosen at random for pre-K slots with a control group whose parents applied for a spot but didn't get one. Some of the control group children attended Head Start or other forms of center-based child care, but most were in home-based care.

The first part of the study, released in 2015, found benefits faded by the end of kindergarten and were "slightly negative" by the end of third grade. Things got even worse academically and behaviorally by sixth grade. That's "alarming," said Farran.

School quality doesn't explain it, she said. The pre-K and control groups attended the same or similar schools. It's not parental motivation: All the parents had applied for pre-K.

It could be the pre-K quality wasn't high enough, or that the focus on academics backfired. Farran thinks programs focus too much on teacher-led instruction instead of giving children time to explore, interact and play.

She suggests other state pre-K programs study long-term results before pouring more money into adding another grade to schooling.

Research on the long-term effects of preschool and pre-K provides [mixed results](#): Studies of Quebec's [two-decade-old](#) public child care program found an increase in "emotional problems, physical aggression and decreased social skills for some children," probably due to uneven quality.

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About Joanne

Comments

Miriam Kurtzig Freedman, JD, MA says

January 28, 2022 at 7:07 am



I've followed this issue for years. Could it be that children are better off at home and that in-home support is more beneficial. Ever since that 30 million word gap study in the 1990's—I've believed that in-home support is how we should go. Support to have parents speak with, sing with, read with, be present with—their little children.

REPLY

Clemsondana says

January 28, 2022 at 7:19 am



A couple of thoughts...when I volunteered with the first group of K and 1 kids at a new 'rigorous charter for underprivileged kids', what I saw was that for kids who weren't ready for academics, either due to behavior or development, they quickly became convinced that they were stupid. One told me that it was easier for me to do 'white people math'. I had some success helping kids over that hump, but for others...once you've convinced yourself that you can't do white people math before you master arithmetic, how is that going to turn out well? Over the next few years the school mellowed on what they asked of K kids, which seemed to help.

I think that many kids can actually be taught academics earlier than we think, but it's a trade-off as to where their time and energy goes. Focusing is hard for a lot of young kids. The part-time church-based preschools that I and my kids went to only spent a little time on academics, and it was gentle. They counted how many kids preferred red vs green apples and made a pictograph. Lots of counting, working on more and less, but it was hands on and involved movement as kids cut out an apple and then stuck it in the right spot on the big chart, while learning to wait their turn. At home we divided cookies or snacks between 2, 3, and 4 people. There was circle time with the calendar and a read-aloud and looking at the thermometer to figure out the temperature. You can count seeds, plant, and then count how many sprout. These constant mini-doses of math and science and language add up and seem to be more effective than the seat-time that seems more common now.

Finally, the biggest issue that I saw when I volunteered there was behavioral – the kids lacked self-regulation. I tend to think that more gently corrected play in preschool or at home would have put them in a better position to learn in elementary than early academics. My relatives who attended and taught in the rural south in the 1950s-1970s, before there was K, said that the kids started first grade usually not knowing letters, colors, numbers, or how to spell their names, but by the end of first were reading. But, they tended to start with decent behavior, frequent recess and teachers who would sometimes send kids outside to run a lap around the playground if they got too fidgety, which I suspect made it much easier for them to cover the material more quickly.

REPLY

educationrealist says

January 28, 2022 at 12:05 pm

That's almost word for word what I recently speculated on Twitter. PreK in general doesn't have bad results. But if you take kids and convince them they are stupid and troublesome 2 years later, that can be a problem.



REPLY

George Larson says

January 28, 2022 at 11:02 am



I think that many kids can actually be taught academics earlier than we think"

I agree, but then we have this wider/diverse pool of children's abilities and our schools do not sound as if they are equipped to handle it. "Equity" may not even allow it.

REPLY

Malcolm Kirkpatrick says

January 29, 2022 at 7:50 pm



When schools fail, system insiders blame a lack of parent involvement. Why then do governments mandate that parents surrender their children to schools? Gandhi wrote that parents are the natural teachers of their own children. At what point in a child's life do the relative contributions of parents and schools tilt in favor of schools? Maybe government agents should take over on parents' wedding night.

REPLY

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