

Should I Prepare my Preschooler for Kindergarten?

This is a common question and concern. Tiger Moms (and Dads) will typically opt for the former, pushing and prodding their young charges to learn academics from as young as 1-2 years of age (or even in the womb!). I've always thought it was ironic that the Baby Einstein series is named after someone who didn't speak before the age of 4! Alternatively parents will embrace play, rejecting all or most academic pursuits until their preschoolers get to Kindergarten, when they are often as old as 6 years of age. We have found that a middle path, one that reflects the interests and joys of the children themselves, is better.

Young Children Love to Learn

It's important to realize that most young children actually enjoy learning. This is something to embrace and encourage. Later on, learning becomes much less "cool" for many students. Many young girls who love learning in Kindergarten and Grade 1 become completely diverted with socialization by Grade 5. Most preschoolers find learning to be a lot of fun. Some of our most enthusiastic learners are only 3-4 years of age, and often come skipping into the learning center looking forward to meeting their teacher and starting class.

Aim for Joy

The aim with younger children should always be about the joy of learning, the joy of discovering the alphabet, deciphering words, understanding numeracy, developing motor skills, and the like. Learning should be fun.

Start with Reading & Writing

This is not to say that every young child will enjoy learning everything all the time. Usually we find that young children will often enjoy learning Reading and Writing more than they enjoy Math for instance. After developing some Reading and Writing skills though, many young students enjoy adding Math.

Keep it Short but Consistent - 15-30 Minutes a Day

We also want to take it easy, as there is no rush for preschoolers. Most enjoy 15-30 minutes of concentrated study, and that is about it. There is plenty of time, many hours in fact, left in the day for play. It's amazing how much can be learned if one studies for only 15-30 minutes every day. The trick here is to create a good schedule and stick to it. Many of our young students know the basics when they start Kindergarten.

When to Start?

When is it most useful to start working with your child academically? We find that some children are ready as of three years of age, and others need to wait until they are four. As long as we can get a child to focus for 10-15 minutes, we can get somewhere. Their stamina builds with practice. Students will often start out with only 10-15 minutes of concentration, but quickly build to 30 and then 45 minutes. Every child is different.

Where to Start in Reading?

What to teach? Start out with the alphabet and the sounds of each letter, as opposed to their names. For instance the name of the letter B is "Bee" but its sound is "buh." Focus on the "buh." Many children will know the alphabet song but not the individual letters out of sequence. As they start to master the alphabet, one should play with taking letters out of sequence, etc.

Teach Cursive to Preschoolers?

For writing, it is actually reasonably easy to teach cursive to preschoolers. Most people think cursive is more difficult than printing, but less motor skills are required for cursive than for printing. Cursive also reduces confusion between b/d and p/q (hard to distinguish in printing, but easier in cursive). It also encourages better spelling as words are memorized through motor memory. Whether encouraging cursive or printing, work on pencil grip and motor skills. Practice really does make perfect. Make it fun and find activities to do with pencils such as mazes and connect the dots.

Where to Start in Math?

In Math, one should start out with basic numeracy. Master the numbers to 10 and then take them out of order. Do the same until 20. Keep encouraging your child all the way to 100. As your child gets up to 20 and beyond, introduce basic addition and subtraction. Introduce addition using the idea of "one more", or the next number in sequence. Start off by asking, what number comes after 10? Then create a link back to the idea that $10 + 1$ is 11. Discourage using fingers to add and subtract. If that is not avoidable, remember to try and pull back from finger counting as they progress. Encourage them to trust their memory instead.

Remember to Make it Fun!

Above all, make sure you are having fun! You might be pleasantly surprised by how much your preschooler enjoys learning.

Better to Start Early

There are many benefits to teaching your preschooler the basics before they start Kindergarten. For my eldest son, we encouraged him to read, write, and do math from the age of 3. He quickly learned to enjoy reading and has always excelled there. Despite having some behavioral issues likely related to hyperactivity, he has never been behind academically. In fact he's always been ahead. Had we not pushed him before Kindergarten though, he would most likely have struggled to do well in school as he got so little attention from his Kindergarten teacher. She was rather tired and preferred to send all the "difficult" boys to the Principal's office every day for most of the day (not the best introduction to school!). Had we depended on his Kindergarten teacher to teach him the basics, he would have been in huge trouble academically by Grade 1. Instead he is still having behavioral issues in Grade 3, but is also still performing above grade level in reading and writing (and is a little above grade level in math). The irony is that now he is in school, we have much less time (and he has much less energy) to pursue academics. So we are grateful we took advantage of his preschool years.

Our younger daughter in contrast has had no behavioral issues at school (at home is a different story!). Nonetheless she loves reading, writing, and doing math. We've been able to encourage her in these pursuits. In contrast to my son, she had an excellent

Kindergarten teacher, one who saw she was ahead and tailored her lesson plans accordingly. This has ensured that she is at the top of her class despite being one of the youngest. She continues to love learning.

Listen to Your Child and You Can't Go Wrong

Many parents have told me over the years that they are reluctant to push academics on their young children, in the fear that they will stress their children out, or that it is a waste of time with possibly negative consequences. Done the wrong way, it certainly could be harmful. One should never berate or belittle a young child's ability to learn. On the other hand, we know that almost every child loves to learn, until they learn that it isn't "cool" anymore, or they get frustrated from being behind. Preschoolers should embrace play, and learning should be play for them too.

