

Preschool matters: Here's why



Preschoolers at the Mitzi Freidheim Englewood Child and Family Center listen while their teacher reads a story. Activities like these help children boost their literacy skills. [Photo by Cristina Rutter]

It may look like children in preschool are just playing, but important learning is going on—learning that is essential for success when formal schooling starts. That is especially true for children who come from low-income families. Studies repeatedly have driven home that point:

- One study in the mid 1990s found that, on average, a child from a low-income family heard 615 words per hour while children of college-educated parents heard 2,150. The children whose parents talked to them more developed bigger vocabularies and were more able to think conceptually—a skill that makes it easier to learn to read. Preschool can help close this literacy gap.

- A study of Illinois' Preschool for All Program found that by kindergarten, children who participated in the program, especially children from low-income homes and were considered at risk for school failure, showed significant improvements in language skills, had fewer behavior problems and were better able to stay focused.

- A 25-year-long study of 1,400 3- and 4-year-old students in Chicago Child-Parent Education Centers found that these

students consistently had better educational, occupational and social outcomes than students who already were in kindergarten, without benefit of preschool. This was especially true for males and children of high school dropouts. And the effects were long lasting. By age 28, these one-time preschool students had higher educational levels and incomes and lower rates of substance abuse and legal problems than the kindergarten students.

- A study called the Carolina Abecedarian Project monitored preschool children's progress over time with follow-up studies conducted at ages 12, 15 and 21. Children who participated in the program had higher cognitive test scores from the toddler years to age 21.

- The HighScope Perry Preschool Study is one of the longest-running and best-

Program options

- **Preschool for All / State Pre-K**
Open to all 3- and 4-year-olds
- **Head Start**
For families who earn at or below the federal poverty income level
- **Child-Parent Centers**
For families who live in specific low-income neighborhoods

Resources

- **Illinois Action for Children**
Head Start, Preschool for All
312-823-1100, option 3
referrals@actforchildren.org
- **Ounce of Prevention Fund**
Head Start
312-922-3863
<http://www.ounceofprevention.org>
- **Chicago Public Schools Early Childhood Education Office**
Preschool for All, Child-parent centers, Head Start, Tuition-based preschool
773-553-2010
<http://www.ecechicago.org>
- **CPS and the Chicago Department of Family & Support Services**
Early Childhood Program Locator
<http://schoollocator.cps.k12.il.us/ECE/index.htm>

known studies on preschool education. It followed at-risk, high-poverty African-American students and found that at age 40, these students had higher earnings, were more likely to hold a job, had committed fewer crimes and were more likely to have graduated from high school than adults who did not have preschool.

—Debra Williams

Choosing a quality preschool program

What should parents look for when choosing a preschool? Here are a few suggestions offered by Gillian McNamee, the director of teacher education at the Erikson Institute, which is well known for its work in child development and early childhood education programs:

1. Look for spaces that are clean, inviting and reflect a sense of order. How is food handled in the setting as well as toileting routines? Does your child have a place to keep his or her coat and personal belongings? Think about all the small details that your child will experience.



2. Do not be swayed by the material resources of the setting. The number of computers does not make the difference in a strong or weak program. Is there opportunity for pretend play and ongoing conversations among children and with teachers?



3. Ask to see the daily schedule. Is there a rhythm and balance between structured teacher-led group times and ample times when children can choose activities? Throughout the day, you want to see plenty of opportunities for literacy-based activities like children singing songs, reciting nursery rhymes, listening to teachers reading aloud, dictating stories and having their stories, as well as good books, acted out.



4. You will want to see a range of building materials (blocks of all sizes and shapes) along with other math games. Children should have plenty of access to writing materials with which to experiment. Look for opportunities for art activities with materials that are easily accessible for children.

All photos taken at the Mitzi Freidheim Englewood Child and Family Center. [Photos by Cristina Rutter]

Letter from the editor

Once when my youngest grandson was three, I asked him to pick up his toys and return them to a special box. Cars, trucks and stuffed animals were everywhere. To make the activity less like work and more like fun, I also asked him to count each toy as he dropped it in. (This was also my way of slipping in a math lesson.)



no more than child care. For a previous issue of *Catalyst In the Know*, I asked one early childhood educator to share one of her pet peeves as a teacher. She said it bothered her that some parents think real learning begins in kindergarten, so they don't take preschool seriously.

But preschool should be taken seriously. As the research shows, children who attend a quality early childhood education program will reap positive, long-lasting benefits. Explore the choices that are available and give your child the advantage of an early start.

Best Regards,

Debra Williams
Catalyst Community Editor

He started with the cars, dropping them in one by one, and began to count, "Uno, dos, tres, cuatro..." My mouth dropped open. I asked him to count, but I never said in what language. Little did I know that my son had been slipping in some lessons of his own at home—in Spanish.

All children are like that, especially under the age of 5. They are like sponges; they have the capacity to absorb an infinite amount of information. But there is a catch—they have to be exposed to it.

That's why preschool is so important, especially for young children whose home environments don't expose them to meaningful literacy experiences, do not encourage them to question the world around them, and are not filled with books and language.

Some parents believe that preschool is

P.S. We still have copies of past issues of *Catalyst in the Know* on topics like special education, improving parent-teacher relationships and parent-friendly schools. If you'd like information on these topics, give me a call or send me an email. You can reach me at (312) 763-3873 or williams@catalyst-chicago.org.

Pre-K program quality

Not any old preschool will do. The research showing the benefits of preschool looked at high-quality programs. Now, the state and city are developing rating systems to promote quality.

The State of Illinois currently operates a voluntary rating system for child care programs. Under pressure from the federal government, it is adding measures of student learning and extending them to preschool programs. Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel already has announced that, beginning next July, city-funded child care programs and CPS preschools will be rated under a new system that will align with the state rating program.

Signs of trouble

- Unengaged teachers sitting on the side of the classroom, not participating.
- Shouting, swearing or other displays of hostile discipline.
- Children crying without being attended to.
- A center that smells like urine, has visible safety risks or is unclean.
- Frequent use of television or videos to occupy children.
- Children wandering aimlessly and left unsupervised or displaying unchecked aggression.

Source: The Ounce of Prevention Fund

More tips

- Observe classrooms for an hour. What are the teachers and children doing? Are they engaged in a variety of meaningful activities, and are rich conversations unfolding in all parts of the classroom?
- Watch the interactions of children among themselves and with teachers. Is respect shown to everyone in the room? Do teachers ask questions to further children's interests? Do teachers show interest in what children do and encourage them to think and explore further?
- Ask about the role of parents in the program. When can they visit? What expectations are there for parent involvement?
- What happens when there is a fight, a disagreement or a time when a child is upset? How do teachers respond? What forms of guidance and encouragement do teachers use?
- Ask about teacher turnover. How stable is the program? Who are the teachers, and what are the criteria for being hired?
- Visit more than one program to help you be sure of your choice.
- Most important, look for a place where you know your child will have a good day and have his or her essential needs met. And ask yourself: Will my child be happy in this setting?

Source: Gillian McNamee, director of teacher education, Erikson Institute

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