

Rigorous Academics in Preschool Can Exist



Numerous principals have had conversations with anxious teachers who worry about that young children are “not ready to learn.” As a principal, you may share the same feelings in the face of growing pressure for academic skills. How can we possibly have rigorous academics in preschool? The answer to this question has three parts. The first is to understand how the preschool brain works. The second is to examine what academics look like in early childhood education. The third is to think about how to adapt teaching to the needs of preschool children so it is indeed rigorous.

The Preschool Brain

Consider this situation: At group time, 16 preschoolers are sitting on the rug. Teacher Annie is planning to read *The Little Red Hen* book. She prepares the children to concentrate by asking them to “have your eyes on me” and “sit crisscross applesauce.” Soon after the reading starts, some children still follow the behavioral instructions. Others begin to wiggle, eyes wandering, little hands moving. A couple of children even turn their backs to the teacher. Annie interrupts her reading, again asking the children to pay attention. Irritated after two more attempts, she closes the book and asks the children to get up, and jump up and down. She tells them, “You are not ready for reading today; you are too antsy.”

What Annie might not realize is that preschoolers learn best when their

whole brain and body are engaged. According to research, for similar cognitive tasks such as comprehending a story, learning a new word, or making a simple addition, the brain of a younger child is more active overall than the brain of an older child or adult. Most of the brain’s areas activate at the same time: motor, emotion, visual, language, memory, and behavior.

Young children are learning even when they wiggle, as are the students in the vignette. Expecting children to be still is not necessary. It is even counterproductive because children are being asked to do something that goes against nature.

Academics in Early Childhood Education

The field of early childhood has well established early learning standards.

They are the guide to rigor in early academics, and a pathway to the Common Core State Standards. In addition to paying attention to the physical and social-emotional development of children, early learning standards focus on cognitive, language, and literacy development, and approaches to learning. It is clear that children must have strong early literacy skills such as phonological awareness, concepts of print, vocabulary, alphabet knowledge, and oral language. These skills are predictors of later reading ability and must be taught intentionally.

The same goes for early math skills. The seeds of algebra and geometry are planted in preschool, with matching and sorting games. Approaches to learning—such as curiosity, imagination, problem solving, persistence, and reflection—are also prerequisites for later academic achievement. They are not innate traits, but skills that should be taught.

Rigor in Preschool Teaching

With the previous information in mind, let’s look at how teacher Annie would redo the reading with more rigor.

This time, Annie still prepares the children to concentrate by asking them to “have your eyes on me” and “sit crisscross applesauce.” Before beginning the reading, she tells the children that today they will learn three new words from this book. She shows them the three words on cards, and gives a definition. She asks the children to repeat the words in unison, engaging all of them (rigor example 1: teaching vocabulary). Soon after the reading starts, some children still follow the behavioral instructions. Others begin to wiggle, eyes wandering, little hands moving. A couple of children even turn their backs. Annie notices these behaviors. She becomes more animated as she reads with more expression, catching the children’s attention. She asks what might happen next (rigor example 2: teaching curiosity). She has the children repeat the vocabulary

words they are studying, and raise their hands when they hear them in sentences (rigor example 3: teaching oral language). She points to rhyming words in the story, and has children clap (rigor example 4: teaching phonological awareness). At the end of the story, Annie helps the children count the little red hen's friends with their fingers (rigor example 5: teaching math).

The National Association for the Education of Young Children has advanced the concept of developmentally appropriate practice (DAP). It means that the teaching adapts to the development and learning needs of the children. DAP teaching methods challenge children and scaffold their learning, in ways that are neither too easy nor too hard. The early learning standards still have to be met. Children do not just do what they want in a free-play environment. Teachers provide a rigorous balance of direction and independent exploration.

See It Happening

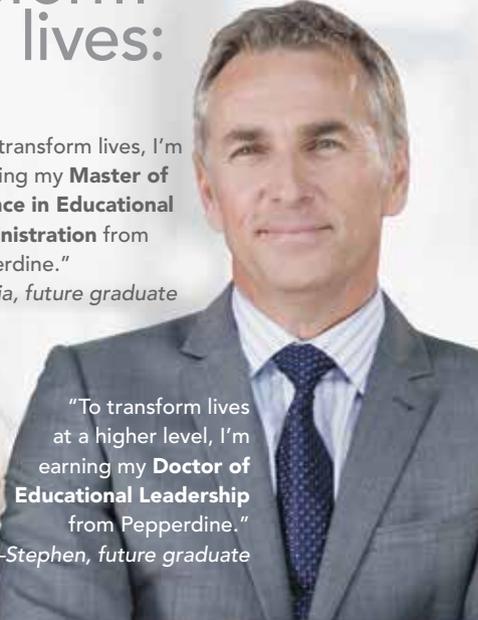
As a principal walking through your school, you will know rigorous academics are happening in your early childhood classrooms when the environment is organized in learning centers. There is an interesting dramatic play area, a sensory table, and a block corner. The reading shelf has a variety of fiction and nonfiction books. Items in each center change periodically, based on the current theme or area of study. Most importantly, you will observe children moving, talking, writing, reading, and singing spontaneously and under the direction of the teacher. You will know that all these activities are educational when children's assessments confirm that the children are learning. Then you and the teachers can take pride in the progress in early literacy and math skills that prepare the children for kindergarten. 📌

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