

HOW WE PUT CHILDREN AT RISK BY STARTING ACADEMICS TOO EARLY



WHY SOONER ISN'T BETTER

HEY, QUIT PUSHING



By Larry Garf

Like all parents, you want your children to thrive and succeed in school. I recognize that today's families are under extreme pressure — from schools, from the media, and even from well-meaning friends and relatives — to push their children into academic work earlier and earlier.

By forcing academics with young children, not only are we failing to raise academic levels, we may be mislabeling or even damaging many of our bright, well-adjusted children.

PRESSURE AND PARENTING

The latest trends in education tell us that children who are taught to read earlier will become better readers and more successful students. This may sound logical on the surface, but in reality, it's an enormous assumption, and one with no foundation.

Renowned professor and developmental psychologist Dr. David Elkind, author of such bestsellers as *The Hurried Child*, reminds us that **"there is no correlation between pushing children into early reading and later academic success."** Obviously, young children who are formally taught to read early on will, at first, read more than their peers who have not been taught. Nevertheless, within a couple of years the difference disappears completely.

What's even more disconcerting is that children who had attended academic, rather than developmental preschools, tend to exhibit higher levels of anxiety and self-esteem issues, along with reading scores that, in the long term, are no better. Therefore, when you feel guilt and pressure because your neighbor is telling you how well his four-year-old is reading, or if your two-year-old niece is reciting her alphabet (at Thanksgiving dinner, no less!) you can feel confident that your child is in no danger whatsoever of being "left behind" academically as long as you've provided a stimulating, invigorating environment. Pressure and anxiety are not necessary components of a solid education for your youngster and, in fact, can have long-term negative effects.

FASHIONS AND FADS IN EDUCATION

The current trend of pushing academics so early is just that, a *trend*. Much in the way that clothing styles change every few years, there are fashions in education as well. Without doubt, this situation will eventually shift. But given the current climate, it is in your child's best interest to protect him or her from today's capricious educational fads and fashions.

What's going on in our classrooms is being presented to us as though (a) it's based upon firm research, and (b) it's always been done this way. Neither of these statements is accurate. In fact, what's happening is a vast and risky *experiment*, one that is already showing signs of failure. I would strongly advise you not to allow your child to become a victim of this trend.

ACADEMIC ANXIETY

If your preschooler or kindergartener is being pressured to do work that seems beyond his or her developmental level, talk to the teacher or, if necessary, the director.

GOOD INTENTIONS WITH NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCES

I have often heard parents report that they gave their child a big boost by talking the principal into starting him in kindergarten, even though he was born later than the cut-off date. I've met a number of parents who recounted, with great pride, that they lied about their child's birthday on the school application in order to get her into kindergarten a year sooner.

The logic of such moves is easy to understand. After all, if one were interested in accumulating a financial “nest egg” for the future, it would be wise to get an early start by beginning to save as soon as possible. I am certain that many well-meaning parents sincerely believe that they are endowing their child with a wonderful gift, an early “mental savings account.”



I appreciate that they are only doing what they think is best for their child, but consider the potentially toxic mechanism that they have now put into motion: from kindergarten on, their child will be working with – and, for better or worse, competing with – many children who are much older, sometimes *an entire year older*. From a developmental point of view, this can be highly significant.

When it comes to adults, a year is not the least bit significant in a developmental sense. In other words, when I was 40, I wasn't at all different from my lifelong buddy Greg, who's a year older than I am, in terms of my abilities, skills or perceptions. There was nothing he could do at 41 that I couldn't do as well at 40. But when we were four and five, that one-year gap would have been momentous. And, given that today's kindergarten curriculum is what used to be the first grade curriculum, even many of the “older” kindergarteners are often struggling with the tasks at hand.

Therefore, by pushing their child, by seeing to it that she is one of the youngest in the class, these well meaning parents haven't given their child a boost at all – they have actually engineered the *exact opposite*, putting their little one at far higher risk for struggles and even failure.

THE WISDOM OF WAITING

In an era when we are pushing and pressuring younger and younger children to perform academic tasks in the hope that we're building better scholars, I am reminded of a story about my own children's preschool experience. The Director of the Topanga Cooperative Preschool, when my twins were incoming three-year-olds, illuminated the issue quite succinctly when, during parent orientation, she was asked whether she teaches academics to the new children. Without a moment's hesitation, she replied:

**Well, as I see it, I have 2 choices.
I could spend six months teaching them the alphabet now,
or I could wait a year and teach it to them in six hours.**

Nevertheless, all too many schools are pushing and pressuring our young children. The key point is this: if we simply waited until they were developmentally ready, they would master the *same material* with joy and enthusiasm instead of stress and anxiety.

HIGH STANDARDS AND HAPPY CHILDREN

When considering a preschool or kindergarten for your child, remember that a developmental approach *is not about lowering our standards*. Quite the opposite: it's about ensuring that your children *achieve* those high standards. What does not work, however, is simply pushing down the curriculum to ever-younger ages.

It's wise to think of children as seedlings. As parents and teachers, our job is to see to it that the young plant has enough water, fertilizer, sunlight, etc. It's also our task to remove stones that may be in the way, blocking the seedling's ability to thrive or reach its fullest potential. These factors are the enriched environment, stimulation, and preparation to which I refer above. What they *do not* include, however, is trying to yank at the seedling, pulling it with ever more pressure, in hopes that it will grow faster. It doesn't work that way with plants. Or children.

A solid developmental program, combined with a supportive and stimulating environment at home, results in the happiest children and the highest test scores.

Larry Garf

Larry Garf has had an unusually broad range of teaching experiences, beginning in 1973. He has taught in the Human Development Department at Pacific Oaks College in Pasadena since 1998. His teaching background also includes first and second grade, as well as special education (K-12). He continues to work with children by teaching art to youngsters, K-6. He is also the Child Development Specialist at Temple Israel of Hollywood Day School and Nursery School, in Los Angeles.

His wife is the painter Melanie Rothschild. They are the parents of young-adult twins who attended a parent cooperative preschool, where Mr. Garf spent hundreds of happy and illuminating hours observing child development unfolding in a natural and unhurried way.

His writing and teaching primarily revolve around the fact that too many of today's young children no longer have the opportunities his own children did: to develop and mature at their own pace, without being rushed or pressured at an early age. HEY, QUIT PUSHING: How We Put Children at Risk by Starting Academics Too Early, centers in on the negative consequences we create when we pressure our young children: elevated levels of anxiety and stress, but not higher academic achievement.