

Preschool Learning: More than ABCs and 123s

by Johanna Sorrentino

When it comes to preschool education, there are two lines of thought. One says that preschoolers need to be taught early academic skills in order to get a leg up on future school achievement. Another says the focus should be on social and emotional development. But, new research from Penn State University says it doesn't have to be exclusively one way or the other, and in fact, a high quality preschool program does both.

Penn State researchers found that students taught with a curriculum that included social lessons, such as sharing, listening, and self-control, scored higher in both the social and academic areas of school readiness.

Karen Bierman, Penn State Professor of Psychology, and her team studied 350 Head Start preschoolers. Half were taught the traditional Head Start curriculum. The other half were given the basic Head Start curriculum fortified with social and emotional teachings—called REDI.

The results, published in the November edition of *Child Development*, show that 70 percent of kids who went through the REDI program showed little disruptive behavior, versus 56 percent of kids in the regular Head Start classroom. Twelve percent of REDI students struggled to focus on academic tasks, compared to 21 percent of regular students. And 20 percent in the REDI class exceeded the national vocabulary standards, while only 15 percent exceeded it with the traditional curriculum.

Bierman says one of the most exciting findings of the study is that when you work both academic and social-emotional skills, you get stronger gains in both areas. “You get synergy when you put both together, so neither area is weakened,” she says.

Clearly, knowing how to share, develop healthy friendships, and learn side-by-side with others is essential to a child's academic achievement in the classroom. But, Bierman says the importance of social and emotional education goes beyond that.

Preschool is primetime for the development of self-regulation, which is what tells a child not to hit another child, but which also tells a child how to set personal goals and focus himself enough to follow through with those goals. “Learning how to sit, listen and learn in a social group is central to the development of self-regulation,” she says.

And the ability to regulate behavior is what helps children get motivated at school. “When they get upset, board, or frustrated it doesn't overwhelm them. They're able to control and organize themselves,” she says. “Plus, the capacity to organize emotion is the same part of the brain that regulates the development of language skills that allow them to identify differences in feeling. Knowing those differences helps them to organize meaning.”

Goal-oriented and motivated learning is best taught in preschool, Bierman says, when the prefrontal part of the brain, which controls decision-making, is at the height of development. “First grade

teachers can teach letter names, but preschool is when that impulsive-aggressive behavior is peaking and language is just beginning to develop,” she says.

So, how did the REDI curriculum manage to pull off double duty? Bierman and her team looked for ways to integrate social and emotional development into the more traditional academic teachings for a more wholistic approach. “We put time into figuring out where the two interlapped,” Bierman says.

Answer: books. They developed an interactive reading program featuring books with social-emotional themes. As the children built up their vocabulary and understanding of a story, they simultaneously learned how to listen and converse about feelings and sharing. “It’s emotional understanding packaged for young children through these stories,” Bierman explains.

The characters in these stories modeled skills such as problem-solving and self-control. One such character is a puppet named Twiggle the Turtle. When Twiggle got upset he went inside his shell, took a deep breath, and then said what bothered him and how it made him feel. In the program, children were encouraged to use Twiggle’s trick for gaining self-control, by crossing their arms (to avoid impulsive hitting), taking a breath, and then using words to describe how they feel.

Another way Bierman incorporated the social and emotional curriculum into the students’ day was by training teachers to use high-level language, especially during non-academic times, such as lunch. “When parents and teachers are busy, they often talk at children,” says Bierman. “But there are times when much more discussion can take place. Can have a meal and not only get the meal done, but use it as an opportunity to talk about feelings and events?” The study found that these types of discussions not only work oral comprehension skills, but improve a child’s ability to focus.

Bierman admits that an enriched program such as REDI requires much forethought and organization, but the point is that it can be done, and the numbers are compelling enough to suggest that it should be done.

Standing in the way of nation-wide implementation is, of course, the cost of materials and teacher-training. But, if President-elect Barack Obama makes good on his promises to fund early childhood education, research like this could become realities for preschoolers across the country.

In the meantime, Bierman says parents can create a home environment rich with opportunities to develop social and emotional skills. Here’s what she suggests:

- During down times, discuss feelings and events with your child, such as what happened over the course of his day and how he felt about what happened. Also, be sure to talk about future events.
- Brainstorm problem-solving strategies with your child. If it’s not Twiggle the Turtle, come up with another way to model self-regulation and discussion of a problem. When issues arise, follow through with your strategy, rather than just managing the behavior through reward and punishment.
- And, of course, practice the age-old advice: read, read, read to your child, and have her read to you. Interactive reading is crucial to language development.