

# Traditional Preschool



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## **What is traditional preschool?**

The US Department of Preschool has defined preschool as ‘center-based programs for 4-year olds that are fully or partially funded by state education agencies and that are operated in schools or under the direction of state and local education agencies’ (Clifford et al., 2017). An expanded view of this definition would include those private institutions that provide an early childhood experience and education that closely matches that provided publicly. The feature that distinguishes preschool from childcare is the inclusion of academic curriculum. In common parlance, preschool and childcare are often conflated. In practice, many childcare centers provide some degree of educational curriculum or informal practice of skills related to letters, numbers, colors, and shapes.

The first public preschool program, Head Start, was established in 1965 as an eight-week summer program to prepare children from low-income families for kindergarten (“History of Head Start,” 2018). At the time, only eighteen states in the US funded public kindergarten, and only 10% percent of three- and four-year-olds were enrolled in preschool (Kamerman & Gatenio-Gabel, 2007).

By the 1980s, state-funded preschool programs began to come into creation due to high public demand, women entering the workforce, and the continued demonstration of positive outcomes for children. By 2000, kindergarten became available in all states, with 98% of children attending (Kamerman & Gatenio-Gabel, 2007). Similarly, preschool attendance continued to grow and by 2015, nearly 70% of four-year-olds participated in public preschool (NCES, 2017).

While preschool has traditionally been available to four-year-olds in a half-day setting, enrollment has begun to include younger children and longer days. Nationally in 2015, approximately 40% of three-year-olds were enrolled in preschool programs. Additionally, among three- to five-year-olds who were enrolled in preschool programs in 2015, some 51% attended full-day programs (NCES, 2017).

In Olmsted County, 43% of three- and four-year olds are enrolled in nursery school and preschool. Of those, 55% attend a public option and 45% attend a private option (US Census Bureau, 2016).

## **How is preschool related to other outcomes in social and human services?**

The initial impetus for public preschool was to prepare low-income children for kindergarten by providing an educational setting for them to develop foundational academic skills that their peers were learning in the home environment. Since the 1960s, multiple studies have demonstrated high rates of return on investment and improved outcomes for students.

The Abcedarian Project was a randomized control trial in which half the low-income children in a sample were provided high-quality educational childcare and the control group were not. The children remained in the program from birth to age five, and follow-up assessments were completed at ages 6, 8, 12, 15, 21, and 30. Children who received educational childcare reported numerous improved outcomes when compared to the children who did not receive the intervention. As children they had higher reading, math, and IQ scores; completed more schooling; were less likely to be teen parents; and were less likely to participate in criminal activity. As adults they held more skilled jobs, were less likely to be unemployed, less likely to use public assistance, and tended to delay parenting (Campbell, 2011).

Similar results were reported by the Nurse Family Partnership Study on home visiting (Stone & Page, 2009) and the Perry Preschool Study (Schweinhart et al., 2005), with estimated returns on investment across the programs between \$4 and \$9 for every dollar invested in interventions. Related studies have demonstrated that returns are highest when investments are made early in childhood (Heckman & Schultz, 2007), and the impact of quality care and education is largest with at-risk and low-income children (Cohen & Lurie-Hurvitz, 2009; Schweinhart et al., 2005).

### **What constitutes quality?**

Preschools originally involved a great deal of play but are now starting to focus more on educational milestones and direct instruction. Many parents now want longer school days and more education for their children. This may be in part due to increased public awareness of the value of early childhood education, but another factor at play is likely the increased academic rigor of kindergarten. Between 1998 and 2010 the percentage of teachers expecting children to know how to read by the end of kindergarten had risen from 30% to 80%. The increased focus on literacy, math, and instruction has substantially eaten into art, music, and child-selected activities in kindergarten (Bassock, Latham, & Anna Rorem, 2016). In order to prepare children for this learning environment, many preschool providers are increasingly focused on literacy and numeracy. In fact, kindergarten-ready assessments often focus on academic skills but omit social-emotional developmental milestones such as turn-taking, rule-following, and cooperation.

Multiple studies have shown that social emotional skills are significantly associated with children's academic success and have been demonstrated to be at least as significant as IQ (Graziano, Reavis, Keane, & Calkins, 2007). In fact, re-analysis of the Perry Preschool and Abcedarian Program suggests that the social emotional skills gained through preschool attendance may in fact account for the long-term benefits related to academics, employment, and criminal behavior – possibly more so than the academic skills (Heckman & Kautz, 2013).

Despite the fact that current research has not been able to clearly determine which portion of academic success is attributable to academic skills acquisition and which

portion is attributable to social emotional skills, there has been extensive research on the ways in which children learn both cognitive and social skills. Research shows that children learn largely through play (Mead, 2018) and small group interactions (Wasik, 2008). Children at this age also struggle with frequent transitions (Martinelli, 2018) and need repetition in order to learn new skills (Horst, 2013).

Social-emotional and academic skills are tightly correlated to income levels. Children growing up in poverty are at particularly high risk for delayed language skills, possibly due to reduced resources (such as books) and language stimulation (such as babbling and narration) in the home (Ryan, Fauth, & Brooks-Gunn, 2006). They are similarly likely to struggle with self-control and social skills, which may be attributed to parenting practices and home environment (Lengua, Horonado, & Bush, 2007). Given that much of the learning that occurs in preschool is due to peer effects, low-income children may see the most gains in school readiness when they attend a classroom filled with peers from various socioeconomic backgrounds rather than a classroom that is uniformly low-income (Schechter & Bye, 2007), although this finding is not as strong as many others in early education.

When polled, 55% parents of public k-12 school students said having a mix of students from different racial and ethnic backgrounds is extremely or very important. However, in a 2001-03 sample of nearly 3,000 children in eleven state pre-K programs it was found that only 23% of preschoolers attended a classroom that could be considered diverse – between 30-70% nonwhite. Most students attended a classroom that was either mostly-white (30%) or mostly-nonwhite (49%). In classrooms where the students were mostly nonwhite, over 75% of the students were low-income. Only 17% of students attended a preschool classroom that was *both* ethnically diverse and medium or high-income (Reid, 2015).

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