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## Effects of various prekindergarten learning environments on a child's social development and self-concept

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## Effects of various prekindergarten learning environments on a child's social development and self-concept

### Abstract

An important topic in education today is the issue of preschools for four-year-olds. In particular, there is much talk about what type of curriculum is in the best interest of the prekindergarten youngster. Much is said about "developmentally-appropriate programs for preschoolers", and the search is on for the most appropriate preschool model which will bring about the most desirable and long-term results in our nation's children. This search has been intensified in recent years as state legislatures have begun considering the question of whether or not to issue mandates that would require public schools in their states to offer preschool to any and all four-year-olds. Iowa legislators issued the decree that the public schools of Iowa were to begin educating four-year-olds, only to retract it later.

EFFECTS OF VARIOUS PREKINDERGARTEN LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS  
ON A CHILD'S SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT AND SELF-CONCEPT

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A Research Paper  
Presented to  
The Department of Educational Administration  
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In Partial Fulfillment  
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Master of Arts in Education

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by  
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An important topic in education today is the issue of preschools for four-year-olds. In particular, there is much talk about what type of curriculum is in the best interest of the prekindergarten youngster. Much is said about "developmentally-appropriate programs for preschoolers", and the search is on for the most appropriate preschool model which will bring about the most desirable and long-term results in our nation's children.

This search has been intensified in recent years as state legislatures have begun considering the question of whether or not to issue mandates that would require public schools in their states to offer preschool to any and all four-year-olds. Iowa legislators issued the decree that the public schools of Iowa were to begin educating four-year-olds, only to retract it later.

While the political issue of opening public preschools is being decided in state capitals across the country, educators, researchers, parents, and many other individuals are becoming involved in the debate about what is most appropriate for four-year-olds. This debate has been going on for some time now, and as long as it continues, there will be those who strongly favor having

four-year-olds in public school and those who staunchly oppose it.

Those who support the idea of prekindergarten for the masses cite numerous reasons. For example, the younger the child, the more impressionable, or "nurturable", he is. Therefore, some would reason, a year in preschool presents an opportunity to greatly enhance the likelihood of a child's success in school. Furthermore, some would contend that the home does not provide the stimulation for intellectual, social, emotional, and/or physical development which the preschool offers, especially for disadvantaged and handicapped children.

The dissenters forcefully raise concerns which sound equally legitimate. There is strong sentiment among many that the child belongs in the home, surrounded by all of the security, love, closeness, and quality communication and guidance which only the stable home and family can provide. Another argument often raised is that there is too much emphasis on cognitive development in the preschool, without concern for the developmental level of the child. Instead of taking the child out of the home, thereby removing much of the parents' responsibility, efforts should be made to assist parents in learning how

to most effectively develop the cognitive and affective skills and behaviors of their own children.

Many questions are being asked regarding prekindergarten. How does preschool affect four-year-olds? Furthermore, how do these effects compare to the effects of staying at home during the prekindergarten year, and how does preschool affect children from different home environments? Since most preschools have always had as a chief goal the enhancement of the social and emotional development of the young child, how are the self-concept, social behavior and individuality of the child affected? Also, of what importance is parental involvement since the nursery school has often been seen as an extension of and supplement to the home (Nurss & Hodges, 1982).

This is a sample of the kind of questions being raised by individuals involved in early childhood education. This paper will focus primarily on the non-cognitive effects of prekindergarten. However, a brief summary of findings concerning cognitive effects will provide some comparative background.

In the publication Summary of Research on Prekindergarten Programs (Educational Research Service, 1976) the major conclusions of over 40 pre-1976 research studies were compiled. Most of them pertained primarily

to IQ and achievement. They could be summarized as follows:

- 1) Prekindergarten programs have had significant and measurable short-term effects on IQ and achievement.
- 2) Prekindergarten experience has improved the cognitive test scores of disadvantaged children, and in some cases has brought these groups near or up to middle-class norms.
- 3) In only a few cases have IQ gains lasted through third grade.
- 4) Home-based programs, which stress parental involvement, have had more significant positive effects than classroom-based programs.

In a more recent article (Featherstone, 1986) about the effects of preschooling, similar conclusions were drawn from existing research. It stated:

Beginning in the 1960's most studies evaluated the success of early education programs designed to interrupt the cycle of poverty and failure in school.... Results of these studies...were fairly consistent: preschooling boosted [IQ] test scores, but only temporarily; [and] unless schools built on and protected these gains with special planning for kindergarteners and first graders, graduates tested



about the same as their controls...within a few years.

The article went on to make the point that when children who had attended preschool fared better on IQ tests in the early school years, this in turn helped to protect them from being labeled "failures" and thereby helped them for at least the first few years of school.

Research results regarding preschooling effects on cognitive abilities shows some consistency, but what does it reveal in the affective domain? At the time the 1976 article (Educational Research Service) was written, there had been little focus on the effects of preschooling on social development, self-concept, and motivation in four-year-olds. At that time few valid and reliable instruments were available for evaluating these constructs. From the little data that was available, it seemed that prekindergarten might have either some or no positive effects, but no studies had revealed any consistent negative effects on social-emotional development.

Relying primarily upon post-1976 research, this paper addressed the question, "How do various prekindergarten learning environments such as preschool, or day care, or staying at home affect a child's social development and/or self-concept?" What follows are summaries and analyses of eleven studies and two research

reviews relating to this question. Finally there are a synthesis of the findings and a brief conclusion.

A relatively strong study by Austin et al. (1987) shed some light on the area of social development. It sought to determine if experience in a day care or preschool would significantly affect a child's knowledge and demonstration of prosocial behaviors. The specific behaviors measured were helping, sharing, and comforting. The hypothesis was that, in comparison to similar groups enrolled in day care or cared for at home, the four-year-olds in a preschool program would exhibit higher levels of prosocial behaviors. The groups were fairly similar in size (N 20) and in a number of other characteristics such as age, family size and income, number of parents, and mother's education. Participants were tested two weeks prior to preschool or day care and again three months later. Interrater reliability was high (.978), while test/retest reliability was rather low (.382). Findings revealed no significant difference in the three prosocial behaviors. It was concluded that child care setting has little or no impact on prosocial values in middle-socioeconomic, two-parent homes. Since a three month "treatment" period apparently did not improve, alter, or replace values learned at home, the

authors suggested that prosocial behavior is nurtured most saliently in the home.

Similar conclusions were drawn by Schenk and Grusec (1987), who also focused on prosocial behavior in children. They selected 20 urban, middle-class children with day care experience and 20 without, and they observed their behavior in arranged situations calling for a display of one of the following prosocial responses: willingness to help, concern for others, or sharing. Findings based on these observations suggested that the children who were reared at home were more likely to display these behaviors than those with day care experience. Also, boys without day care experience used significantly more stereotyped reasoning (e.g. "It's nice to share"), and stereotypical reasoning was significantly correlated with prosocial behavior (.38). And, although both groups had essentially the same level of knowledge about appropriate behavior, in general, the children reared at home actually behaved more appropriately. Schenk and Grusec also noted that day care children were less responsive to the needs of an adult, and they seemed more peer-oriented.

In another recent study done in England (Jowett & Sylva, 1986), no significant differences were found between the social participation exhibited by children

who had been enrolled in a playgroup and those who had attended a nursery. From the descriptions given, one could equate the British playgroup to an American day care and their nursery to our preschool. Forty-five children from each of these two preschool experiences were observed once when entering kindergarten and again 6 months later. While the two groups differed somewhat in the type of tasks in which they engaged, their social participation levels were essentially the same.

In a 1979 study, Flint, Hick, Irvine, Horan, and Kukuk wanted to know whether or not participation in prekindergarten had any measurable effect on the non-cognitive development of a group of children between the time they entered and the time they left the program. The California Preschool Social Competency Scale was given to 5000 four-year-olds before prekindergarten started in the fall. From this original group, a sample of 1402 children were post-tested in the spring. When studying the results, Flint et al. divided the test into its five categories and analyzed each category separately. It turned out that a year in prekindergarten had no significant effect in three areas: considerateness, task orientation, and response to the unfamiliar. However, a small but significant effect was detected in two other areas. Attendance in a

prekindergarten seemed to be correlated with 1) an increase in extraversion and 2) greater verbal competency. The fact that there was no control group with which to compare results was a weakness in this study. However, other studies seem to support these findings.

For example, in what could be considered a stronger study, Larsen and Draper (1984) concluded that a traditional (university-operated) preschool program could affect a child's social competency. Social competency was defined as an individual's everyday effectiveness in dealing with his environment. As in the study by Flint et al. (1979), the California Preschool Social Competency Scale was used. It was administered first at the end of preschool and then at the close of kindergarten. The subjects were all considered educationally advantaged. Larsen and Draper used these children in an attempt to build on previous Head Start research (Collins, 1984) which tended to show social developmental gains in disadvantaged children. Both a control and an experimental group were used, with children assigned randomly to one or the other. A 2x2x2 ANOVA disproved the null hypothesis and revealed that the children in the experimental group (preschool) were more socially competent than their control group peers (no preschool).

Incidentally, the greatest gains were made by the boys, with girls improving only slightly. It also should be noted that this study was of a longitudinal nature, and high attrition (approx. 19%) was a viable threat to validity.

Levenstein (1974) sought insight into the social-emotional development of preschoolers from low-income homes. The results from this study seemed to indicate that children who attended preschool exhibited better socio-emotional coping skills. Somewhat discrediting to the study, however, was the fact that while there were both control and experimental groups, there was no random assignment, and the control group had no pretest, whereas the treatment group did. Secondly, information on the validity and reliability of the test used (Child's Behavior Traits) was sketchy.

Similarly, Wurster (1980) attempted to determine if preschool and kindergarten children experienced improved social skills after a year in the Fort McDowell Indian Community Preschool Program. The Butler Evaluation Instrument was used as a pre- and post- measure. There was a significant difference between before and after scores in areas of both social awareness and self-concept. But, since no control group was used, any gains detected could plausibly be attributed to anyone of

a number of other causes, including natural maturation of the child.

In California, a study was conducted with low-income children and their families. Lally, Mangione, and Honig (1987) sought to assess the long-range effects of a comprehensive early intervention program which started at the time of the child's birth and continued through age five. The study included 108 families at the poverty level most of which were headed by a single parent (mean age = 18 years). The families in the treatment group received a wide range of assistance including educational, nutritional, health, safety, and human service resources. Parental involvement was emphasized. The control group received no such assistance. A longitudinal follow-up on about 75% of the original children found that program children had better self-esteem and were less disruptive in school. On the other hand, the control group had more numerous and severe instances of juvenile delinquency.

Incidentally, a number of other longitudinal studies have found that disadvantaged participants in high-quality preschool programs are significantly more likely than non-participants to complete school, to go on for additional academic or vocational training, and to hold jobs and be self-supporting. They are also less

likely to receive public assistance, be arrested, or become teenaged parents. It has also been estimated (Day & Thomas, 1988) that for every dollar invested in high-quality preschool programs for the poor, there is a seven dollar savings in the long run.

In regard to self-concept, Kiefer (1980) found no significant difference between low-income, educationally disadvantaged children who had been through a home-based pre-prekindergarten and those who had not. Upon enrolling in preschool the Preschool Self-Concept Picture Test ( $r=.94$ ) was used to measure self-concept. Noteworthy, though, is the fact that no pretest was given to either group. Had this been done, it may have revealed significant gains in the program group.

Derrick and Halsted (1981) studied the difference in self-concept between Head Start children and children who attended privately-operated nursery schools. Self-concept was defined as the way one feels about one's self and was measured by the preschool form of the Children's Self-Social Constructs Test ( $r .72$ ) which emphasized interaction with other persons. Testing occurred two weeks prior to the start of kindergarten. The nursery school children fared significantly better on 6 of the 10 categories of the test covering self-esteem, social interest, and identification with mother, father,



teacher, and friends. Some serious threats to validity were present in this study. For instance, it was quite possible that the two groups already differed significantly before attending preschool since neither random assignment nor pretest were used. Information on the characteristics of each group was limited, but even that which was supplied showed some group dissimilarity on important factors like race, family environment, and socioeconomic level.

In 1984, Miller and Bizzell conducted one of their many follow-up studies involving a group of children who had attended one of four different preschools. This particular study measured self-esteem with the Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory ( $r=.88$ ). The children, who by the time this study was done were in the ninth and tenth grades, showed no significant difference in the construct of self-esteem. Therefore, this long-range study drew conclusions parallel to those proposed by the shorter range studies of Kiefer (1980) and Derrick and Halsted (1981).

Though there are numerous reviews of the research on Head Start programs, they contain a limited amount of information on social development and self-concept. This is especially disturbing since preschools have traditionally placed high priority on social and

emotional development. As Moore (1981) said, "This persistent neglect of social outcomes in Head Start evaluation research is particularly unfortunate when one considers that the major long term benefits of Head Start may well be reflected in measures other than IQ."

The information which has been gathered from Head Start research could be summarized as follows (Administration for Children, Youth, and Families, 1983; Collins, 1984):

1. Self-esteem: The effect of Head Start in this area is difficult to measure because preschoolers have naturally huge self-esteems. Generally, the self-esteem of Head Start children declines once they enter school.
2. Social development: Some studies show that Head Start has positive effects in this area, but that social superiority seldom persists through second grade.
3. Extraversion: Head Start children are usually found to be more aggressive, attention-seeking, sociable, and assertive.

It would seem that the bulk of the research in the area of preschool education continues to be in the cognitive domain. Findings regarding affective

constructs, however, could be synthesized somewhat so as to produce a few patterns.

For example, the strongest studies indicate that children who attend either a preschool or a day care show either no or slight superiority in social development (Austin et al., 1987; Flint et al., 1979; Jowett & Sylva, 1986). While this seems especially true with disadvantaged children (Lally et al., 1987; Levenstein, 1974), Larsen and Draper (1984) obtained similar results with educationally advantaged children, although such differences often become indistinguishable by the second grade. Moreover, according to some studies (Collins, 1984; Schenk & Grusec, 1987) this sociability seems to be more peer-oriented, aggressive, and attention-seeking, and not necessarily prosocial. While Austin et al. showed no significant difference in prosocial behaviors between preschool, day care, and home-reared children, Schenk and Grusec found children reared in stable middle-income families were more prosocial than their day care peers. Just the opposite may be true with children from less advantaged homes. Numerous long-range studies reveal decreased social deviancy and juvenile delinquency in later life among early intervention participants (Day & Thomas, 1988; Lally et al., 1987). This seems logical

since less stable, low-income homes are often less conducive to prosocial behaviors.

In the area of self-concept, the studies are quite scarce and generally rather weak. Therefore, it is difficult to build any strong arguments. More research is needed. In one study where a relatively minimal treatment was provided (Kiefer, 1980), there was no significant difference between program and non-program children. On the other hand, a very extensive home-based treatment, such as the one described in Lally et al (1981) brought about increased self-esteem in high risk students. In Derrick and Halsted (1981) no significant difference in self-concept was detected between Head Start children and nursery school children.

By way of conclusion, a few general comments and opinions could be projected which may to a certain extent be supported by these findings. First of all, perhaps it would be safe to say that a stable, nurturing home is as effective as a preschool or day care setting, if not more so, for developing in children prosocial behavior and positive self-concept. A preschool or day care experience may develop sociability, but this may not always be an entirely positive type of sociability. However, educationally disadvantaged children who lack a positive, constructive, stimulating home environment can

incur long-lasting benefits from extensive intervention which emphasizes parental involvement.

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