

Debunking the Belief That Earlier is Better

By Rae Pica, Education Consultant

A mother told me that her son was seven months old when she first felt the pressure to enroll him in enrichment programs. She said, “Here I was with an infant who had just learned to sit upright by himself, and someone was asking me what classes he was going to be taking, as if he were ten!”

Another mom, this one an early childhood professional who understood child development, complained to me that she was under tremendous pressure to enroll her daughter in the local, competitive soccer program. When I asked her daughter’s age, she replied, “Two and a half.”

What these stories – and many others like them – have in common is the belief that *earlier is better* – that you just can’t start kids too soon on the road to success. Whether we’re talking about academics or athletics, this idea has become deeply ingrained in our society. But where has it come from? Why are parents and children being burdened by this false notion? Why are parents being made to feel terrified that if they don’t give their little ones a jumpstart on the “competition,” their children will fall behind and end up as miserable failures?

What you’re much less likely to hear is the truth about what actually happens to your kids if prodded to complete tasks before they’re developmentally ready. As noted early childhood expert Jane Healy once told me, “When you start something before the brain is ready, you’ve got trouble.” Among the possibilities for trouble are enormous stress and even depression. Today, depression among children is at an all-time high.

Let’s examine some other realities.

There is a large range of what is “normal” in child development – something you may not realize if you’ve only seen charts showing the *average* age for developmental milestones. For example, the average age children learn to walk is 12 months – 50% before and 50% after. But the *range* that is normal for walking is 8-3/4 months all the way to 17 months. The same applies for reading. The *average* age that children learn to read is 6-1/2 – again, 50% before and 50% after.

Still, you’ve probably felt the pressure – whether from media reports or other parents -- to teach your child to read as soon as possible. Less often reported is that children taught to read at an early age have more vision problems, and those taught at age five have more difficulty reading than those taught at age seven. Moreover, the research shows that usually by third grade, and certainly by middle school, there’s no real difference in reading levels between those who started reading early and those who started later.

Of course reading isn’t the only skill children are being asked to acquire early; requirements in all subjects have risen as curriculum is “pushed down” from higher to lower grades. As politicians pander to the notion that education is a race, and parents insist that early childhood educators switch from play-based programs to academic-oriented curriculums, teachers – from preschool to the primary grades – are forced to abandon their understanding of what’s developmentally appropriate and to teach content they know to be wrong for children. Kindergarten, according to a study from the University of Virginia, has become “the new first grade.” And, based on my observations, preschool has clearly become the new kindergarten.

All of this is happening despite the abundance of research demonstrating that children enrolled in play-oriented preschools don’t have a disadvantage over those who are enrolled in preschools focusing on early academics. Studies, in fact, have shown that there were neither short-term nor long-term advantages of early academics versus play and that there were no distinguishable differences by first grade. Additionally, fourth graders who had attended play-oriented preschools in which children often initiated their own activities had *better* academic performance than those who had attended academics-driven preschools.

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Children want very much to please the important adults in their lives. When they fail to meet their parents' and teachers' expectations because they're developmentally incapable of doing what's asked of them, fear, frustration, and anxiety are the end results. None of this endears them to learning.

On the athletic side, when foot-eye coordination isn't fully developed until the age of nine or ten and we ask – no, *oblige* -- children just barely beyond the wobbling stage to play soccer at practically professional levels, they're set up to fail. Children asked to catch a small white ball hurtling through the air at them before their visual tracking skills are fully formed learn not to catch but to become fearful. Children whose growing muscles, joints, and bones are stressed beyond what should be expected of them risk injury – sometimes lifelong injury. None of this endears them to physical activity.

So, whether we're talking about moving or learning, two things children are born loving, the end result is often the same: loss of motivation. Additionally, children who are "trained" by adults to develop at a pace that is not their own tend to become less autonomous people. And, again, children who begin in sports when they're developmentally ready catch up to and even surpass those who started early.

Childhood is not a dress rehearsal for adulthood, nor is it a race. It is a separate, unique, and very special phase of life. And I'm afraid that we're essentially wiping it out of existence due to a misguided belief that earlier is better.

What's a Parent to Do? My advice:

- Recall your own childhood and what you enjoyed most about it. Remember the freedom you had to play – and learn -- on your own timetable. Trust that this is what's best for your child as well.
- Rest assured in the knowledge that child development *cannot* be accelerated; it is immutable. Furthermore, there's no reason to *try* to accelerate it.
- Wait until your little ones are at least 8 years old before enrolling them in organized sports.
- If you're choosing a private preschool, opt for one that is play-based and developmentally appropriate.
- If your child is in public school, learn as much as you can about the curriculum. If you don't like what you're seeing (often, your child's stress levels are your indicator as to whether or not the school is demanding too much), speak to the teacher and to administrators if necessary. The more parents there are who demand developmentally appropriate practices, the more likely it is to happen.

Rae Pica has brought her messages about the development and education of the whole child to parents and educators throughout North America. Her latest book is What If Everybody Understood Child Development?: Straight Talk About Bettering Education and Children's Lives. You can learn more about her at www.raepica.com and follow her at @raepical.