

## HOW CHILDREN LEARN IN DEVELOPMENTALLY APPROPRIATE PROGRAMS

*What follows is a reprint from a 2001 Cherry Preschool newsletter written by Alissa Levy Chung, Developmental and Clinical Child Psychologist, and Kristin Loeks Jackson, Cherry Pre-K teacher. Both women have since become mothers and Cherry parents! At the time, they were responding to the beginnings of what has become a movement toward teaching reading in kindergarten.*

### LAYING THE FOUNDATION FOR FORMAL INSTRUCTION

By Alissa Levy Chung

Advice about child development seems as confusing as advice about nutrition these days. Over the past few months, articles have appeared in newspapers about making Head Start into a reading program and the “mini-university” concept for a preschool. New research on brain development has shown that children’s brains are highly influenced by their caregiving environments. Talk of the importance of reading and the “Mozart effect” has sent many parents on a quest to try to promote their children’s early development by stimulating their developing brains. At the same time, two large studies were released showing that the two most important parts of preschool are the social and emotional gains that children make that promote readiness for future learning and overall well being. How are parents supposed to sort through so much conflicting information to figure out what is best for their children?

In child development, there has long been a gap between what researchers know and what they have conveyed to parents and the community at large. Most child development research is published in academic journals and is full of too many statistics and technical terms to be useful and understandable to parents. Sadly, some of the answers to parents’ questions lie buried in these articles. From what we have learned about development, we have found that it generally progresses in a stepwise manner. Children have to learn certain basic tasks before they are able to progress to others. Without a foundation in the basics, the more complex tasks are more difficult or impossible to master. Generally, the order in which tasks must be learned is the same for most children. Biology and brain development are important here because they constrain what children are capable of learning or physically doing.

For example, most children will learn to walk at about 12 to 15 months, with a broader range of 9 to 18 months still considered within normal limits. Even if parents drill children on walking and help children to practice walking on a daily basis, children will still be unable to walk much before 9 to 10 months because their bodies simply cannot support walking until certain biological and muscular changes occur. Similarly, parents who do not make their children practice walking will still have children who generally walk within normal limits. Practice or a failure to practice would not be expected to change the start date for walking by more than a few weeks. And there are no long term differences in children’s ability to walk depending on the age when they first learned.

In many ways, preschool education can be seen similarly. Most children are not ready to learn to read before they begin kindergarten or first grade because the brain must develop certain structures to make such learning possible. Child development experts have identified other developmental issues as paramount for preschoolers, including:

1. Learning how to interact with peers
2. Learning how to separate from parents/caregivers
3. Learning how to participate in a semi-structured setting
4. Learning how to cope with frustration without the immediate intervention of an adult/parent
5. Learning basic concepts through play and activities that set a foundation for later academic skills (e.g., bigger versus smaller, cause and effect)

While these tasks do not seem academic in nature, it is easy to see their importance for future school success. Children who cannot do these basic tasks will not be able to handle the demands of an elementary school classroom. It is also important not to minimize how challenging these tasks can be for young children. Interacting with a peer requires a child to communicate with another child to learn his/her desires, to express his/her desires own clearly, and then to be able to integrate the two and decide upon a game or activity that both can enjoy. During the activity, children have to accommodate new players, changes in rules, and the broader limitations and structure of the classroom rules. These activities stimulate children and push them to higher levels cognitively, emotionally, and socially.

It is unfortunate that parents sometimes must question themselves if they choose a preschool that focuses on social-emotional development and allows time for free play. Many parents' instincts tell them that their children are too young to be drilling in academics and to handle a rigid structure. Child developmentalists can reassure parents that their instincts have a strong basis in research and theory. Children must learn to walk before they can run. By setting a solid foundation during early development, children will actually be more prepared for both the social and academic challenges they encounter at school.

### **PRESCHOOL LITERACY**

By Kristin Loeks Jackson

I recently saw an ad for another area preschool promising to teach its three and four year old students how to read. On the surface, it sounds great. What parents wouldn't want to give their child the advantage of a two or three year head start on academic success? Perhaps parents have wondered from time to time if they made a mistake sending their child to a developmental preschool like Cherry which doesn't offer formal academic instruction.

We don't think that Cherry students are missing out academically. Current research in child development and learning indicates that whatever *temporary* gains a child might make with early reading instruction are lost by the time a child is a few years into elementary school. If children are pressed to learn skills that they do not have the developmental framework to master, however, they quickly grow frustrated and avoidant.

Educators at developmental preschools note a growing tension: we want to help children prepare for increasingly demanding elementary school curricula, but we also must respect children's neurological development. We believe that the best way to balance these demands is by letting children take the lead in learning. Children love to learn, and they are drawn to challenges that are within their grasp. As teachers, our role is to facilitate children's learning as they indicate readiness and interest. We are aware of the objectives established by the state and by local school districts, and we look for ways to encourage children to practice those skills as a natural outgrowth of their play and interests. There are many good goals for young children's learning; four of them are **phonemic awareness**, the **alphabetic principle**, the **meaningful use of several letters of the alphabet**, and a **love of reading**. We've found many ways to weave opportunities to practice these skills into the children's play.

**Phonemic awareness** is the ability to hear the sounds that make up our oral language. Children need to be able to differentiate sounds so that when they begin to read, they will be able to recognize the sounds that letters and letter combinations represent. Songs, fingerplays, poems, and rhyming games all help children to hear rhyming words and other words that contain similar sounds. Children typically love the funny sounds of the English language, and often take a spontaneous interest in phonemics. As we walked back from Penny Park the other day, several of the children began to sing one of our favorite songs, "*Willaby Wallaby*." They began singing the song in the usual way: "*Willaby Wallaby Wark, an elephant sat on Mark, Willaby Wallaby Wian, an elephant sat on Brian...*" Then, a couple of the children began adding new verses about cars, mud, trees, and other things, rhyming nonsense words as they sang. Now that I've learned that several of my students are interested in phonics, I'll introduce more rhyming games and songs to them.

We also want children to grasp the **alphabetic principle** – that words are made up of letters and that letters are symbols that carry meaning. Before children can learn to decipher words, they need to understand that people use letters in meaningful ways. At our free art table last week, several children wanted to make cards for their family members. I offered to write down whatever words they wanted on their cards. As I wrote, I spoke the words I was writing out loud, and then I read what I had written back to each child, pointing to the words. Most of the children can't read the words I wrote, and many of them can't yet differentiate my printed letters from meaningless scribble. But I read it to them to communicate that those words have a specific meaning for me, and for anyone else who can read. Other children will arrive at the concept that **letters are meaningful symbols** another way. A few children have already enjoyed playing restaurant in our class. They travel around the room with a clipboard and a pen scribbling down food orders. The children aren't writing recognizable letters yet, let alone conventionally spelled words, but their play indicates an interest in purposeful writing. It is my job as a teacher to facilitate and help extend this play. The Evanston kindergarten teachers would like their new students to be able to recognize some letters (most likely the ones in their name) in a meaningful way. We try to provide many opportunities for children to read and write their names, their classmates' names, and other useful words, as children are interested and able to do so. The other day, I helped a highly motivated child find his name on our Mystery Bag

chart, and count the number of days until it would be his turn to take the bag home. A few children decided to start a bakery at our playdough table, so a teacher helped one interested child make a sign for their business. As we label the children's artwork with their names, we often pronounce the letters out loud as we write them. I was delighted to look down the other day and observe the little girl whose name I was writing watch me form the letters with rapt attention. She's just begun to notice her name can be written down; soon she'll notice that it's printed all over the place in our room. In the not too distant future, she's going to really want to be able to print it for herself.

At Cherry, our most important pre-reading goal is to instill in children a **love of reading and books**. We want them to look forward to the time when they will be readers. Our desire for children to love books and reading is our strongest reason for holding off on formal reading instruction until they are ready for it. Many children who were taught to read before they had the neural development in place to do so easily never got over their initial struggle to learn. We don't want reading to be drudgery. The best way to teach children to love and value books is to share books with them. So books are a big part of Cherry's classrooms. We read to the children every day, sometimes acting the stories out or doing other activities inspired by the stories. We stock a bookshelf with a changing array of books for the children to look at on their own. We place books with interesting photos about what we are studying on our science table. When a child asks a question that one of our books might be able to answer, we make a point to pull out the appropriate book and learn with the child. Research shows that one of the most significant factors in school success is reading every day to your child. We do it at school, and we encourage you to enjoy a daily book with your child at home.

Formal reading instruction is not a part of Cherry's educational program. However, facilitating children's play and experiences so that they can learn as they are ready and interested is our goal. We believe it is an excellent foundation for future learning.