

How Young is Too Young for Children to Learn? Brain Research Highlights Importance of Early Years

By Lori Barrett, Thinkertots Founder

I am often asked if infants can really benefit from participation in developmental learning programs. Since many adults did not begin their formal education until kindergarten, they are often skeptical of the need for structured activities at such an early age.

The fact is, science has conclusively and quantifiably proven the significance of our earliest years in the development of the brain. A 1997 White House Conference on early childhood development and learning highlighted the wealth of supporting research, underscored the importance of positive early experiences for individuals to reach their fullest potential and gave urgency to a reevaluation of our educational system and how and when we first engage children in the learning process.

At a time when so many mom's and dad's are both working, opportunities to read or simply spend meaningful time together with our children have become increasingly hard to find for many families. Television and later video games, which can potentially provide beneficial stimulation in certain circumstances, often become poor, but very real alternatives for time-stressed parents.

I started Thinkertots learning centers for children from birth to five years when I could not find developmentally appropriate and enriching programs for my own son. As a child development specialist, I was confident that I could provide fun, rewarding and educational activities that would be rewarding for both of us. However, social and physical interaction with other children can be equally important to a child's overall development. And, involvement in teacher led activities and learning represent a significant step in preparing for your child's school years.

The process of socialization and the awareness it brings out in children is an example of learning that many people don't recognize and appreciate. While I know that early exposure to developmental programs will not help a toddler learn quantum physics (at least not right away!), it will positively influence their educational development. Learning how to share, to take direction, to focus on a single task or even just to "play nicely" with other children are important steps in the process. Today, many teachers use small group learning models and "pick-a-partner" assignments as part of their curriculum. Getting your child used to these situations at an early age can help minimize potential difficulties with the transition from their comforting and safe home environment to the classroom.

For those people who still question the need for programs before kindergarten, a study conducted by the Carnegie Corporation in the mid 1990's documented that

kindergarten teachers reported one in three students was not equipped with the fundamental skills necessary for learning. A 1996 report by Sharon Begley in Newsweek found that “children whose neural circuits are not stimulated before kindergarten are never going to be what they could have been.”

The bottom line is that all children across the United States should be ready to learn when they enter the classroom. And all of us as taxpayers pay the price when they are not. The cost of remedial educational programs is staggering. And, with many children handicapped by factors ranging from poverty and substandard childcare to parents who are incapable of providing sufficient attention and support, the problem continues to grow.

There are many signs, both positive and negative, that can help attentive parents know when its time for their children to be involved in educational programs.

For example, your infant may be ready for a class if he is responding to music, is interested in faces, can grasp objects or simply enjoys being out of the house. Your toddler may be ready for a class if he can stay focused and involved in one specific activity for five or more minutes, shows interest in other children, enjoys toys he can manipulate or likes to be “entertained.” Your preschooler may be ready for a class if she enjoys books and stories, can understand simple directions, is curious about her world or asks about “going to school.”

Conversely, if you have a particular concern about your child, such as shyness, refusal to share, short attention span or an inability to listen, then RUN, don't walk to enroll him in a class. These tendencies do not get better on their own, and are much easier to address before formal schooling begins.

Here are some helpful tips for parents eager to positively influence the educational development of their toddlers:

READ, READ, READ - Few activities reap the rewards that reading to your child will. Reading helps develop attention span, creative thinking and language while giving you both a close time for bonding. It doesn't matter if she likes to hear the story or if she just wants to actively go back and forth between pages. Reading ability is so closely aligned with success in school that starting early really makes sense.

Parents often tell me that their child won't sit still for a book. Do it for as long as they can stand, even if this is just a few minutes. Their ability to focus should gradually increase over time. Leave picture books in a bin that the child can access himself and you will see him open them up. It is also good for children to see their parents reading whether it is magazines, newspapers or novels. If you have an older child, let the older one read to the younger one. This should make them both feel good.

MUSIC - Studies show that exposure to different types of music has a positive effect on brain growth and is particularly linked to math ability later on. Play all types of music for her, not just “kids music.” This helps make children open to enjoying a variety of musical styles as they grow older. Music is soothing to most people, including children, so it is also helpful in developing methods for self-soothing. Encourage them to move to the music. Play instruments (both real and homemade). At Thinkertots, we use the CD's produced by Music For Little People. They produce all kinds of great music for children: jazz, calypso, folk, classical, blues even the Beatles and Elvis! You may discover some new musical tastes for yourself too!

COMPUTER PROGRAMS - There are some outstanding educational software programs for toddlers like Reader Rabbit Toddler . These are fun for her and do a great job of teaching basic concepts. The sooner your child is comfortable and adept at using the computer the better. Some spatial/sorting/counting concepts are so easy to learn with good educational software. Certain children show a better attention span when sitting at a computer so this could be a good tool for them. It is good to get them comfortable with sitting in front of computer and moving the mouse. Computer skills are such an integral part of society now that a child must have them!

A bit of careful planning can make your child's early days happy ones filled with learning, fun and excitement. Taking an early, active role in your child's educational preparedness and development is an investment in time and love that will pay lifelong benefits.