

# Tutoring tots? Some kids prep for kindergarten

Students under growing pressure to perform at ever-younger ages



By  
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updated

For two hours a week this summer, Krissy Rubesch has been working with a tutor on reading and math. Summer schooling isn't unusual for kids who need a jumpstart on academics for fall, but Krissy is only going into kindergarten.

Already a pro at reading phonetic words such as "cat," she has spent seven weeks learning about the silent "c," letter combinations such as "sh" and other more advanced reading skills. She's been working on addition with four-digit numbers and has done some creative writing to improve her penmanship and ability to sound out words.

Krissy, who turned 5 this month, will be among the youngest kids in class, and her mother emphasizes she isn't trying to create a superstar student. She just wants to make sure her daughter is prepared to keep up with the other children who are learning their words and numbers, too. All of them will be expected to master various academic skills in the upcoming school year, or risk retention.

"My concern is there's so much emphasis, probably because of No Child Left Behind, on reading and math," says Heather Rubesch, mother of two in Kansas City, Kan., referring to the controversial education law signed in 2002 that focuses on increased academic performance and standardized testing.

While more parents are keeping the youngest kids like Krissy out another year before starting them in kindergarten — often entering them into pre-K in a practice called "red-shirting" — Rubesch decided against that for Krissy, who already attended two years of private preschool.

"She is ready and I saw no reason to hold her back," says Rubesch. "But I do want her to have the confidence academically, especially against her peers who are almost or over a year older than her."

Long gone are the days when parents signed their kids up for kindergarten based on whether their birthdays met the school's cut-off, and youngsters simply showed up on the first day, where they played, snacked and napped. Perhaps they had attended preschool, but if they did, they almost certainly didn't have any summer tutoring to make sure they really were ready for kindergarten.

Today, many children go to two or three years of preschool and some stay on for another year of pre-K. Like Rubesch, some parents have begun signing their kids up for summer classes or one-on-one tutoring to improve their reading, math, writing and overall "kindergarten readiness."

It's not hard to see why parents feel the pressure to help their kids, but is all this kindergarten preparation really necessary? Is it just one more example of over-the-top helicopter parenting? Or has kindergarten become so rigorous that kids need every possible advantage to succeed?

## 'Pressure-cooker classrooms'

Critics of the state of early education say there are problems all around. The pressure, they say, largely starts at the top with efforts such as the NCLB, the federal act that pushes schools to increase performance or face penalties. That puts pressure on superintendents and principals, who put pressure on teachers, who in turn increase their focus on academics for even the youngest children.

Knowing that standards are high, parents who want the best for their kids also can pressure them in ways that aren't productive or welcome (though Rubesch says Krissy loves her tutoring, which is given by her former preschool teacher). The pressures are trickling down into the more academic preschools, and even to new parents hoping that certain toys and music will nurture a baby genius right from birth.

"It's like a dog chasing its tail," says Joan Almon, executive director of the Alliance for Childhood, a nonprofit organization in College Park, Md., who formerly worked as a preschool and kindergarten teacher. "You don't know quite where to stop this. But the kids need it to stop."

The group released a report this spring titled "Crisis in the Kindergarten: Why Children Need to Play in School," which concludes that kindergartens have changed dramatically in the last two decades "from places where love of learning was thoughtfully nurtured into pressure-cooker classrooms where teachers are required to follow scripts, labor under



Five-year-old Krissy Rubesch searched for the answer to a math problem while teacher and tutor (session at the Rubesch home.

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unrealistic one-size-fits-all standards, and test children relentlessly on their performance. Kindergarten has ceased to be a garden of delight and has become a place of stress and distress.”

The report is based on nine studies, including three commissioned by the group that examined the state of kindergarten in New York and Los Angeles. Those three new studies showed that play materials such as blocks, sand and water tables, and props for dramatic play “have largely disappeared” from more than 250 full-day kindergarten classrooms studied. Most children had half an hour or less a day for playtime, and some got no playtime at all.

Instead, standardized testing and preparation for those tests were a daily activity in most of the classrooms, even though such tests are of “questionable validity” for kids under 8, the report says.

Today, says Almon, kindergarteners are expected to perform at the level traditionally expected of first-graders — reading, for instance, by the end of the year, despite any solid support behind the change.

“There is absolutely no research showing that children who read at age 4 or 5 do better at age 10 or 12 than children who start reading in first grade,” she says. “But there is research showing if you push 4- and 5-year-olds too hard, it backfires.”

The report points out that while there’s ongoing concern about American children catching up with their counterparts in countries such as Japan and China, specifically in areas such as science, math and technology, schooling in those countries before second grade is “playful and experiential.” And youngsters in Finland, where teens consistently score high academically, also attend play-based kindergarten and start first grade at age 7 rather than age 6.

#### Power of play

Play not only is a stress-reliever from all these academic pressures, Almon says, it’s also a critical way that children develop language, express their creativity, expand their social skills, solve problems and generally learn about their world — all important abilities that will help them in kindergarten and well beyond.

“Through play children take on every aspect of life,” she says, without them worrying about being judged by adults. “In their world of play, they rule supreme.”

But as kindergarten has become more academic at the expense of play, retention rates have gone up and so have extreme behavior problems, says Almon. “We think that’s coming about because the children are so stressed about expectations that are unrealistic.” Problems are surfacing in preschool too, where expulsion rates are more than three times higher than the national average for kindergarten through 12th grade, according to a Yale survey involving 40 states.

Carleton Kendrick, a Boston-area family therapist for more than 30 years, says he sees first-hand the consequences of “fast-tracking” children.

Too much pressure to perform academically from teachers and parents can lead to a range of anxiety-related complaints and psychosomatic symptoms in youngsters that normally wouldn’t show up until the teen years or later, he says. School stress can cause young children to be worried, overwhelmed, ashamed, guilty and even clinically depressed. For some, the stress can contribute to headaches, stomach upset, stuttering and insomnia.

“The parents think something is wrong with the child — and not the parents and teachers and education system,” says Kendrick.

“As a therapist who has seen many children become mentally and emotionally overwhelmed by being placed on this out of control, educational gerbil wheel, I hope that parents will wake up and say ‘no’ to hurrying their children through preschool and kindergarten,” he says.

Jodi Allen, a kindergarten teacher in North Miami Beach, Fla., says that with today’s high academic standards, she understands where anxious parents are coming from. “It used to be you had to read in first grade and now you have to read in kindergarten or you don’t go to first grade,” says Allen, who had to hold back two girls who couldn’t read well enough to pass kindergarten.

Still, she wishes parents wouldn’t worry quite so much because, after all, it is a teacher’s job to teach, and most of her students who have attended preschool are prepared enough for kindergarten. “We tell the parents at open house that [the students] don’t have to come in reading, but they feel the pressure,” she says.

As a result, it’s not uncommon for preschool kids in her area to get tutoring or at least intensive study time with their parents to prepare them for kindergarten, she says. Allen herself has been tutoring this summer for extra income.

#### ‘A little too prepared’

Looking back now, Wendi Aarons of Austin, Texas, says she learned a lesson of her own after extensively preparing her first son, Sam, for kindergarten two years ago.

He’d already gone to a preschool that “concentrated on prepping him for kindergarten,” Aarons says, and she worked with him during the summer before he began school to further hone his skills. “By the time he started kinder, he was already reading at a second-grade level,” she says.

On one hand, knowing how to read boosted his self-esteem. “He was known as the best reader,” Aarons says. “In kindergarten, that’s like the equivalent of having a Camaro.”

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But there was a downside, too. "I think he was actually a little too prepared, as he began to be very bored and unchallenged throughout the year," Aarons says. "Kindergarten is seven hours a day in Texas, and he just didn't have enough to do."

Aarons says she talked with the teacher about moving Sam up a grade, to challenge him more, but the teacher said he was not socially ready for that. Sam was challenged more in first grade, Aarons says, including getting extra projects to keep him busy. And while he still complained of being bored, he no longer said he didn't want to go to school.

With her younger son, Jack, who will start kindergarten this month, Aarons has been taking "more of a casual approach."

"He went to a preschool that was a lot more play-based," she says, "and while I'm working on his reading with him, it's not to the extent that I did with my first son."

For parents, one of their biggest tests is trying to figure out what's best for their young school kids in today's rigorous academic climate. The answers aren't always so simple, and they certainly go beyond teaching tots the three R's.

"It's really a fine line between over- and under-preparing," says Aarons, "and I think a lot of parents don't know what to do, exactly."

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