

# WHAT HAPPENED TO KINDERGAR

By Jen Scott Curwood

## Are academic pressures stealing childhood?

It's a 21st-century truism that in order for the United States to get ahead in the global economy, we need to upgrade our public schools. Ideally, that should mean ensuring that every child receives an education of the best possible quality. Too often, however, in our culture of fast food, media sound bites, and instant downloads, we mistake *faster* for *better*. That assumption has led countless school districts—perhaps even your own—to promote “academic kindergartens” where 5-year-olds are more likely to encounter skill-and-drill exercises and nightly homework than unstructured, imaginative playtime. With so much pressure to teach essential literacy and math skills, many kindergarten teachers



PHOTO: (LEFT) ©DORLING KINDERSLEY/GETTY; (RIGHT) GREG LORP; STYLING: JEFF STYLES; GROOMING: JENNIFER MORITO



TEN?

# cover story

and even prekindergarten teachers say that time for free play and exploration is increasingly limited.

“Kindergarten is now first grade, and first grade is now second grade,” says Anne Stoudt, a kindergarten teacher in suburban New Jersey for 19 years. “It used to be normal for first graders to still be learning to read. Now, the handful of kindergartners who aren’t reading by the end of the year are considered behind.”

Indeed, just a decade ago, only 15 percent of kindergartners were readers. If we go back 30 years, the number shrinks to only 5 percent. This year, in Maryland’s Montgomery County—which, like many districts, has mandated full-day attendance for fives—nearly 90 percent of kindergartners passed an end-of-year reading test.

## GETTING TOUGH ON KINDERGARTEN

Part of the reason kindergarten is becoming more and more academic is a growing understanding of the importance of early learning and the capabilities of young children. “Five-year-olds aren’t seen as babies anymore,” says Liz Stevens, a kindergarten teacher in suburban San Diego. “What we know about brain-based learning tells us this is the right time for reading.”

It may be, but there is little doubt that No Child Left Behind also plays a role in determining the “right time.” The pressures on schools to prepare children for testing in third grade has helped to eradicate the block area and dress-up center from the kindergarten classroom. By beginning the first-grade reading curriculum in kindergarten, schools have effectively gained an extra year of instruction.

## WHAT IS LEFT OUT

Proponents of ramping up standards in early elementary education tend to focus on the numbers. More children learning to read or do math sooner must be good. But these achievements may come at the expense of other skills kids need to learn, such as self-reliance, problem-solving, and spatial thinking.

“When we replace the block center with a math center, what do we gain?” says Stoudt. “Blocks are all about math, except they are more fun.”

While young students’ reading and math scores are soaring, there is little assessment of the effect of the intensified academic focus on kids’ motivation to learn, creativity, motor skills, social skills, or self-esteem. “The risk is children who are already burned out on school by the time they reach third grade,” says Stoudt. “Play is how children learn. There should be more of it in the upper grades, not less in the lower.”

## WORKING HARD AT PLAY

Research consistently backs what early elementary teachers know: Imaginative play is the catalyst for social, physical, emotional, and moral development in young children. With guidance from an

observant teacher, kindergartners can use imaginative play to make sense of the world around them—and lay the critical groundwork for understanding words and numbers.

“Play facilitates the growth of children’s reasoning abilities,” says David Elkind, Ph.D., author of *The Power of Play*. Through classifying objects (cars, shells, beads) and through experimentation (water play, clay), children learn to make inferences and draw conclusions. “Children’s questions are a form of mastery play,” says Elkind. “In asking questions, children are creating their own learning experiences.”

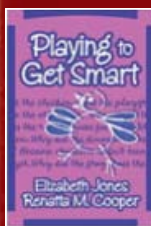
## THE INCREASING PACE OF GROWING UP

Perhaps nowhere else do children grow up as fast as in the United States. Joan Almon, coordinator for the Alliance for Childhood in the United States, relates a well-known anecdote about Jean Piaget, the famous cognitive psychologist. “He didn’t particularly like speaking to American audiences. After he would finish his lecture on the natural progression of child development, someone would invariably ask, ‘But how can we get them to do it faster?’” says Almon.

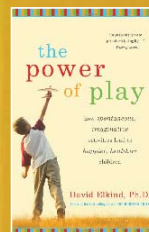
In Finland, which routinely leads the world in assessments of literacy, math, and science, children don’t start formal schooling until age 7—and then

## Get Smart About Play

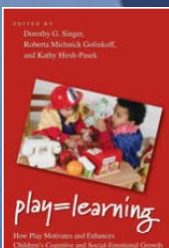
The past few years have brought a slew of books on the importance of playtime. Here are several we recommend.



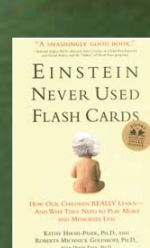
*Playing to Get Smart*, by Elizabeth Jones and Renatta M. Cooper. Two researchers (quite witty themselves) explain why play matters.



*The Power of Play: How Spontaneous, Imaginative Activities Lead to Happier, Healthier Children*, by David Elkind. Elkind tackles TV and video games in his call for physical play.



*Play = Learning: How Play Motivates and Enhances Children’s Cognitive and Social-Emotional Growth*, by Dorothy G. Singer, Roberta Michnick Golinkoff, and Kathy Hirsh-Pasek. A broad anthology covering more than 40 years of research.



*Einstein Never Used Flash Cards: How Our Children Really Learn—and Why They Need to Play More and Memorize Less*, by Roberta Michnick Golinkoff, Kathy Hirsh-Pasek, and Diane Eyer. Why the three Rs don’t make sense in PreK.

# cover story

they only attend half days. Compared to countries like the U.S. or the United Kingdom, children in Finland spend less time overall in school, too.

But here, it's expected that kids start kindergarten at age 5, and many have years of preschool experiences under their belts before walking through the kindergarten door. Vivian Gussin Paley, author of *A Child's Work, The Importance of Fantasy Play*, writes that this has led some to question, "Since children enter preschool at a younger age, wouldn't they have enough playtime there before going to kindergarten?"

According to most child-development experts, the answer is no. Play is the necessary work of children. According to psychologist Erik Erikson, the development of initiative through imaginative play is one of the primary challenges in the growth of young children. If children miss out on the work of play, their later learning can be adversely affected.

## IT'S NOT JUST CHILD'S PLAY

Roberta Michnick Golinkoff, Ph.D., is a professor of education at the University of Delaware and the author of numerous books, including *Play = Learning* and *Einstein Never Used Flash Cards*. She argues that play is the primary vehicle that children use to explore their world, learn critical social skills, and grow emotionally.

"But playtime also allows children the opportunity to rough-and-tumble with other children," Golinkoff adds. A 2003 study from the Kaiser Family Foundation found that children under 6 spend as much time with television, computers, and video games as playing outside. Clearly, the opportunity for physical play is crucial.

At school and at home, children have less time for unstructured play. "Children are used to being entertained by media," says Cindy Middendorf, a noted national speaker and author of *Differentiating Instruction in Kindergarten*. "But relying on television, movies, and video games, children are pulled away from real imaginative play."

Middendorf spent three decades as a teacher before her recent retirement, and the last 22 years of her career were in a kindergarten classroom. She adds that play is a vital part of language development in children—and it also establishes a foundation for reading and comprehension.

"Play has been phased out of so many kindergarten classes," Middendorf says.

"But since we're not getting the academic results we expected, educators are now realizing that they can teach academic standards within the context of play."

## WHAT TEACHERS CAN DO

So how can a kindergarten teacher successfully integrate play into his or her classroom? By embedding math, science, and literacy skills in a fun, meaningful context, says Golinkoff. "Learning has to be enjoyable," she says. "If a child grows to dislike school, there will be repercussions for years to come."

Almon adds that the drive to play is strong in every healthy child. However, children need the time and permission to do so. But what about those kids who don't know what to do—or, really, how to play?

"If a child can't play independently, his teacher can play with him. The key is to know when to pull back so the child doesn't become dependent on that external structure," Almon explains. Teachers can facilitate play in all children by asking questions, using new vocabulary, and encouraging social cooperation with peers.

To encourage fantasy play, open-ended play materials work the best. Wooden blocks, pieces of cloth, and other basic construction materials allow children to imagine countless scenarios—and cost little to add to your classroom. Art and music don't have to exist solely as separate classes, either. Middendorf suggests reading a story aloud, then having children paint their literary responses. Alternatively, the class can help act out a story—and learn important lessons about plot, characters, and sequencing—or play a game that involves math skills.

"Teachers can also use children's imaginative play as a springboard for a lesson plan," Middendorf says. "In the end, you don't have to choose between an academic-based or a play-based kindergarten. It needs to be balanced." □

Jen Scott Curwood is a freelance writer who lives in Wisconsin and specializes in education. Curwood also authored "The Rise of Transitional Kindergarten" in this issue.

## Don't Teach Kindergarten?

*Academics-heavy kindergarten may actually hurt kids down the road. Here are four reasons why.*

### 1 KIDS LEARN TO SOCIALIZE THROUGH

**PLAY.** It may look like a simple game of hide-and-seek, but it's how kids learn about rules, role-playing, and working with one another.

### 2 PLAY TEACHES NUMBERS, LETTERS, AND REASONING.

When kids sort sticks and stones, read stories, and ask questions about the world, they're preparing for a lifetime of learning.

### 3 PLAY BREEDS IMAGINATION AND INNOVATION.

You only have to watch a small group of children playing with blocks for a few minutes to know how such activities encourage creativity. Deny kids that experience, and they lose out.

### 4 PLAY HELPS KIDS TO COPE.

The average game of tag is full of drama—and, through disagreements and the occasional bruise, kids learn to deal with bigger problems.

### Quebecor:

Please convert to CMYK and silo from background, include very soft