

# Ready for Play Time?

*Less structure in preschool may not work for all kids*

## The Importance of Being Little: What Preschoolers Really Need from Grownups

By Erika Christakis

Viking, 2016, \$28; 400 pages.

As reviewed by Mark Bauerlein

Last year, *Education Next* published the findings of a study of the academic achievement of two groups: those who in adolescence lived in single-parent households and those who lived in two-parent households (see “One-Parent Students Leave School Earlier,” *features*, Spring 2015). The researchers found a significant gap in years of schooling completed between the two groups. Worse, the gap has widened over time: “American children raised in single-parent homes appear to be at a greater disadvantage educationally than ever before,” they write.

One would think that a book subtitled “What Preschoolers Really Need from Grownups” would acknowledge the single-parent problem and list answers to it among the needs. But only a few times in its nearly 400 pages does this concern come up (in throwaway remarks). The aim of author Erika Christakis is to alter our conception of childhood and improve pre-K practices, and that seems to go along with not differentiating among children in any way at all. Boys and girls don’t call for distinct treatment: “The truth is that gender variation is far less pronounced in the early years than people realize,” claims Christakis. Differences in income, race, region, nationality, and religion don’t matter much, either: “I would argue vigorously that the nature of young children differs little across political or other

boundaries,” she writes. Kids are kids. As for family structure:

We can no longer automatically blame certain kinds of parents or dismiss certain kinds of institutional or home settings as perforce inadequate, because the truth is that children can learn, and always have been able to learn, in any setting.

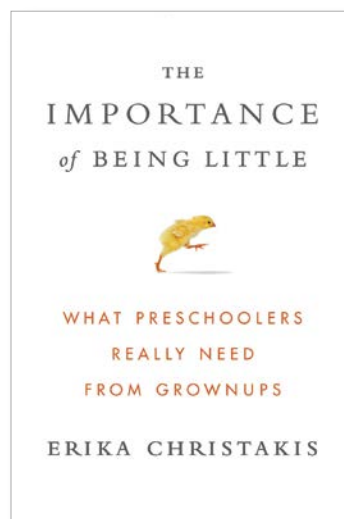
With nearly one in four children today living with an unmarried mother (see “Was Moynihan Right?” *features*, Spring 2015), this is an obvious oversight. But in a way it makes sense. Christakis is a champion of preschool. She has been a preschool teacher and director, and she is now a researcher at Yale University’s Zigler Center in Child Development and Social Policy. She regards the emergence of preschool issues in political campaigns as “a truly astounding development.” She wants more funding and resources, and she assumes a “childcare crisis” that solid preschool programs rightly address. Single parenting, of course, has aggravated the crisis, but educators are loath to mutter anything that might

suggest disapproval of single mothers. Better to accept the reality and focus on what can be done: more and better preschool for all.

In reality, Christakis observes, differentiation of children based on home situation does go on in pre-K and elementary schools, and this is part of the problem. With the rise of accountability and especially after the passage of No Child Left Behind, she explains, academic standards and outcomes-oriented curricula have crept down the age ladder. As evidence has mounted showing that failure is often determined by what happens in the toddler years, educators have converted kindergarten and preschool from “playful social experience to a more narrow educational opportunity focused on so-called cognitive and academic skills.” We have let an “obsession with outcomes” make pre-K classrooms overscripted and message-packed, run on strict schedules and micromanaged lesson plans.

This standardization of early schooling happens most vigorously in places of socioeconomic disadvantage. Educators want to help low-income kids, and so they pile on academic challenges in kindergarten and in pre-K, too, believing that more skills training in early years produces grade-level math and reading afterward.

According to Christakis, the effect is to extend the learning processes of later childhood and adolescence back into times where they don’t belong. A 4-year-old learns one way, a 10-year-old another. A 5th-grade classroom with a teacher using direct instruction to instill Common Core goals through lively tasks is fine. The same effort in preschool isn’t. There, we need more



**Christakis assumes too hastily the equal readiness of all kids for play-based instruction. Some children coming from chaotic homes prosper in highly structured classrooms.**

spontaneity and open-endedness, more “free-range” instruction. Instead of talking at children, we should converse with them. Instead of drills and leading questions, we should open up topics and supply materials, then get out of the way and let children handle them as they wish and pose their own questions. In a word, we need to sustain the trial-and-error, creative, and opportunistic habitat of play.

Here lies the burden of *The Importance of Being Little*: to demonstrate that play, when steered by a discreet and discerning teacher, is a mode of genuine learning. Christakis presents several persuasive illustrations of its opposite, namely, overplanned academics. In many schools, teachers must post the standards taught each day on a bulletin board, all expressed in the abstract idiom of accountability. Obsessed with print-rich environments, they coat walls and surfaces with “a vertiginous array of labels, vocabulary lists, calendars, graphs...” that strike kids as white noise or senseless distraction. We have them draft “I can do X, Y, and Z” testimonials that foist an “adult-centric sense of personal agency on kindergarteners who really couldn’t care less if they can ‘use and understand verbs and adjectives by knowing their opposites.’” Some of the curriculum packages get downright manipulative, such as the one having teachers begin a lesson with, “Have you ever been happy?” and begin the next day with, “Have you ever been sad?”—an approach sure to produce bafflement and phoniness.

The contrary is play-based learning. “Play,” Christakis says, “is the fundamental building block of human cognition, emotional health, and social behavior.” Watch children at play and you find sophisticated exploration going on, elaborate invention, and clever gamesmanship (not always benign). It may look idle or pointless, but it builds memory, enhances numeracy and literacy (games involve counting and wordplay), manages

impulses (play does have rules), and promotes collaboration and competition. Play involves risk, but it fosters resilience, too. Christakis even finds a benefit in the inequities that arise when kids are allowed to play together: “When the older kids get too mean or too rough or don’t respect the feelings of the younger children, the little ones rattle their chains: they go on strike, they break things, they tattle. So the system recalibrates itself naturally in most cases, in humans as in apes.”

Teachers and parents enter child play effectively by adopting the mindset of the young and asking, “What is it like to be a child?” Wise instructors remember that things look and feel much differently than they do from older perspectives. We shouldn’t correct children when play doesn’t follow a lesson plan, so long as the children remain on topic. If they stray from a group project, but remain engaged in “purposeful activity,” let them go! We shouldn’t call so diligently for apologies and respect, either, since “the wrongdoers and the wronged can be the same person in different episodes of play.”

When we remove play from classrooms, low-income kids suffer the most. Affluent ones usually have grownups who engage meaningfully with them and provide space for playful leisure, while low-income kids often live without such opportunities. Preschool is the only place where they may exchange

thoughts with adults, experience constructive play, and enjoy the actual learning that goes with it. Many at-risk children need adventures in curiosity and intellectual freedom more than they do literacy and numeracy exercises.

It’s a convincing case against excess regulation. It is refreshing, too, to hear a preschool teacher accept the price of some skinned knees and hurt feelings and wayward attention to have a free-range classroom.

But Christakis assumes too hastily the equal readiness of all kids for play-based instruction. Yes, every child learns, often through play, no matter what the environment, but children in high-literacy households with attentive mothers and fathers are more equipped for purposeful inquisitiveness and the ability to communicate it than are single-parent, high-TV-viewing kids. Play is natural and all kids do it, but it can be cultivated by adults, which means that kids enter preschool with disparate talents and dispositions. An absence of differences in kind shouldn’t obscure consequential differences in degree. Nor should it discount the possibility that some children coming from chaotic homes prosper in highly structured classrooms, which might be for them the only rational zone in their lives (and which explains part of the success of KIPP schools).

This is not to dispute the central point of *The Importance of Being Little*. Freud was right when he said that a child “takes his play very seriously and he expends large amounts of emotion on it. The opposite of play is not what is serious but what is real.” But for all its importance, play, like every other human capacity, is found in relative amounts and runs in diverse directions among individuals, and while we appreciate its value to every preschool classroom, we must also begin the labor of distinguishing it by the circumstances of all the budding minds passing through.

*Mark Bauerlein is professor of English at Emory University.*