

Educational Philosophy

What Should Children Gain from Nursery School?

By Jeanne W. Lepper

What children should primarily gain from nursery school is an opportunity to play and socialize with a group of their peers under the guidance of trained teachers who can maximize the children's growth experiences in an emotionally supportive atmosphere. Paying for a child to participate in a group experience is money well spent for parents of preschoolers. The kinds of socialization skills children learn in a professionally designed educational setting, combined with the love and devotion of their parents, contribute to a lifelong security and sense of self-confidence. These skills include knowing how to resolve conflicts in verbal, rather than physical, ways and how to approach another child in a positive, altruistic manner. Children learn a great deal from modeling what adults say and do. Parents may hear phrases their children have learned from their teachers at school such as "No, I'm not finished." "I need a turn." "I'm waiting for a turn." "It's your turn now." Shy children who have the benefit of sensitive, observant teachers are helped to develop relationships with other children and to gradually become independent.

Play, the other major aspect of the child's experience at nursery school, is truly the child's work. Children are naturally motivated to experiment, to investigate, to learn as they "play." When the teachers properly set the stage, the children are intellectually engaged in the activities provided. As they participate in a variety of creative activities in art, music and movement, children gain confidence in their own abilities and have an opportunity to practice their developing skills. Many activities can and should be provided at home as well, particularly water play and easel painting, which many children never seem to have enough time with. Although few children learn to read during their preschool years, what they can do and should learn are a variety of pre-reading skills and a love of language, poetry and books.

Problem-solving skills are also important for young children to learn. They are learned in a variety of ways, including experimenting with water in a dramatic play corner, working with puzzles, observing natural phenomena in the science corner and in the garden. Unit blocks are probably the most important play equipment ever designed specifically for young children. All blocks are multiples, or fractions of the basic unit, and as children build with them, they internalize the mathematical concepts inherent in these materials.

Children need an opportunity to work through and to enhance their developing concept-formation abilities. Many nursery school activities provide a basis for this, including dramatic play, most often recognized in the doll or housekeeping center where children can dress up and assume different roles. A dollhouse with furniture and figures in miniature is very important as part of this process as well. This type of play allows children an opportunity to work through fears and worries, and to symbolically conquer these emotional hurdles. In addition, in terms of cognitive development, children are able to clarify misconceptions and refine their thinking and knowledge. For example, they may figure out what a firefighter does and what relationships exist among different members of the family.

In summary, children gain a sense of autonomy—a confidence in their own abilities—and a sense of freedom in nursery school. Children gain a feeling of security, of trusting their environment and the adults in it. The nursery school day provides a routine, an anchor that children need, which then allows them to experiment with the flexibility built into the program. As part of their nursery school experience, children learn to separate from their parents for short periods of time, and to enjoy it! Parents enjoy it too! Having a few hours to oneself and knowing that one's child is having an opportunity to be with other children is a wonderful feeling. This marks the beginning of a new stage in the relationship between parent and child, in which the parent is no longer the only person responsible for the child's care and education. Parents can also form friendships and share resources with other families. From the program, they learn the importance of having easel painting, unit blocks, dollhouses (for both boys and girls), and all sorts of easily-found materials for creative activities with their children at home. Finally, what children and their families gain from nursery school is a sense of self-esteem from being in an environment which is designed to meet their needs and where the staff admire and respect the beauty of children as they are developing in these early years.