

Prekindergarten Is Growing Up

Kids are learning language and social skills earlier than ever before

BY KATE MAIER

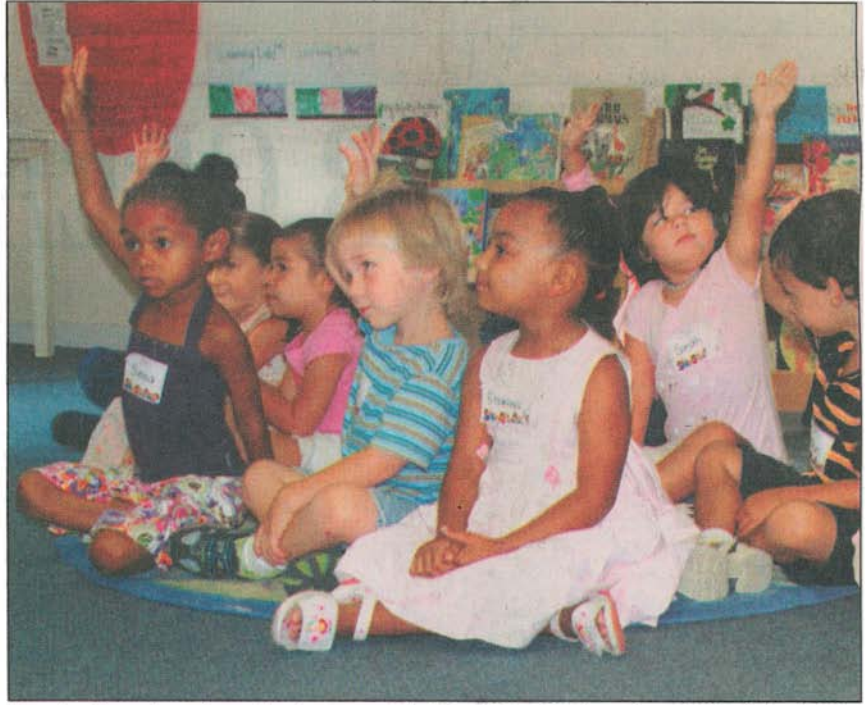
In Arlene Notel's classroom at the East Hampton Day Care Center, some serious learning had already begun on Sept. 7, the first day of prekindergarten. After half an hour of playtime, the group of 16 4-year-olds hustled to get toys put away before gathering on a carpet in front of their teacher.

Children of all personalities, some boisterous, others shy and contemplative, learned to crisscross their legs and raise their hands to answer questions. Those who were less eager picked up on cues from their peers. "In this class, [only] six were in the day care program last year," Ms. Notel said. "But they're all doing so well today."

The cubbies in the brightly decorated classroom had already been marked with the children's names. Next to them, in an envelope on the wall, was a stack of blank "ouch reports" waiting to document bumps and bruises through the year.

While the scene may look familiar, there are some subtle differences from the nursery school of old. An area that might have been designated as a play kitchen, for example, today is one of several "learning labs." Curriculum changes, some due to New York State's recent push for universal prekindergarten, have molded a program unlike the one many adults may remember.

"Nationally, it's more structured," said Maureen Wikane, a former kindergarten teacher who has been director of the day care center on Gingerbread Lane for 11 years. "The skills that we're addressing to a 4-year-old are what you might have



On the first day of prekindergarten, Arlene Notel's class already had the basics nailed down: They learned to sit on the "listening rug," cross their legs, and raise their hands to answer a question. *Kate Maier Photos*

seen in the kindergarten experience years ago."

"I don't think people understand that, traditionally, the nursery experience was dependent on the skills of the teacher," she said. At the center, all the teachers and their aides are certified.

"This is a balanced curriculum, articulated with John Marshall," Ms. Wikane said of the East Hampton elementary school most prekindergartners will move

on to. "They're getting a full range of exposure, in each of the domains." Yoga, music, and fitness are all part of the day-to-day activities.

Ms. Wikane sees the formative years as an excellent opportunity to allow children to latch onto learning and socialization. "Developmentally, at this age, they are so open," she said, but that openness is fleeting. Once they grow up

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even just a little, "they can't ever get that back."

Another set of challenges has also entered the picture recently. Across the hallway, Sandra McLaughlin estimated that about a quarter to a third of her students spoke limited English or were bilingual.

At the age of 3 and 4, kids are capable of making amazing strides, however. The language gap narrows rather quickly between the children, and, "by the end of the year, some of them will be sight reading."

Although there are some bilingual teachers at the center, children are thrown together in what is known as an "immersion" process. For those whose first language is English, she said, "in a way, it's nice, because they become like mini-teachers themselves."

"They know how to do it," Ms. McLaughlin said as a mixed group of 4-year-olds gathered around a table to draw and play, seemingly unaware of the social boundaries they were transgressing.

Starting language studies early makes a major difference in elementary school and even before then. "You can imagine what it does with the kindergarten experience," Ms. Wikane said. "By the time they graduate, their conversational language is developed. It's very helpful."

Now that the state has required East End school districts to subsidize prekindergarten programs, the door is open for more children to participate. However, like many unfunded education mandates, it presents budgeting problems. "The state came out with universal prekindergarten but didn't fund it," Ms. Wikane said. "We had to figure out ways."

At the center, where only the half-day 4-year-old class is paid for by the school district, "we do have a huge fund-raising effort, to maintain the budget," she said.

In families with two working parents, the environment at the day care center is far more stimulating than a few hours of television with a babysitter. "For working parents, these children might not be in prekindergarten because they can't manage otherwise," she said.

When East Hampton's half-day prekindergarten program ends, about half the kids stay on for the rest of the day, when the class transitions into 4-year-old day care. Parents pay \$160 per week to have their kids stay until 5 p.m.

"There is a rest period," Ms. Wikane said. "We feed them a hot lunch and two snacks."

Recently, East Hampton school officials attempted to change the prekindergarten cutoff date, citing developmental differences between 3 and 4-year-olds. No matter where the cutoff falls, "there's almost a whole year of difference" among the students, Ms. Wikane said.

"But we are able to individualize the program. I feel like we're able to address the needs of each individual student."

"It's very unusual for a child not to have prekindergarten," said Jennifer Tarbet, the principal of the John M. Marshall Elementary School, who reported not a single tear on the first day of kindergarten this year. The screaming and separation anxiety that goes along with the first day of kindergarten for many young children has already been played out in day care. As children are immersed in programs at increasingly younger ages, however, even that difference becomes less apparent among them.

"This little one has never been in a program before. It's going to take some time," said Ms. Wikane of a little boy who was still clutching his mother's shirt outside the room after class had started.

It doesn't take long before she sees children progress, she said. "This six-week period is very much a settling time. By Halloween, it really comes together. By Thanksgiving, that's when the whole development thing really seems to even out a bit."

"This is a good year, nobody's screaming," Ms. McLaughlin said before her class started. A bewildered-looking little boy holding a blanket sniffled behind her while his classmates romped around the room.

"Sometimes, they haven't had anything when they come here, which is really difficult," she said, while other kids have been coming to the center since the age of 1 1/2.

As she spoke a young boy named Hudson toddled across the room to quiz her. "When do we go outside, and when will we do yoga?" he asked before approaching his less-social peer, encouraging him to leave the teacher's side and come play.

With a little bit of direction, the hope is that by the time they both reach kindergarten, the differences between Hudson and the boy with the blanket will be indistinguishable.