

**WHY PLAY IS VITAL IN PRESCHOOL:  
DEY'S RESPONSE TO THE *NEW YORK TIMES* REPORT  
SUPPORTING FLASH CARDS OVER FREE PLAY**

by Diane Levin for DEY\*

At Defending the Early Years (DEY; [www.deyproject.org](http://www.deyproject.org)) we work to promote appropriate educational practice in early childhood. Dana Goldstein's May 30<sup>th</sup> article, "[Free Play or Flashcards? New Study Nods to More Rigorous Preschools](#)" (*NY Times*, 5/30/17) not only left us puzzled but raised several important questions.

Should a study that found a 2½-month gain in academic skills when taught in preschool influence early childhood policy and practice? How can one argue for giving up big chunks of playtime for academic teaching to make such minimal gains in academic performance—with little consideration of what other areas might have lost out because of the focus on academic skills? Studies of Head Start programs that taught academic skills to preschoolers in the 1960's and 1970's found that gains made in academic performance over children in more play-based Head Start programs were generally gone by second grade (i.e., "fade out effect," as mentioned in the article). Furthermore, research in many European countries, which do not start formal reading instruction until age seven, shows that starting formal teaching of reading earlier has little benefit.

Play-based early childhood programs are all-too-often misunderstood. Just having play in a preschool is not enough, as *all play is not the same*. When a child dabbles from one activity to another, tries out one material and then the next, and/or does the same activity day-after-day, this is not quality play or, necessarily, even play. And, even when a child does become more fully engaged in an activity that develops over time and is meaningful play, teachers have a vital role facilitating the play to help the child take it further. The teacher also makes decisions about how to integrate more formal early literacy and math skills into the play—for instance, by helping a child dictate stories about his painting and pointing out some of the key words and letters involved, etc. The teacher can then help the child "read" the story at a class meeting. With block building, the teacher and child might discuss shapes, as she tries to find the right shape for her structure.

This kind of intentional teacher-facilitated learning through play contributes to the many foundational skills children need for later school success, including self-regulation, social skills, creativity, original thinking, oral language development, eye-hand coordination, pre-literacy and math skills, and positive attitudes toward problem solving. And, in the long run, these

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foundational skills are much more important for how children will feel about and perform later in school than the 2½ months gain they might obtain from the early skill instruction received in preschool, as reported in the *New York Times* article.

Rather than debating over free play versus flashcards, perhaps we should be asking the bigger questions:

1. Why are years of research on the benefits of quality play in preschool programs so often ignored?
2. Why is it assumed that academic skills are so important to emphasize in preschool rather than a focus on the development of the “whole child” and foundational skills that prepare children for school success in the later years?
3. Why are play and learning so often treated as if they are *dichotomous*, as they seem to be in this report?