

High-Quality Preschool: Why We Need It and What It Looks Like

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Research has consistently shown that 3- and 4-year-olds who attend a high-quality preschool succeed at a higher rate in kindergarten and beyond—both academically and socially. But the majority of preschool programs in the United States rank below “good”, with many rated far lower.

Many of our most vulnerable children attend the lowest quality programs, and children who are at risk for school failure are more strongly influenced by the quality of preschool. Many children from middle-class families also attend preschools that are not of good quality.

Momentum is building across the country to develop more high-quality preschool programs. Therefore, it's crucial to have a clear vision of what high-quality preschool programs look like.

What We Know

- **The quality of early education and care significantly influences academic and social development.**
- **High-quality, early childhood programs benefit disadvantaged children into adulthood.**
- **Children who are at risk for school failure receive the greatest benefit from the quality of preschool.**
- **The average quality of preschool is less than good--too low to be effective educationally.**
- **Many vulnerable children attend the lowest quality programs.**
- **Many children from middle-class families also attend preschool programs of mediocre quality.**

Policy Recommendations

- **Develop state standards for all preschool programs.**
- **Raise teacher salaries and benefits to levels similar to those of K-12 counterparts.**
- **Develop valid measures of early educational quality incorporating recent research on early literacy, mathematical, scientific, and social-emotional learning.**
- **Provide continuous training and quality improvement efforts to all preschool teachers and programs.**
- **Work together at federal, state, and local level to establish a coordinated system of high-quality education and care for all 3- and 4-year olds.**

Rating Preschool Quality on Process and Structure

Preschool programs are typically rated on two dimensions of quality – process quality, which involves direct experiences such as teacher-child relationships, and structural quality, which involves elements such as class size and teacher qualifications. Both process and structural quality are critical factors to the effectiveness of a child’s education.

Dimensions of High Quality Focus on All Program Participants

The features of a high-quality preschool program focus on what is critical for the child, family, teacher, curriculum, and classroom.

Critical for Children

Children are respected, nurtured, challenged, and encouraged to make meaningful decisions.

They enjoy close, warm relationships with the adults and other children in their classroom. They do not spend long periods of time waiting, being ignored, or isolated. Children enjoy and look forward to school.

The child’s home language and culture is respected, appreciated, and incorporated into the classroom curriculum.

Classrooms are busy with conversations, projects, experiments, reading and building activities. The materials and activities are individualized and challenge children’s intellectual development.

Children have an opportunity to learn basic school readiness skills, using the child’s natural curiosity as a powerful motivator.

Critical for Families

Family members are included as partners in all aspects of the educational program and home culture is incorporated into all communications.

Parents can improve their educational and/or parenting skills.

Critical for Teachers, Curriculum, and Classrooms

Teachers have at least a four-year college degree and specific training in early childhood education and are paid accordingly.

Teachers have frequent, meaningful interactions with children. Important concepts such as mathematics and early literacy are taught through projects, everyday experiences, collaborative activities, and active curriculum.

Each child’s progress is assessed and necessary adjustments made on a regular basis.

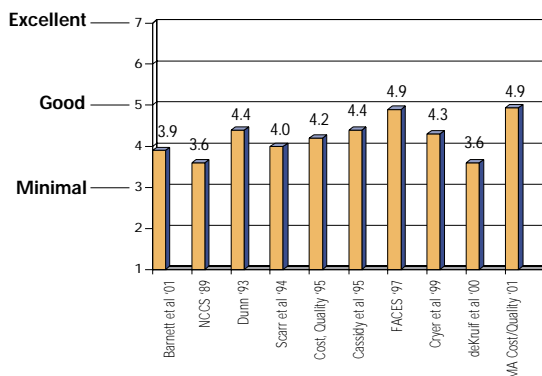
The curriculum incorporates specified goals, expected outcomes, and assessment procedures.

Research proves that young children are more capable learners and can benefit more from good early education than previously thought.

However, most of America’s young children do not attend high-quality preschool programs.

Most youngsters attend programs rated lower than what is necessary for the preschool even to reach a ‘good’ rating.

Average Quality Scores (ECERS)* in 10 U.S. Studies



*The Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale (ECERS) is widely used in early education research to measure process quality. In 10 studies across multiple states, the average overall ECERS score did not reach 5.0, the minimum level to be judged as “good.” These findings create concern about the quality of experiences provided to most young children in typical programs with even the best programs researched falling below “good.”