

Maybe Preschool Is the Problem

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Published: May 22, 2005

IF six out of every 1,000 preschool children are asked to pack up their Goldfish crackers and never return to nursery school - expelled at the tender age of 4 - whose fault is that?

"Two-career families" - code words for working mothers - would be the easiest target, followed by violent cartoons or some electronic toy.

But maybe, some education experts say, the problems stem from preschool itself.

A new study released last week by the Yale Child Study Center found that preschool children are three times as likely to be expelled as children in primary school, and that roughly 5,000 preschool children are turned out each year.

The study, the first of its kind, did not come to conclude what leads to the expellable behavior. And clearly a well-established list of attributes - poverty, clinical disorders, inconsistent parenting - contribute to the poor behavior.

But numerous experts on early childhood argue that the current structure and expectations of modern preschool, in which block sets and dress-up rooms are often replaced with alphabet drills and quiet desk work, may be culpable as well.

It turns out that not only are 8-year-olds expected to excel in schools and standardized tests, but 4-year-olds are expected to excel as well.

"There is a push now to making preschools more academic and less focused on social skill development," said John Boekamp, a clinical

assistant professor of psychiatry and human behavior at Brown Medical School, who works with young children with serious behavioral problems.

Previously, mastery of one skill, self-regulation, had typically been a major focus of preschool," Mr. Boekamp explained. "It is pretty clear that this is an important facet of preschool education."

Indeed toddlers are a self-centered lot, as anyone who has spent more than an hour with one knows. They require a lot of coaching for a world in which crayons are shared, the feelings of others are paramount, and games of Candyland can be lost without tantrums.

Traditionally nursery school has been the place where those skills are acquired, and where socialization has been the primary lesson. But as the educational pendulum in the United States has swung toward emphasizing standardized tests and enhanced academic achievement, the focus of many preschools has changed as well.

"The notion of standards are coming down almost to the embryo," said Adele Brodtkin, a psychologist and child development consultant. "We are not allowing normal, creative, interactive play. We are wanting kids to sit down and write their names at 3 and do rote tasks that are extremely boring at a young age."

Dr. Brodtkin and others argue that when children are pushed toward activities or a curriculum that is above their skill or age level, frustration and bad behavior are often the result.

The push for academic-centered preschooling has not happened in a vacuum. State and federal policies, particularly the No Child Left Behind Act, signed by President Bush in 2002, require states and local school systems to meet tough new academic expectations or face consequences.

Supporters of these programs argue that strong academic preschool programs will help equalize an

educational system that has been bifurcated between rich and poor districts for decades.

Behavior modification, they argue, should take place at home, even if in many homes it doesn't. "Modern parenting practices are failing to cure toddlerhood, which is the most pathological stage of human development," said John Rosemond, a syndicated columnist and advocate of traditional parenting. "I tell people it is a measure of God's mercy that we don't grow to full size in one or two years."

Proponents of education equity are critical of government programs like Head Start, which are less academic and more focused on emotional and behavior issues.

But these programs, the Yale study found, had lower expulsion rates than faith-affiliated and other private preschools, which tend to stress academics.

In some centers, children are less expelled than fired. Day care centers dressed up as preschools were among those places that had a higher rate of expulsion, often, it seems, because children are not meeting up to their contractual obligation to behave.

"The historic mission of providing a child care is to provide a service to the parent, not service to a child," said Walter S. Gilliam, the Yale study's chief author. He added that because "the center is serving the parent's child care needs, not the child's educational needs," the day care center's goal is likely to be less about imparting social skills or pedagogy and more about maintaining a certain harmonious environment.

High expulsion rates also often flag a preschool's failure to provide support for its teachers. The study found, for instance, that expulsions were about twice as common in classrooms where teachers did not have access to mental health professionals.

"When teachers have access to behavioral psychologists and classroom management techniques," Dr. Gilliam said, "expulsion rates are cut in half."

Dr. Gilliam cited his own experience as a consultant in a Head Start school in Kentucky, where one preschool teacher once lamented to him that her students raced up through the center of her classroom as if it was a drag strip.

"I said, 'Why do you have a drag strip in the classroom?' " Dr. Gilliam said, and then helped the teacher move bookshelves and other furniture around the room, creating small isolated sections where children could interact in small groups, eliminating the center strip of floor in the room.

Certainly, disruptive children can destroy the classroom experience for the others. They can make a teacher's life miserable, sucking away her energy, good will and time. They can anger other parents, who in turn pressure schools to turn them out. It is often easiest, and perhaps better for other children in the classroom, to maintain high standards for discipline.

But, some experts wonder, whether standards are now just too high, at least for the preschool set.

"There are inappropriate expectations in this country," Dr. Brodtkin said. "There is this enormous worry about achievement and accomplishment."

Are behavioral flash cards far behind?