

# Elements of Early Childhood

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# Elements of Early Childhood Education

## Subcommittee: Early Childhood

### **Subcommittee Members:**

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### **Introduction**

The Early Childhood Education Subcommittee focused on the benefits and limitations of universal preschool programs. Throughout their research, they found data relating to school readiness, which includes closing the gap, social implications, and academic benefits, as well as research to support or deny the benefits of high quality programs, financial benefits of preschool enrollment, and societal effects of preschool.

### **Historical Overview**

Early childhood education encompasses the education of children between ages birth and five. Child development experts consider this a critical time for developing the foundations for

thinking. It is during this time, that a child develops linguistic, cognitive, social, emotional and regulatory skills needed to be successful in school (Bakken, Brown and Downing, 2017). In time's past, these skills were typically developed with the help of adults in the home. Today's early childhood programs are a result of a gradual transition from home to the first step of the education ladder. The purpose and expectations of early childhood, in its origin, differs greatly from what we are experiencing today. As we trace through history, it is evident that Early Childhood Programs were influenced both by the needs of the children and the needs of society.

The schooling of young children had been the sole responsibility of the home or church from antiquity to around 1700s. The emphasis was on social skills and good behavior, the arts, and practical practices of life. Learning numbers and letters were typically the responsibility of the mother or nanny.

In more modern times, the responsibility of early childhood is moving more and more away from the home. It is now socially acceptable for the child to be educated outside the home at an early age. The work of John Amos Comenius, John Locke and Jean Jacques Rousseau developed the philosophical framework for Early Childhood. Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi, Friedrich Froebel, Maria Montessori, and Rudolf Steiner created the curriculum and methodology that generated programs which were specific to the needs of the young child. The work of Sigmund Freud, Jean Piaget and Erik Erikson solidified the philosophy. All of their work was cemented by one common thread, Early Childhood Education starts with the child and not with the subject matter. They all concurred that Early Childhood Education must be adapted to meet the nurturing needs and interests of the child (Elkind, 2007).

In 1837, Friedrich created the first kindergarten program in Germany. He believed

children acquire skills by using their natural curiosity and desire to learn. To that end, kindergarten programs included music, nature study, stories, dramatic play, crafts, puzzles and manipulatives. The importance of learning in a group was also highlighted with the introduction of circle time. In the United States, Margarethe Schurz opened the first kindergarten in Watertown, Wisconsin, in 1856 for her immigrant German community. Elizabeth Peabody started the first American English-language kindergarten in Boston in 1860.

In the 1900s, we saw a shift in purpose. Immigration and the Industrial Era provided a need for the supervision of children away from the home. Kindergarten programs were used to fight crime and prevent poverty (Milligen, 2012). The goal was not so much to teach reading and writing but to develop cognitive and emotional skills -- to teach the whole child (Elkind, 2007). A secondary purpose was to provide a healthy environment for children while their mothers worked in the factories. It was not until the 1900's that we saw a real shift in purpose. Kindergarten programs were used to engage students in learning at an early age to prevent poverty (Milligen, 2012).

In 1965, the Head Start Program was launched. This program brought a renewed interest in preschool. The program was seen as a way to combat poverty and low student achievement in economically disadvantaged school districts. According to the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER), there is a push down of expectations on our youngest learners and a need to provide support for these new expectations. Under the Bush and Obama administrations the benefits of preschool were revisited to help close the achievement gap for our students at risk. The issue of "quality" came to the forefront, and revamping of programs took place. From 2007 to today, the percentage of Head Start teachers with bachelor's degrees

increased from 38 percent to 74 percent significantly increasing the quality of teaching in Head Start. Because of these improvements, millions of our nation's most at-risk children entered school in the of fall 2017 more ready than in years past. The Obama administration is responsible for the finalized new Head Start Performance Standards which included a process for a data-informed checks and balances and encouraging the use of certified teachers in all Head Start Programs (Mead, 2017).

According to National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) report, “Preschool, A State by State Update” (2017), 43 states, plus the District of Columbia and Guam, provide publicly funded preschool. Approximately 1.5 million 3 and 4 year old children across the country are attending publicly funded preschools. Florida, Oklahoma, Wisconsin, and the District of Columbia each serve more than 70 percent of their 4 year-olds. Another 18 states serve more than a third of these children. According to NIEER, seven states don’t fund preschool at all.

New Jersey offers free universal preschool in 35 low-income cities and towns and currently has more than 47,000 3 and 4 year olds enrolled. A preschool expansion for low-income 4-year-olds in 17 additional districts began this fall, and a push is underway to expand universal preschool to another 90 districts. Our public preschools are often considered a model for the rest of the country. The research supports that New Jersey preschools have significant and sustained effects on student achievement. (Rinde, 2015)

In 2017, kindergarten programs vary greatly across the country. Inequity in the types of opportunities offered to kindergarten students are apparent countrywide. According to the Education Commission of the States (2013), children are not receiving fair and equitable early

childhood experiences. Fifteen states plus DC mandate kindergarten attendance. Most states require districts to offer at least a voluntary half-day program. Alaska, Idaho, New Jersey, New York, and Pennsylvania are the exceptions. According to Melissa Stager, Somerset County Education Specialist, only three districts do not presently offer full day kindergarten in Somerset County: Bridgewater (who is planning to implement one in the near future), Hillsborough Township, and Montgomery. In New Jersey, universal preschool and full day kindergarten are mandated in School Authority Development (SAD) Districts.