

Work Hard, Play Hard:
The Jumpstart Philosophy of Early Childhood Development
by Hannah Beaty

Situation One: Teachers pass out coloring-book pages and crayons and warn the preschoolers to color inside the lines. One wall of the classroom holds a bulletin board on which all of the students' names are written, with sections reserved for gold stars. Once the children finish their coloring sheets, they are told where to play and what materials they are allowed to use. The teachers ignore the steps a child takes to complete a task in favor of a focus on the students' final products. When the children cause a conflict, teachers immediately yell, "No," and put children into corners for time-out. When teachers read books to the children, they do not allow for interruptions or discussion. At the end of the day, parents pick up their children with nothing more than a nod to the teacher.

Situation Two: Teachers inform the children that it is "art time" and encouraged children to use whatever art supplies are available in the classroom. The children's completed artwork adorns the walls with splashes of different colors and evidence of different textures and shapes. Once the children finish with their art projects and have used many different materials to complete their masterpieces, the teachers give the children the choice of play areas. The teachers remain participants or at least active observers during most parts of each child's creative process. When a problem arises, the teachers take the time to define the difficulty and help children develop mutually acceptable solutions. During story time, students are encouraged to manipulate rhymes, guess what will happen next in narratives, and ask questions. At the end of the day, teachers chat with the parents about what their children accomplished, or if the parents cannot stick around to talk, a newsletter that states the day's activities is ready for them to take home to read.

These situations describe two different preschool classrooms. Situation One depicts a scene most common in preschool classrooms across the nation, but especially in urban, low-income areas. This scenario can be detrimental to the development of three- to five-year-olds because the routine of the classroom robs children of the freedom needed to grow through play. The second situation, however, describes the less common, but much more beneficial, Jumpstart classroom. Jumpstart is an AmeriCorps-sponsored program that focuses on preparing children for success in school; Jumpstart generally participates in urban areas, where it serves low-income families. With this type of classroom organization, preschoolers gain better cognitive and social skills through explorative play. The Jumpstart philosophy of early childhood education provides three- to five-year-olds the best opportunity for intellectual, motor, and social growth by focusing on family involvement, the dialogic reading method, process versus product, encouragement versus praise, adults as partners in play, and individual problem solving.

Family involvement can either make or break a child's foundational development. According to Rosalind Charlesworth, family "involvement with children and their schooling not only has positive effects on academic achievement but also on self-concept and moral and social development" (244). Importance should be placed on getting the family involved, or at least keeping the family informed of what its child is learning. Many different techniques can be used to activate family participation. Preschool teachers can create newsletters informing parents of what is being taught in the classroom. These newsletters can be placed in each child's mailbox, along with any artwork, worksheets, and other materials the child completed. The work and newsletters spark conversation between family members and the child, causing further learning about and reinforcement of subjects taught at school. Another suggestion for involvement is a traveling backpack. Teachers can provide a small backpack that holds a book, a sheet with questions, and possibly a

stuffed animal correlating with a character in the book. Families then read the book with their children, fill out the questions based on the book, and return the bag to pass along to others. The Jumpstart method of recall, however, most effectively transfers information of a child's learning to the parents by requiring corps members to facilitate a discussion between parent or guardian and child.

A key concept of "family involvement" is the fact that children need *family* involvement, not just *parental* involvement. The family is a support system that consists of not only parents or guardians, but also of siblings, grandparents, and other extended family members. Especially in low-income areas, children sometimes rely on older siblings for some of their basic needs. Therefore, major sources of encouragement for such children may come, not from a parent, but rather a big brother or sister. Older siblings and grandparents can make the same, if not greater, impacts on the development of children, so every effort must be made to include every familial aspect of a child's life in a child's education. If a sibling regularly picks up a Jumpstart child, instructors make sure to keep that sibling informed of the child's progress.

A final suggestion for the encouragement of family involvement is frequent family days or parent-teacher conferences. It is common for elementary schools to have parent-teacher conferences so that families are notified about what their children are learning. These conferences also should be instated at the preschool level in order to keep families knowledgeable. Many parents with preschool-aged children do not have time to talk with a teacher when they pick their children up from school; therefore, these parents may not know what their children do at school unless their children tell them. Parent-teacher conferences, then, bridge the distance between classroom and home, as do Jumpstart policies that invite parents to come early to pick up their children so that they can observe what is being learned during sessions.

As a Jumpstart Corps member, I have a partner-child named DonTavion. When he came to his first session, he already knew how to write his name, but he had not begun to read and write other words. Because his name was no longer a challenge to write, I asked him to write dates. At first, I would spell out words, because I was not sure how many letters DonTavion recognized outside of the letters in his name. However, once I realized that he knew all of the letters of the alphabet and their basic sounds, I started to help him sound out words so he could write them on his own. At the end of day one, I talked with DonTavion's father about what we had accomplished. DonTavion's father explained that he had been working with DonTavion on writing his name, and they now were focused on writing and reading other words. Because DonTavion's father and I had a conversation about what each of us were working on, we were able to determine which methods enabled DonTavion's learning process.

Another significant part of a child's development is his or her introduction to reading. Research shows that "the way we read to children is just as important as how frequently we read to them" (Handbook 68). According to Marilyn Segal and Don Adcock, "children who are drilled in reading before they show a spontaneous interest may develop negative feelings about the skill; it is a lot more productive to teach preschool children how to enjoy books than to teach them how to read" (138). In order to encourage children to like books, Jumpstart offers the dialogic reading method. The dialogic reading method involves "taking turns in a conversation about a book," whereby the child becomes the storyteller and "the role of the adult is to prompt the child with questions, expand the child's responses, and encourage the child's efforts to retell the story and name objects and actions in the book" (Handbook 68). The Jumpstart method of reading is much more beneficial to the child's learning process than simply having an adult read a book to a child. Instead

of being a passive listener and quickly becoming distracted, children become active participants, eager to share in the reading process.

The common method of sitting above children, reading the words on the page, and then showing pictures reaps no benefit for a child's knowledge of books and reading. The one-to-one reading of the Jumpstart method allows children to at least learn the basic concept of reading, even if they do not learn how to read the exact words on the pages. Children soon recognize the left-to-right motion involved in reading words, and they understand that the words on a page generally correspond with the pictures provided as they listen. Soon, they begin to recognize repeated words and associate certain sounds with combinations of letters. Before long, children are reading words themselves. In short, when a child is "an active participant in the reading experience, the child shows greater language gains" (Handbook 68). While an adult is reading a book to a child, they can engage in several different methods to create an active participant out of the child. For example, with rhyming books, the adult can pause at the end of the line for the child to fill in the blank. Adults also can prompt children to help read the repeated lines in books. These techniques "encourage children to listen to and use language" (Handbook 70). Before, during, and after reading a book, an adult can ask a child questions about the plot: what the child thinks will happen, what is happening, and what the child believes will happen next. This helps children with memory and recall, as well as using pictures as context clues to tell new stories. When adults have conversations about books with children, developments in language, cognition, and imagination occur.

Another major point of early childhood development is the process-versus-product dynamic. James Johnson, James Christie, and Thomas Yawkey agree with the Jumpstart idea that "means are more important than ends. This absence of pressure to achieve a goal frees children to try many different variations of the activity and is

a major reason play tends to be more flexible than goal-oriented play" (12). Product-oriented activities rob children of their imaginative and creative sides, taking the joy out of figuring things out for oneself and using one's own talents and skills to complete a goal.

Art activities provide one of the clearest examples of how the process of an activity can be much more meaningful than the end product. Coloring books offer little stimulation for artistic creativity. In place of them, adults can encourage creativity by providing a variety of materials from which children can choose: different colors and textures of paper, pipe cleaners, markers, crayons, chalk, tin foil, glue, scissors, and so forth. Children learn that there are more than one way of using art supplies. Because of this idea that the process is more important than the product, Jumpstart excels in providing process-oriented projects such as collages, self-made books, and paintings, whereas the typical classroom coloring sheet provides a child little room for imagination.

One distinct example of how process-oriented activities and the provision of various materials help a child develop sticks out in my mind. One day, I was playing in the block area of a classroom with DonTavion. He had informed me earlier that he wanted to play in the block area, and I went there with him to observe his actions. Instead of giving him a set of blocks to use and telling him to "make a building," I sat back and let him choose his materials. DonTavion picked out some wooden blocks and began placing some on top of others. When I asked him what he was doing, he informed me that he was building a "New Spiderman Tower." I continued to watch him build. After a while, however, he saw another child playing with some toy gears in which all the gears will turn when one is turned manually, if they are put together correctly. DonTavion found some gears, put them together, and then placed them in the middle of his tower. When I asked him what he was doing then, he told me that he now was building a "New Spiderman Clock Tower." He further explained

that the gears with which he found the other child playing looked like the inside of a clock, so he decided to put them in his tower to transform it into a clock tower. This open-ended activity allowed DonTavion to use different materials to make connections between familiar things in his world—superheroes, buildings, the insides of clocks—in order to create something unique. A set activity with a single goal in mind would not have allowed DonTavion the freedom that informed his “New Spiderman Clock Tower.”

Throughout early childhood, children need some sort of affirmation. However, there can arise drastic differences in the attitudes of children who are *praised*, as compared to those who are *encouraged*. Praise is “an external motivator that does not foster the intrinsic motivation needed for active learning to occur” and “invites comparison and competition and increases children’s dependence on adults” (Handbook 31). Examples of praise are sayings such as “good job,” “nice work,” or, “beautiful.” Constant praise can cause five negative effects. Praise manipulates children into doing what an adult wants. Children can become “praise junkies” in which they “measure their worth in terms of how much praise they receive from adults.” Because praise is considered a judgment (even if positive), it steals the chance for children to take pleasure in what they did for themselves, instead of looking to an adult for affirmation. When praised constantly, children lose interest in their activities because they become focused on the verbal reward, rather than the activity itself. Finally, praise can reduce a child’s achievement because children become so focused on earning rewards that they are less likely to take risks (Handbook 31).

Encouragement, on the other hand, provides “support that is specific, genuine, and does not convey a value judgment” (Handbook 31). Adults can find ways of supporting what a child is doing without praise. By playing with children, adults show that the children’s activities are important and introduce new ideas to

them simultaneously. Instead of telling a child that he or she did a "good job" on activity, an adult can encourage a child by talking to him or her about what was done and how it was achieved. Taking the time to talk to a child shows much more interest than does a "nice work." Finally, adults can show that they care about what a child is doing by repeating and restating what a child says about his or her work to show that the adult truly is listening (Handbook 32). A "good job" here and there will not ruin a child's development, but adults should try to avoid praise and use encouragement instead.

One day during classroom assistance time, I witnessed an example of the effects of too much praise. The children in the classroom were given the task of drawing rain. Most of the children drew something that resembled a cloud with lines representing rain drops descending from it. One little girl, however, drew spirals similar to those of a tornado. She explained to me that the violent lines were a thunderstorm and seemed proud of her work. However, she noticed the teacher praising the raindrops of the children around her and became upset when she did not receive praise as well. She soon gave up drawing her thunderstorm and started over on the other side of the paper, drawing raindrops just like those of her classmates. Because of the praise given and not given, this little girl was robbed of her individuality. If the teacher had followed the Jumpstart practice of encouragement instead of praise, the little girl would have finished her storm and been confident in her ability to depict the weather.

Another major Jumpstart idea to keep in mind is that of adults serving as partners in play. Instead of sitting back and watching children play or telling a child how to play, adults should use the Jumpstart method of getting on the child's level. If a child decides that he or she wants to play in a housekeeping area and use a banana as a phone, the adult should not tell the child that the banana is not a phone, but instead pick up another banana and begin a "phone conversation" with

the child. One major concern with being a partner in play is remembering that preschoolers do not have the same level of fine-motor skills as do adults. This statement may seem obvious, but adults often forget that some things come much more slowly to children. If adults do not keep this fact in mind, play can be debilitating to a child's self-esteem.

Imagine a child and an adult playing with Playdough. The child decides he wants to make a pig. He squishes the dough until he has what he decides is a pig. In the middle of his process, however, the child looks over to see what the adult is doing and notices that the adult has created an intricate, realistic-looking pig. One of two things will happen next. Either the child will announce that he cannot make a pig, or he will ask the adult to make a pig for him. The child has lost confidence and will not try to make another pig. In order to avoid this situation, adults should play on the same level as children, almost copying the work children do in order not to discourage creativity and initiative.

A final aspect of early childhood development Jumpstart approaches well is independent problem solving. Adults need to allow children to solve their own problems and do certain things for themselves. The Jumpstart method of problem solving involves steps adults can take in order to allow children to do so. If two children are fighting over the use of a toy, an adult can be a moderator, rather than a judge. The adult should get on the children's level and take the toy away from both children in order to allow for concentration. The adult then should acknowledge that each child looks upset and give each child the chance to explain the problem. Once the children have given their sides of the story, the adult then should repeat back what each child has said so the children know the adult listened. Next, the adult should ask what the children should do to fix the problem. Occasionally, by this point, one or both of the children have lost interest and moved on to different toys, in which case the problem is solved. However, if both children still are paying

attention, they must come up with a solution so there is no more fighting. Whatever solution the children come up with (within reason) and agree upon, the adult must make sure that they follow through with it. Even if the children decide that one child gets the toy for two minutes and the other child gets the toy for fifteen minutes, as long as they agree upon that solution, the adult needs to comply with the decision. This approach to problem solving creates opportunities for children to take responsibility for their actions.

Because I work in an urban area where many low-income families live, I have seen the effects that alternative teaching methods of Jumpstart can have on children. One child, Ivani, constantly was told "no" by teachers. The teachers labeled her as a troublemaker, and one even went so far as to tell us that she was "stupid." Because Ivani was not exposed to the Jumpstart method, she seemed to be behind her classmates academically. However, in the Jumpstart classroom where these methods are implemented, she impressed many Corps members with her intelligence. The encouragement and support she received in Jumpstart allowed her to become confident in her abilities, despite what her teachers told her, and she excelled in kindergarten.

Jumpstart methods are not difficult to understand, nor are they difficult to implement. Preschool teachers need only apply these methods to their classrooms to develop a group of confident, intelligent, successful children. Once students in the poor urban areas receive the educational foundation they need, cycles of poverty can be broken as children acquire tools for success.

Works Cited

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