

For 4-year-olds, interactions with teacher key to gains

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Pre-kindergartners who spend much of their classroom day engaged in so-called free-choice play with little input from teachers make smaller gains in early language and math skills than children who receive input from teachers in a range of different activity settings. Low-income children benefit particularly when a higher proportion of their time is spent in individual instruction settings.

Those are the findings of a new study that appears in the September/October 2010 issue of [Child Development](#).

"If [early childhood education](#) is to level the playing field by stimulating children's [academic development](#), more quality instructional time spent with teachers and less free play time without teacher guidance may prepare children better for starting kindergarten," according to Nina C. Chien, a postdoctoral fellow in pediatrics at the University of California at San Diego, who led the study (Chien was at the University of California at Los Angeles at the time of the study). "Our work has implications for policy and practice."

Chien and colleagues note that teachers who modify instruction to fit children's changing needs can do so during play settings by asking thought-provoking questions or using new words to describe what children are doing, so it's not a matter of play versus instruction. But it appears that play without such teacher input doesn't support learning to the same extent as contexts involving more introduction of instructional content by teachers.

In the study, researchers looked at more than 2,700 children enrolled in public pre-kindergarten programs in 11 U.S. states; more than half the children were poor. Based on their observations, they categorized the children according to the types of settings in which they spent the bulk of their time: Some spent most of their time freely choosing from a wide variety of educational materials to play with and less time engaging in pre-academic activities. Some spent a lot of time learning individually through teacher-directed activities, focusing more on fine motor and early literacy activities. Some spent much of their time in small- and whole-group instructional activities. And some were taught by teachers who worked across a range of individual and group settings.

The researchers found that children who were engaged in free-choice play made smaller gains in language and math than the other children. The free-choice play model involving limited teacher intentional instruction is popular in many early childhood classrooms—more than half the children in this study had free-choice play as their primary pattern of activities. The study suggests that this approach may not be best for children's early achievement. In the study, the researchers noted that the children who took part in free-choice play spent little time on academic activities.

The study also found that low-income children who were guided by teachers in individual instruction made greater gains than children who spent their time primarily in other activity settings. This finding lends support to the idea that low-income [children](#) do better in a program that's focused on learning, with more time spent in individualized instruction.

Provided by Society for Research in Child Development

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