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Maybe Preschool *is* the Problem -*Any* Preschool

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The New York Times reported last week that as many as 5,000 children are expelled from preschool programs each year. Researchers at the Yale Child Study Center released a research study that indicated an expulsion rate for preschoolers that ran three times higher than rates for school-age children. “In the past, in a school of 150 kids, you might have one or two kids with behavior problems, but now it may be up to 10 percent of the kids,” commented Susan Glaser, an educational psychologist and preschool director in Cleveland, Ohio. Surprised? Today, the paper is out with a commentary by Jennifer Steinhauer that argues that the problem might be what is expected of preschool programs.

In “Maybe Preschool Is the Problem,” Steinhauer argues that “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.” In other words, the problem is that preschool programs are now assigned the task of making very young children into students.

She cites John Boekamp, a clinical assistant professor of psychiatry and human behavior at Brown Medical School, who commented: “There is a push now to making preschools more academic and less focused on social skill development.” As Steinhauer pressed the point, “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.” Adele Brodtkin, identified as a psychologist and child development consultant, pressed even further, arguing that educational standards “are coming down almost to the embryo.”

As anyone who has ever known a preschooler already knows, children of this age are not meant for serious study. I am convinced that this observation misses the larger truth, however. Preschool children are not meant for institutionalized settings in the first place. What they need in the intimate and non-threatening context of the home, where they are not surrounded by a throng of fellow preschoolers, but by parental love, nurture, discipline, and instruction. Treating this as just one more institutional problem to solve is a failed project. The institutionalization of young children has been attempted or envisioned by various utopian and despotic regimes, ranging from Plato’s utopia to Israel’s experiment with the kibbutz. Children belong at home. Of course, don’t expect the “educational experts” to agree with that.

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