

# Introduction

**A** CHILD'S FIRST YEARS are filled with play and exploration. For a little one, this is a time of innocence, one of freedom and discovery. Parents are filled with boundless joy over their newest family addition. In the middle of the second year, there is often a change. Parents change. Their minds become troubled. They begin to worry: "Am I doing enough to develop my child's intellect? What more can I do? Should I send my son or daughter to preschool?" In the recent past, preschool years were not filled with such parental concerns; the unstructured time a child enjoyed with parents during the toddler years continued through the preschool years until the youngster was ready to begin elementary school. Why the change?

Many Americans now place greater value on the intellect than in the past. Parents want their children to have every opportunity, and many believe their children will have fewer employment options if they leave the nest without a college degree. They want their kids to go a top-notch college, even

if they themselves did not. But to gain admission, adolescents must be enrolled in a competitive high school. In order to get into the competitive high school, youngsters must attend a good junior high school. And of course to have even a remote chance of getting into the “good” junior high, a child must come from a fine elementary school. But the elementary school may prove elusive if parents did not find an elite preschool for their toddler!

Today children are spending more time in kindergarten; often free play and naps are sacrificed for reading and writing drills. In 1977, 27 percent of children attended full-day kindergarten; by 2001 that number was 60 percent.<sup>1</sup> Standardized tests have made their way into some kindergarten classrooms that evaluate their language arts, math, science, and social studies skills.<sup>2</sup> And in turn, these expectations create greater pressure for the academic achievement of preschool-aged children.

This sense of urgency has resulted in preschools, or “learning centers,” popping up everywhere; they seem to be on every street corner. Many churches have even jumped on the bandwagon and now offer preschool programs. With the increase in academic pressure, preschool school days are getting longer, the number of days a week is increasing, and children are starting at younger ages.

Tutoring centers originally designed for school-aged children who needed extra attention have now developed programs for preschool children whose parents are hoping to give them an edge. Some parents even go as far as hiring private tutors, with the goal of providing their children with a smarter start.

In some larger cities the competition to get into the best preschool is so fierce that admission requirements include testing, interviews, and stellar recommendations. Some parents even pay thousands of dollars for preschool consultants

to help their child get a coveted spot. For some preschools, long waiting lists are not uncommon. When we lived in Los Angeles, a work colleague said his son was on a waiting list for an elite preschool. The funny thing was, his bundle of pride and joy was still basking in his mother's womb. Plans were being made to put his child on the fast track, and he was not even born! This father-to-be then cautioned us not to delay making our own plans, even though we were newly married and had no children.

Product developers too are in high gear, creating the latest gadget to sharpen a youngster's intellect, promoted by marketing departments that promise your youngster will be Ivy League-bound if you just follow the instructions on the back of the package. Many of these products are based on scant research, if any, but feature a catchy name along with clever marketing. Often parents are being sold a bill of goods by being assured that the latest product will catapult their preschooler ahead of their peers intellectually. These promises come in all forms: videos, computer games, toys, and Web sites selling educational products.

We believe it is your responsibility as a parent to unlock your preschooler's intellectual potential, but we believe there is no shortcut or magic bullet. We urge you to create an intellectually *stimulating* environment, but not an intellectually *demanding* one. There is a tremendous difference.

## Intellectually Demanding Environment

In an intellectually demanding environment, parents place too much emphasis on the intellect. This is unfortunate for the parent and bad for the child. For the parent, it creates extra stress and anxiety when the time should be spent enjoying a child's early years. These parents are overly concerned with milestones. Questions haunt them, such as "Why doesn't

my child know all his letters?” “When should my child start reading?” and “Why can’t my child write his or her name?” They fear their child will be left behind or not do as well as his or her peers.

In an intellectually demanding home, the child fares far worse than his or her peers. The time that should be reserved for freedom and exploration is supplanted by a time of anxiety. A child feels compelled to fulfill high parental expectations; this is fertile ground in which the seeds of unhappiness are sewn. In this environment, a child may believe that the parent’s love is conditional—that in order to be loved, he or she must meet the lofty demands of the parent. Often this is not how the parent feels. In fact, many parents are doing what they believe is best for the youngster. Yet what is most relevant is not what the parent thinks but rather what the child perceives. If the child perceives a parent’s love is conditional at a time the youngster needs support and encouragement, it can be devastating.

One indication of an intellectually demanding environment is one in which a child spends too much time running from one activity to the next. Spanish class, art class, and music class may be great for a youngster, but not in the same afternoon. In general, too much formal instruction time replaces free play or interacting with parents or friends.

Another characteristic is when a child is confronted with activities before he or she is developmentally ready for them. If a child is pressured to perform beyond his or her developmental level—i.e., to understand letter sounds too early or to write before he or she possesses the fine motor skills—it can damage or destroy a child’s eagerness to learn, as well as his or her self-esteem.

## Intellectually Stimulating Environment

On the other hand, an intellectually stimulating environment is child-focused and physically and verbally engaging, as well as emotionally supportive. Instead of focusing on a child primarily as a budding intellect, such an environment fosters a holistic view of a child. And rather than racing to the next milestone, the parent realizes every child is unique and develops at his or her own pace. Each child has special gifts, and it is the parent's job to cultivate a child's talents and strengthen his or her weaknesses.

Parents who create an intellectually stimulating environment do not feel compelled to compare their child with his or her peers. The child is then less anxious because he or she feels loved unconditionally, regardless of his or her achievements. Such parents carefully select outside activities, yet they do not overly schedule the child. And since there are fewer time constraints, the youngster has more time to experience being a child. There is plenty of play time to enjoy toys, parents, and peers, as well as leisurely reading time. Of course most parents want their child to be smart; by creating a stimulating yet undemanding environment, such parents can be confident that they are doing the most to unlock a child's intellectual potential.

Just to be clear, as authors, experts, and parents, we endorse academic rigor, but not for the preschool-age child. Learning at this age should be experiential. In an intellectually stimulating environment, a preschooler's mind is best sharpened through age-appropriate enriching activities under the guidance of a loving parent.

And although we do recommend some classroom activities specifically designed for the young student, we recommend them in appropriate doses and at the right time: not long daily classes filled with busy work, but activities that in-

corporate learning through play. Choosing developmentally appropriate activities for your child will lay the groundwork for his or her intellectual achievements by creating curiosity and a love for learning.

## Creating the Right Environment

What you do in the early years will set precedents for your child for years to come. We wrote this book to help you create the best intellectually stimulating environment for your child. While there are many books about the cognitive development of infants and toddlers, fewer address children ages three to six, when the brain is going through tremendous changes; its capabilities greatly increase as the brain creates new connections and makes those existing more efficient. Growth and optimization of the preschooler's brain makes learning easier in the future. By following the methods and philosophy of this book, you will get your child off to a smarter start.

In a clear and accessible format, this book presents the latest quality research on developing a child's intellectual abilities. Then, based on co-author Renee's Masters of Counseling Psychology in Marriage and Family Therapy and her work with children in a clinical setting, combined with our first-hand knowledge from raising two children, we show you how to incorporate proven techniques into your daily routines.

Specifically, we will teach you how to develop the following capacities in your child:

- Critical thinking
- Problem solving
- General knowledge
- Pre-reading/reading skills
- Vocabulary
- Oral expression

- Oral comprehension
- Math skills
- Spatial ability
- Curiosity
- Creativity
- Love of learning

Following our approach, you will foster curiosity and a passion for learning in your child. You will train your preschooler to think analytically and develop problem-solving skills that will be valuable for a lifetime. You will improve communication with your child and build a stronger relationship with him or her. In turn, your youngster will respond with trust and curiosity and become a more emotionally healthy child.

To parents of children with developmental disabilities, please realize that our book is not meant as a substitute for professional help. And if you suspect your child may be outside the normal range of development, contact your pediatrician.

That said, we believe every child can benefit from our approach, whether a genius or more challenged, whether the youngster is enrolled in preschool or not.

—RENEE MOSIMAN and MIKE MOSIMAN, *November 2008*