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# Allow our kids time to play

## Formal schooling too early may be a counterproductive step

**KATE EMERY**

**M**y daughter has brought home her first report card.

What an exciting school milestone, surely? Pop it up on the fridge next to the painting of what might just as easily be a cat, a possum or a self-portrait.

The problem with the report card is that my daughter is not in Year One. She's not in pre-primary. She's not even in kindergarten.

My daughter has just completed her first year of day care and recently celebrated her fourth birthday.

So why did I find myself gloomily surveying that report card, ignoring the nice bits about her love of music and focusing instead on her inability to offer basic greetings in French. Merde!

In most respects I adore my daughter's day care. But the arrival of that report card has highlighted, for me, what childhood education experts have warned about for years: the "schoolification" of early childhood education and the erosion of play-based learning.

Increasingly, four-year-olds are expected to master the skills that my Generation Y cohort wouldn't have touched before school.

While my own kindy years were spent peeling glue from my fingers and creating artistic masterpieces for my parents — most of which would mysteriously never be seen again — kindy kids in 2021 are being held to a higher standard.

And if that sounds to ambitious parents like a strategy designed to maximise their child's potential, experts say it could have the opposite effect.

Writing on her blog, parenting expert Maggie Dent said the shift away from "unstructured play together with the impetus to lift our falling educational standards" has seen the loss of fun for kindy-aged children.

She has even heard stories of four-year-olds being assigned

homework. Murdoch University senior lecturer in early childhood education Sandra Hesterman has been vocal about the trend that has turned pre-primary into what Year One would have been 20 years ago.

For example, phonics that children now learn in kindergarten or pre-primary were being taught in Year Two just two decades ago.

The problem is that when there is pressure to meet literacy and numeracy standards, children get less time for play-based learning. And there is a wealth of evidence to suggest that is how children learn best.

In one paper, *Too Young to Fail: Standardising Literacy in the Early Years of Schooling*, Dr Hesterman described how standardised testing in early childhood education "overshadowed" teachers' work and "diminished opportunities for children to learn literacy through play-based learning approaches".

Dr Hesterman noted there was a "groundswell of

discontent" about the demise of play-based education, including a mismatch between the emphasis on play-based learning in early childhood education teacher courses, and the "limited opportunities" for play-based learning in action.

When it comes to early childhood education, Australia is no Robinson Crusoe.

One University of Virginia study, called *Is Kindergarten the New First Grade*, compared kindergarten teachers' expectations between 1998 and 2010.

It found that in 1998 just 30 per cent of teachers expected children should know how to read by the end of kindergarten. In 2010 that had risen to 80 per cent.

Jean Piaget, surely the world's most famous cognitive psychologist on what is admittedly a short list for most of us, had a nice — possibly apocryphal — anecdote about US attitudes to such things.

Supposedly he did not like speaking to American audiences because, inevitably, after he had delivered a lecture

on the natural progression of child development someone from the crowd would ask: "But how can we get them there faster?"

What countries, then, get it right?

Tired as I am of tugging my forelock in the general direction of Sweden — a



country designed to make others feel bad about themselves, the Angelina Jolie of the globe, if you will — the Scandinavian countries continue to be the pin-ups of the early childhood world.

In Sweden, for example, children start formal schooling at seven and attend pre-school before that. There are national pre-school “goals” but no specific benchmarks that children need to hit by a certain age. There is no formal testing until third grade.

A TIME article about the differences between US and Scandinavian countries put it like this:

“Forget flash cards, wall words and kindergarten readiness — Scandinavian parents are keener to have their young children climb trees and dig for earthworms than learn academic facts.”

I am not moving to Sweden. You are not moving to Sweden. My daughter is certainly not moving to Sweden.

It is up to us in WA, then, to think about the kind of early childhood education we want for our children.

My daughter’s ability to conjugate French verbs — or not — before her fifth birthday does not matter, unless I plan to find a chic Parisian for my second husband. (I do not, husband number one will be thrilled to learn.)

But my daughter’s experience in education now will shape her relationship with school, teachers and learning for years to come and that will help determine the kind of person she grows up to become and the future society she helps to create.

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