

Seeking an Early Learning Program for Your Child? Five Questions Every Parent Should Ask

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Today's parents recognize that economic success later in life is closely related to academic success during early age. As a nation, we lag behind most other developed countries in academic performance on reading, math and science. The nation has witnessed a palpable increase in calls for improving student performance in key subjects.

Consequently, the demand for early learning programs focused on academics has seen an unprecedented growth in recent years. With state funding unavailable for high quality pre-kindergarten (Pre-K) programs, parents have relied on private schools, Montessori, or Mothers' Day Out programs. With the summer learning loss that takes place among elementary school students, the need for engaging in some form of learning activities during the summer months has also been shown to deliver value in educational research.

But when selecting an early learning program, what should parents be looking for? Whether it be for Pre-K aged children or elementary school students, parents need to make sure that the early learning program that they choose offers results not only in the short-term, but also enhances a child's interest and self confidence in the learning process along the way. To ensure that an early learning program meets the needs of your child, parents should ask the following five questions when selecting:

1. Does the early learning program offer one-on-one instruction to build my child's academic confidence?
2. Does the program stimulate curiosity as a way to hold my child's attention?
3. Does the program make learning relevant for my child through use of games or other hands-on tools?
4. Does the program service pique my child's interest with latest technology?
5. Does the program demonstrate results of my child's performance with progress reports and evaluation?

Let's discuss each question in further detail to see why each is so important.

1. One-on-instruction

Individualized attention through one-on-one time with an adult offers children an opportunity to achieve mastery learning – which means not moving to the next lesson until ensuring that the previous lesson has been understood. As children move to advanced levels within a subject, they are more confident in dealing with those advanced levels only if they are well versed in the basic concepts. Moving them right along in locked step in a group situation only serves to hide their individual weaknesses and sends them into an unnecessary spiral of under-confidence if they happen to be lagging behind in a particular area.

2. Curiosity instead of control

Reading, math and science subjects work best when a child's inherent curiosity is nurtured. Some early learning programs pride themselves in managing students through repetition and control to achieve desired results. That is a short-term approach that turns

off a child from the excitement that subjects like science and math promise – and instead turns learning into a chore. Engaging a child’s attention through cartoon characters, scenarios, and examples is more likely to make learning an interactive experience at an early age that can spark their imagination further.

3. Use of learning games and hands-on tools

Games can help isolate and emphasize learning concepts effectively. Children find games a natural way to interact with their environment and learn concepts. Use of games in early education can reduce boredom and make reading, math or science concepts relevant for a child.

4. Use of Computers

Today’s children differ from the way their parents grew up for one single reason: Exposure to electronic media. Television, computer software and the Internet has brought up a generation that responds to such media for understanding and assimilating messages. Parents have an opportunity to turn their children’s interest into a learning opportunity by selecting early learning programs that use educational software in their repertoire of learning services. Use of educational software when under adult supervision has shown in studies to increase learning benefits. Moreover, it helps educators and care-givers to form an instant rapport with a child.

5. Use of Assessment

Age appropriate pre- and post-assessment in the form of periodic evaluation is valuable in understanding a child’s academic progress. To avoid making the process dull, boring or intimidating, the Early Learning Program should ensure a friendly assessment conditions, constant encouragement, and positive reinforcement along the way.

Conclusion

With current resource constraints at the state and Federal level for public education, especially at the pre-k level, teachers are mostly unable to offer the two most desired ingredients in early education:

1. Individualized attention; and
2. Personalized lesson plans.

When parents choose to invest in an early learning program, the program must in turn ensure that the parents are receiving the desired academic value in individualized attention and personalized lesson plans for their children. It is only by treating a child as unique individual can a teacher begin to uncover the true potential and personality of each.

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