The Crisis in Early Education
A Research-Based Case for More Play and Less Pressure
By Joan Almon and Edward Miller

“While early formal instruction may appear to show good test results at first, in the long term, in follow-up studies, such children have had no advantage. On the contrary, especially in the case of boys, subjecting to early formal instruction increases their tendency to distance themselves from the goals of schools, and to drop out of it, either mentally or physically.”
—Lilian G. Katz, Professor Emeritus, U of Illinois

The crisis in early education in the U.S. continues unabated. Policymakers persist in ignoring the huge discrepancy between what we know about how children learn and what we actually do in preschools and kindergartens.

Numerous studies—some extending over decades—show the effectiveness of play-based education that combines hands-on learning with child-initiated play. But research is largely ignored. Instead, short-term studies that show gains in discrete skills like letter and number recognition are increasingly used to justify didactic and even scripted instruction for young children—with disastrous effects for many of them.

The desire for early achievement is not new. The Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget, who died in 1980, mapped the stages of cognitive development in childhood. He frequently ran into what he called “the American question”: How can we speed up the pushing down of the elementary school curriculum into early childhood that combines hands-on learning with child-initiated play. But research is largely ignored. Instead, short-term studies that show gains in discrete skills like letter and number recognition are increasingly used to justify didactic and even scripted instruction for young children—with disastrous effects for many of them.

The Hartford Courant reported that Connecticut students in the earliest grades, including kindergarteners, are increasingly being having in ways that pose physical threats to themselves and others. Connecticut schools suspended or expelled 901 kindergartners for fighting, defiance, or temper tantrums in 2002; this was almost twice as many as in 2000.

One New Haven school official attributed the spike in violence among young children to the increasing emphasis on standardized testing and the elimination of time for recess, gym, and other chances to play. “It’s not like it was when we were kids, when you could expect to have an hour or so every day to play and explore,” she said. “That kind of time just isn’t there anymore.”

A Time magazine article in 2003 linked aggressive behaviors with rising academic pressure in kindergarten and first grade in anticipation of the yearly tests demanded by the No Child Left Behind Act. Stephen Hinshaw, a professor at the University of California, Berkeley and an expert in hyperactive disorders, spoke of the need for a broad-based kindergarten approach: “Even more vital than early

Teaching at Williams College, designed research to study curiosity in classrooms. During a series of school visits, however, she saw so few examples of children asking questions and expressing curiosity that she had to call off the study.16

The loss of curiosity has profound implications for education. Science and math educators increasingly speak of the need for inquiry-based learning, that is, a “focus on student constructed learning as opposed to teacher-transmitted information.”17 Ironically, student-initiated learning is exactly the way young children learn when allowed to play and engage in hands-on discovery. Many current approaches to kindergarteneducation inadvertently stifle experiential learning and curiosity in young children, which makes teaching advanced math and science in later grades more difficult.

An Urgent Need for Action
When the Alliance for Childhood began its campaign to restore play both in early education and outside school, we found other organizations committed to play. Each was doing important work, but each in its own silo. It was a perfect picture of parallel play that had not yet advanced to rich, social play. Once we began working (and playing) together, a movement was born. Play began to appear more regularly on the cultural radar screen.

We knew we had reached a critical point in this effort when the New York Times reported in January 2011 that “the movement to restore children’s play gains momentum.”18 This momentum must be continued and expanded. Educators must join forces with parents, pediatricians, child development experts, and enlightened policymakers to turn the tide in favor of a healthy and creative childhood for all children. Only concerted action by people from across the disciplines of children’s learning, health, and well-being will raise general awareness of the crisis.

It is time to launch a decade for childhood that will restore and preserve play-based early education. Join us in doing so.19
reading is the learning of play skills, which form the foundation of cognitive skills," he said. He pointed out that in Europe children are often not even allowed to read until age seven. “Insisting that they read at 5,” he said, “puts undue pressure on a child.”

**Time to Slow Down: Evidence from Abroad**

In the 1970s Germany embarked on a similar plan to push early learning—turning its kindergartens into centers for cognitive achievement. But a study compared 50 play-based classes with 50 early-learning centers and found that “by age ten the children who had played excelled over the others in a host of ways. They were more advanced in reading and mathematics and they were better adjusted socially and emotionally in school. They excelled in creativity and intelligence, oral expression, and gender. He found “no difference” by age 12 in the reading fluency and comprehension of the two groups.

Suggate’s third, longitudinal study looked at reading from first instruction to the primary school to see whether differences in school experiences and the primary curriculum at the two different types of schools would have accounted for the ability of Waldorf children to reach the same reading level as their state counterparts by age 12. He concluded:

One theory for the finding that an earlier beginning does not lead to a later advantage is that the most important early factors for later reading achievement, for most children, are language and learning experiences that are gained without formal reading instruction. Because later starters at reading are still learning through play, language, and interactions with adults, their long-term learning is not disadvantaged. Instead, these activities prepare the soil well for later development of reading. This research then raises the question, if there aren’t advantages to learning to read from the age of five, could there be disadvantages to starting teaching children to read earlier? … in other words, we could be putting them off."

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By age 23, when the study concluded, the direct instruction students showed serious problems in overall development:

- 47% of the DI students had needed special education, compared to only 6% of the other students;
- 34% had been arrested for a felony offense, compared with 9% of the others;
- 27% had been suspended from work, while none of the others had been;
- None of the DI students had married and were living with spouses, compared with 31% of the others;
- Only 11% of the DI students had ever done volunteer work, compared to about 43% of the others.

The results are clear: When at-risk children get inappropriate early education it has a lasting negative effect. Yet millions of young children in recent years have been subjected to schooling that demands too much too soon. We are not reducing the learning gap with such methods; we are intensifying the problems. It is time for educators and policymakers to adopt the rule that guides the medical community: First, do no harm.

**What Have We Lost?**

While schools focus on drilling literacy and math skills into young children, a few researchers are studying what is being lost. Creativity is one casualty. The Torrance creativity test, which has been millions of times over five decades in over 50 languages, is a better predictor than IQ of which students will become successful innovators in a host of professions.

When Kyung Hee Kim at the College of William & Mary analyzed almost 300,000 Torrsc researches of children and adults, Newsweek reported in 2010, “she found creativity scores had been steadily rising, just like IQ scores, until 1990. Since then, creativity scores have consistently inched down ward. ‘It’s very clear, and the decrease is very significant,’ Kim says. It is the scores of younger children in America—from kindergarten through sixth grade—for whom the decline is ‘most serious.’

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Finland guarantees high-quality child care for all. Most children do not enter child care until age three, as mothers get financial support if they choose to stay at home for that period. Support is especially strong in the first year, so that almost no children enter child care before age one.

Child care, generally called kindergarten in Finland, extends until age seven, when children enter first grade. The programs are play-based, with well-trained teachers and aides and low-child-adult ratios. For 6-year-olds, half-day programs are also available, usually in child care centers, which “place a slightly greater emphasis on academic preparation and language development than typical child care.” This slow but well-developed approach lays a strong foundation for school success.

Recent research by Sebastian Suggate of New Zealand’s University of Otago found no long-term gains from teaching children to read at age five compared to age seven. Suggate undertook his study because “he could not find any quantitative controlled study within the English-speaking world to ascertain whether later starting readers were at an advantage or disadvantage. He found only one methodologically weak study conducted in 1974, but nothing since that time. Yet people regularly insist that early reading is integral to a child’s later achievement and success. He admits to being surprised, therefore, by his own findings that this is not the case, even at age five. All took the same test at age 12. The study controlled for home literacy environments, family economic status, parental education, ethnicity, and gender. He found “no difference” by age 12 in the reading fluency and comprehension of the two groups.

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The Down Side of Speeding Up
The desire for a fast track to success, coupled with the push for tough standards and test-based accountability, has built a new superhighway without speed limits or guardrails.

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The crisis in early education can be found in the nation’s classrooms. For many children, the outcome of this hurried script is showing that children who read at age five do better in elementary school, whereas others do not. Yet there is no research showing that children who read at age five do better in elementary school. The push for early reading has been accompanied by the creation of state and national standards, which call for kindergartners to master more than 90 skills related to literacy and math, many intended to get children reading in kindergarten. Yet there is no research showing that children who read at age five do better in elementary school.

For many children, the outcomes of this hurried curriculum are unhealthy. Educators and physicians report increasing incidents of extreme and aggressive behavior in preschools and kindergartens and link these to the stress children experience in school.

When Walter Gilliam, head of the Child Study Center at Yale, surveyed almost 4,000 teachers from state-financed preschools, he learned that three- and four-year-old children were being expelled at three times the national rate for K-12 students. And 4.5 times more boys were being expelled from preschool than girls.

Gilliam’s data showed a correlation between the amount of dramatic play in preschool and expulsion rates—less play, more expulsions. Other researchers are examining rising rates of aggressive behavior in pre-K and kindergarten classrooms. The Alliance for Childhood’s Crisis in the Kindergarten documents several examples.

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