

# **Strong Early Elementary Education Is Key to a Child's Academic Success**

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All parents want their child to be successful in academics, but they do not know when to focus on the child's academics. It is quite natural for the parents of a 4-year-old to feel that their child is too young to stress over academics. They want the child to play and enjoy the early years, but in the process they are losing precious time for education. In the early years a child has a stronger ability to grasp new concepts than in later years when there are too many distractions. In the contemporary world, most play doesn't involve the kind of physical activity that is beneficial for the kid's growth. Today, our children's play mainly involves electronic gadgets. Certainly playing with these gadgets improves some of their critically needed skills, but, most of the time, if uncontrolled, the kids become addicted to electronic games, which takes away precious time from early elementary education. What has led to this situation is parents' and other relatives' excessive love towards the child, which makes them buy whatever the child asks. Parents feel that their child shouldn't be deprived of toys, which were sorely lacking in their own childhoods. What parents do not understand is that if you keep bowing to every demand of children, it makes them believe that things come easy in life, and what you need is just a wish. Isn't it so? It is OK if your child doesn't say every day that you are the greatest parent in the world. You want your child to say that you are the greatest parent after your child becomes a parent in future. Instant gratification is not necessarily a part of good parenting.

Parents frequently ask me, "What am I supposed to do now with my child? How can I engage my child? I can't play with the child all day." It is true that you can't play with the child all day, but you can create a situation for your child to engage him- or herself in a pursuit that frees him or her from boredom. Early reading development is the key to relieve your child from boredom. The ability to read early, preferably by age 5, is the key to your child's learning process. Therefore, you need to enroll your child in a quality pre-school at age 3. It is one of the important decisions you are making for

your child. Enquire your friends and neighbors about which pre-schools focus more on academics than on playing. Many pre-schools employ unqualified substandard teachers at low pay to maximize their profitability. These substandard teachers try to compensate the lack of their teaching skills with excessive play time. They tell you that the kids are supposed to play and that there is plenty of time ahead for learning. This is untrue. You need to look for a pre-school with a trained and passionate teacher to motivate your child—you need to do what it takes to make your child an early reader. Reading liberates young minds from boredom and accelerates the learning process. Often children who struggle academically are not strong readers. They can't read well because of poor vocabulary. It is obvious. How can a child learn well if he or she can't read well? Make sure that you read a book to your child every day. Tell the child stories of your own childhood and of the childhood lives of highly-accomplished historical figures. This inspires and motivates your child to learn. Vocabulary is the key to reading and writing. Start teaching the pronunciation and meaning of simple two- and three-letter words early on from the age of 4 and encourage them to read books with simple words. Help your child in reading and don't lose your patience if your expectations are not met right away. Some children initially need more time than others to develop proficiency in reading.

In math, while teaching numbers, you need to make sure that your children develop number sense. Involve them in grocery and regular household shopping. Start teaching application of mathematical operations like addition, subtraction, multiplication and division in real life situations. Early memorization of the multiplication table is the key to success in math. Both quickness and accuracy are important, and your child can improve these skills by actively participating in math competitions inside and outside school. In case your child's school does not offer any math competitions, check to see if any other organization in the area does. Do not let the child use a calculator to solve problems in

early elementary school education. The child may lose common sense if he or she gets used to the calculator early on.

To generate interest in science, buy simple science concept and science experiment books from any retail store, and encourage your child to conduct the experiments under your supervision. There are several science concepts your child can learn using household items like water, oil, eggs, salt, etc. Science books from the kindergarten level are available at market. Early exposure to science concepts promotes curiosity and analytical thinking. If the class teacher gives an opportunity, encourage the child to present his or her experimental findings to other students in the class. This boosts your child's self-confidence and public speaking skills.

Furthermore, the present generation has sharper minds than we give them credit for, and they can handle analytical reasoning problems very well if exposed to them early on. Schools do not expose the kids enough to problem solving that requires analytical skills. In many school districts, selection for the Gifted and Talented (GT) programs is based on the child's performance on a test that requires analytical thinking. Some children need lot of time to understand a question during the test if they have not seen such a question before. Most of the GT tests are timed, and the child will not be able to complete all the questions if the prior familiarity with such questions doesn't exist. So, it is a good idea to expose the child to questions requiring analytical skills before appearing for such tests.

Reading non-fiction books is another important aspect of a child's learning process. Non-fiction books improve your child's general knowledge and awareness of the present day world and its relation to the past and even to the future. Your child's persuasive writing skills depend on the knowledge of varied topics. Therefore, mix non-fiction books on varied topics with the fiction books in your child's reading list. Make sure that your child is reading books with age appropriate content. Some of the books are not good for your child's emotional growth. Librarians in the public libraries and in the school library can help you with picking age-appropriate books.

Also, participation in seasonal sports, especially group sports, will help your child to develop teamwork skills. Team sports and other team activities teach children the concepts of sharing and compromise, which help your child deal with both the exhilaration of victory and the agony of defeat. It is true that loosing shouldn't become a habit, but at the same time the child need not win everything. If your child should lose in an activity, don't belittle him or her. Console your child and encourage a renewed determination the next time around. In real life we don't get everything we want and win in everything.

Emotional growth of the child is very important. Let your child bond with cousins and friends. Don't compare your child with other children, especially with siblings, cousins and friends. This leads to the child developing animosity towards them. Involve grandparents, relatives and friends in your child's life. Children surrounded by family and friends tend to have excellent emotional growth. Involve your child in weekly religious schools—of course not to make religious zealots of them but to inculcate a value system. Never teach intolerance towards any religion, race or caste. Teach kindness and compassion towards people who need help by being an example. There isn't anything we could aptly call perfect parenting. Just do your best to raise your child. Over-parenting is not helpful to your child's growth. Learn to give breathing space to your child. Allow for the development of unique ideas and a unique personality. Give your child the chance to make some of his or her own decisions. Enjoy this journey with your child. Good luck and have fun.

*About the author:* The author is a professor of Electrical and Computer Engineering at the George Mason University, Fairfax, Virginia. He has authored or co-authored 4 book chapters and 130 technical research articles on various topics in several international journals. So far he has supervised 15 completed Ph.D. theses. He is passionate about early elementary school education. He has written books for kindergarten children and is the founder of Curie Learning LLC, which specializes in enrichment educational programs in the Washington, DC area for elementary- and middle-school children.

