



## Column: Trained staff, fun environment are key to preschool quality

By Julie Mack | Kalamazoo Gazette

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At first glance, a summer morning at a preschool program run by Kalamazoo Public Schools looked much more like a play group than a class.

Children in one corner were building block towers; another group was playing house. Several girls at a sandbox were pretending to make ice cream cones, with a teacher's aide encouraging their culinary imagination.

How much learning was going on here, really?

More than you might think.

The point of preschool is not so much to teach children their ABCs and numbers, but to get them thinking about how the world works. Building a block tower teaches rudimentary lessons about physics and engineering. Playing house in a group helps build language and communication skills. Creating imaginary ice cream cones fires youthful creative juices.



Julie Mack | Gazette Opinion

So what looks like play time is actually the sign of a high-quality preschool.

Last week I wrote about the importance of preschool. But not all preschools are created equal — and the quality tends to vary tremendously, especially in a state such as Michigan, in which anybody who meets day-care requirements can call their program a preschool.

Incidentally, last week's column on the importance of preschool included a line that said "day care is not preschool," which drew a flurry of e-mails from insulted day-care providers. But I'm sticking to my guns on this; the research shows that high-quality preschool is a distinct institution from day care.

But there is a caveat: Some day-care providers do embed a preschool program within their day (I sent my own children to such a program), so it is possible to get both preschool and day care in the same facility. The key is taking a close look at the program and using the same checklist one would use for other preschools: What is the training of the staff? How is the day structured? How many students are in a classroom? What is the curriculum?

"The No. 1 priority is the quality of the staff," says Kristi Carambula, who oversees early-childhood services for the Kalamazoo Regional Educational Service Agency.

A high-quality preschool should have lead teachers with degrees in early-childhood education, not just teachers who couldn't find a job in a K-12 school or nice people who like children.

A background in early-childhood development is important because those teachers are specifically trained in how to work with 3- and 4-year-olds to maximize their development. Those teachers also are "good detectives by helping to identify learning and development issues and by making sure children get the referrals that they need," Carambula said.

"Second, I would look at the environment," Carambula said. "I would want an environment where, if I got down on my knees, things are accessible to people my height. Too many times I see a preschool room with really nice stuff, but it's stored up and away from the kids, which I've never understood."

She also said she would want a preschool classroom that emphasizes "purposeful play" over academics. The point is not to make preschool a dumbed-down version of K-12 education but to lay a foundation for inquisitive learning, providing an opportunity for "exploration and discovery and learning how to own information," Carambula said. "It has to be fun. Too often, because of all the structure and all the goals, some of the joy leaves the room."

Group size also is important. There should be no more than 20 children in a classroom, and the adult-to-child ratio should be no more 1 to 10, which could include a lead teacher and an aide or two. In addition, the day should include time when children are allowed to break into smaller groups and choose from several activities.

In looking at the preschool's curriculum, "I would ask how your preschool's curriculum aligns with the school district that your child will attend," Carambula said. "If the (preschool officials) say they don't know, I would be concerned. They're shortchanging kids" if they're not checking with the local school district to make sure that children are adequately prepared for kindergarten.

A final piece of advice from Carambula: Preschool programs for low-income children, such as Head Start, can be every bit as good as costly private programs.

"You can buy quality preschool, but there are some excellent free preschools that meet the same criteria," Carambula said. "Kalamazoo is blessed with some quality private and public preschools."

*Julie Mack's column on parents and school success appears Tuesdays in the Kalamazoo Gazette. Are you a parent who needs advice on a school-related problem? Or a parent or educator with a strategy to share? E-mail [jmack@kalamazoogazette.com](mailto:jmack@kalamazoogazette.com) or call (269) 388-8578. Mack also has a blog on school-related issues at [blog.mlive.com/schoolzone](http://blog.mlive.com/schoolzone).*

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