

Preschool program preps kids for academic success through elementary school

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A program that helps low-income parents prepare their children for school has benefits that extend beyond kindergarten and into third grade, according to Penn State researchers.

The researchers found that the preschoolers of [parents](#) who participated in the program performed better academically, acquired better social emotional skills and needed fewer additional school services when they were in third grade.

Karen Bierman, Evan Pugh Professor of Psychology, said that because the transition from preschool to kindergarten is such an important period of development for children, she and the other researchers wanted to help parents—especially those of limited resources—set their kids up for success.

"Many of these families don't have the financial resources to seek out enrichment learning opportunities for their children the way people with more income might," Bierman said. "Many also lack access to optimal child care or preschools. This program can empower them and give them

things they can do in their own home. It decreases some of that resource gap."

The study—published today (June 4) in *JAMA Pediatrics*—also found that in addition to academic and social benefits for the child, parents who went through the program reported fewer problems with their child's behavior and also less stressful parenting.

The program was designed as an extension of the Head Start REDI (Research-based, Developmentally Informed) preschool program, which is a school-based program aimed at helping children from low-income families build skills to help them succeed in school.

"Both programs were designed to help children develop academic readiness skills, especially language and literacy skills, and also social emotional skills," Bierman said. "But while the classroom program involves teachers working with groups of kids, the at-home program is designed to help parents work with their child on these skills individually in a playful, intimate setting."

For example, Bierman described an activity in which the parent and child play restaurant. The program provides parents with a guide to set up the game and materials to use in the activity.

She said that while playing with their imagination is fun for the children, they also get to practice their letters and language skills as they take their parent's "order" and mix up alphabet soup. Additionally, the program teaches parents how to use picture books to start conversations with their kids about feelings and social problems.

"Essentially, our storybooks and conversation games give parents an easy way to get their children talking with them about their feelings and their social experiences," Bierman said. "These conversations show the children that their parents

are someone they can talk to about feelings and problems."

Bierman added that they try to emphasize how valuable it is to build up the parent-child relationship as a source of social support as children enter school, as well as a source of interesting activities and conversation.

"When children are used to talking with their parents about their feelings, they are able to use their parents to help them manage the everyday challenges they experience as they adjust to school," Bierman said.

While the researchers found that the children who participated in the program had better academic performance and social competence in kindergarten, the team wanted to see if those benefits would extend further on in their academic career.

Researchers took a group of 200 children and their families that had already participated in the REDI classroom program and split them into two groups: one that would participate in the REDI parenting program and a control group that would receive an alternative set of math learning games through the mail.

Several years later, when the children were in third grade, the researchers evaluated both groups of children to measure their academic performance, their social-emotional adjustment, problems at home and whether they used additional services at school.

"Earlier studies of the program showed that children had benefits in kindergarten, and this study helped us see that these benefits and gains sustained years later," Bierman said. "We saw that in third grade, the children were performing better academically and also had better social emotional skills, like being able to understand other people's feelings."

The researchers also found that the children who participated in the REDI parenting program participated in fewer school services, such as learning support, special education or counseling

for mental health. They also experienced fewer problems at home, as reported by the parent.

"This suggest that the program pays off over time," Bierman said. "If you strengthen that parent support right at the transition from preschool to kindergarten, children are more able to navigate both the academic and social demands of school over time. Also, when children are bringing problems home, parents may be more well set up to support their children with those issues."

Bierman said that in the future, the researchers will explore whether technology can be used to replace some of the face-to-face time with parents, making the program potentially more affordable for [school districts](#) to implement. The researchers will also continue to follow the [children](#) who participated in the program to see if they continue to experience benefits.

More information: *JAMA Pediatrics* (2018). [DOI: 10.1001/jamapediatrics.2018.1029](https://doi.org/10.1001/jamapediatrics.2018.1029)

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