

7 Reasons Worksheets are Damaging for Pre-schoolers' Development

By: Author Tanja Mcilroy

Categories Cognitive Development

Do you find yourself looking for worksheets to do with your preschool child at home? Are you tired of just watching your child play all day?

Perhaps seeing your child with a pen and paper seems more like real learning?

It's time to ask the real question. Are worksheets developmentally appropriate for pre-schoolers?

The main reason I started this blog is that I have a passion for talking about the benefits of play and explaining to parents and teachers how their children are learning.

Sometimes I'm not sure if I'm informing about the benefits of play or if I'm actually defending play.

In this day and age, there seems to be a trend towards formally educating young pre-schoolers, with the most popular aid being the worksheet.

Why There Should Be No Worksheets in Preschool

For many years now, theorists have researched child development and it is widely known and accepted that children learn through play.

Children don't just learn through play, they learn absolutely everything through play!

This happens during the first 6 years. Without play, they cannot learn to think, problem-solve, read, write or do maths.

Sadly, the trend over the last few years has become to formalise young children's education - to move it away from play towards more academic activities.

Sometimes the schools feel pressure to push children ahead, but often it is the parents who see more value in formal activities.

Workbooks and worksheets **are not** developmentally appropriate for pre-schoolers for many reasons.

When I was teaching preschool it was as if any activity that looked formal or was printed on a worksheet was seen as real learning and any kind of play activity was seen as passing time or having fun.... **This couldn't be further from the truth.**

In fact, any time your 3-year-old is working with pen and paper on a formal task is a great big **waste of his time.**

Here are 7 reasons why worksheets don't work and are actually damaging to kids' overall holistic development.

1. Gross Motor Skills

Let's start at the beginning. Children learn through their bodies. From the time they are born, they learn to discover their world through their bodies and through their senses.

Gross motor skills refer to a child's large muscle development.

A baby cannot hold a pencil and write because she has not yet learned to hold her head up, to sit straight, to walk, balance, etc.

Only after several years building these **large muscles** and developing the **small muscles** (known as fine motor), will she be able to hold a pencil and write with control.

Pre-schoolers should be spending most of their time running around outside, playing and working all the muscles in as many different movement activities as possible.

This, combined with lots of fine motor activities, will ensure your child is physically ready for school.

Not only do children need to be able to hold a pencil, but they also need to be able to **sit upright** for a fair amount of time and have **strong core muscles**.

They need balance, coordination, muscle tone and strength.

Movement also develops the actual **pathways in the brain, creating new connections.**

A small child's cognitive development has therefore not yet reached the point it needs to be at to start writing. Their time is best spent moving and developing their brain.

Movement develops a child's concentration span - a very important factor when asking a child to sit at a desk and work on a formal task.

2. Fine Motor Skills

As mentioned above, children then need to work on their fine motor skills. They naturally develop their large muscles before their small muscles.

Small muscles include those of the fingers, toes, tongue, eyes, etc.

Writing might seem like an appropriate fine motor activity for your child but it is actually the last piece of the puzzle.

Well-developed fine motor skills enable a child to write; writing does not build foundational fine motor skills.

There are so many activities that parents can choose from to develop fine motor skills. Here are a few examples:

- Painting with brushes of different sizes
- Drawing with large and small wax crayons
- Building puzzles
- Moulding playdough
- Cutting and pasting
- Drawing with pencil crayons
- Tearing
- Playing with pegboards
- Lacing and threading
- Drawing with jumbo or small chalk

If your child spends much of his time engaged in these kinds of activities, by the time he starts school, his fingers will be strong enough to hold a pencil and his body will be able to cope with the physical task of sitting for an extended period of time and writing.

It also takes time for children to learn to use the correct pencil grip. **If they are forced to write too early, they generally form an incorrect grip which can be very difficult to undo.**

3. Concentration Span

During the first few years, a child's concentration span is relative to their age. An appropriate length of time is roughly 2 to 3 minutes per year of age.

Therefore, a 3-year-old should be able to concentrate for between 6 and 9 minutes on one task at a time. [source]

He may play for longer than that, but will usually be swapping from one kind of activity to another.

Poor concentration span is one of the biggest problems seen in elementary and primary schools.

Spending time making your 3-year-olds fill in worksheets is **not helping** them build their attention span - if anything it is hurting it.

You are expecting your child to sit for an amount of time that is not age-appropriate for him.

One of the best ways to build concentration is through movement. So, although it may seem like a workbook is helping to improve your child's concentration, a better way to do this is to send them out to play.

4. Developmental Appropriateness

The preschool years are for learning through play. There is a multitude of research and evidence that backs this up.

There are some great studies that have been carried out in various schools and countries where they have tried to formalize education in the early years, in an attempt to better prepare their learners or speed up their development.

These studies show how children did not benefit educationally. It only impacted their learning negatively later on in their school career.

In most countries, children begin formal education at roughly the age of 6. Preschool is, therefore, a time of informal learning, and there **is no place for worksheets.**

In the study on formal instruction in Germany, in particular, children who **were given more academic instruction in preschool performed worse in reading** and mathematics by the fourth grade than those who had attended a play-based preschool!

Your child will be using workbooks for at least another **12 years** so they will not be missing out if they don't start in preschool.

5. Maturity

Little children need time to mature and grow.

You would never expect a new born baby to listen intently to a story or turn the pages of a book herself. However, we expect our 3-year-olds to sit down and do formal "work," in the belief that they will somehow learn quicker.

Here is a practical example. Every time I had a parent meeting at school, I would be asked the exact same question - "Does my child know the numbers and letters yet?"

A child has the ability to memorize the numbers to 100 and beyond, and they also have the ability to memorize the letters of the alphabet if they repeat it enough times. However, they don't have the maturity to actually understand what they represent or why they are meaningful.

A child who can count 6 actual, physical objects is more mathematically advanced than a child who can rote-count to 100 without stopping.

As for letters, memorizing the letter names does not have much to do with learning to read well.

If, for example, they have poor phonological awareness, they might know what a letter b is, but they could struggle to blend a b and r together in the word broom. This child may find reading challenging.

His time in preschool would have been better spent learning nursery rhymes and playing sound games in order to develop this skill. Then combining the sounds b and r would not be such a challenge later on.

Memorizing the letters b, a and t does not mean the child can blend them together or break them up when trying to decode the word bat. That is what pre-reading skills are for.

Learning at school should always be meaningful and aimed at a child's maturity level. The constant need to aim higher than where your child is at only results in frustration, a feeling of not achieving success and poor skill development.

6. Time to Play

Any time that is wasted on formal activities is replacing time when your children should actually be playing.

When your preschool child is drawing, singing, listening to stories, playing in the garden, climbing and building, she will have no shortage of play activities to fill up her day.

However, once you start introducing the formal workbook it has to be completed at the expense of real learning.

Throw in some screen time and children's playtime gets pushed to the end of the priority list.

7. Short-Term Strategies

Learning should be a long-term strategy.

Let's say a child is constructing a tower out of blocks. There are so many thought processes that go into this activity.

She has to think about how to build the physical structure and she has to solve problems as she goes along. One side may be shorter than another, or she may have difficulty balancing the tower.

A simple activity such as this is building long-term thinking and problem-solving strategies. Filling in a worksheet and tracing the letter b ten times is a very short-sighted strategy.

Because the tracing activity is not really meaningful to a child, he will retain the knowledge for a short period of time and probably be able to recognize the letter if you show it to him soon after; however, he hasn't really learned any life skills through the activity or any skills for working with and manipulating sounds.

I have come across so many programs designed to teach children as young as 3 to read. Amazingly, you can actually teach such a young child to read basic words with enough drill work and repetition.

However, monitor that little child over the next few years and there is no guarantee he will be reading at an age-appropriate level.

Why?

Because he has missed out on so many foundational skills. His auditory perception, visual perception, memory, understanding of rhyme and syllables, vocabulary and comprehension, concentration and maturity are all still developing.

English is a complex language made up of many sounds - not just the 26 letters of the alphabet. These change when they are joined together and they change based on their position in a word.

Some words follow no apparent phonemic rules. These are called sight words because they cannot be decoded according to a set of rules.

Your 3-year-old who was taught to read with a workbook is really going to struggle once he gets into the second or third grade and reading becomes about his level of auditory and visual perception.

In other words, it will depend on his ability to work with sounds and recognize familiar shapes and patterns, not his ability to recognize a single letter.

It is also important for him to be able to hear where each sound is in the word - in the beginning, middle or end.

What is a good long-term strategy for developing reading ability?

Something as simple as reciting nonsense rhymes with various sound patterns or playing a game of I-Spy. Spot words around the room that begin with a particular sound and your child will start to develop an ear for that sound.

What is Your Child Learning at Preschool?

If your child is coming home on a daily basis with photocopied worksheets, colouring pages or other kinds of formal activities, you can rest assured that either the teachers haven't studied early childhood development or the school is feeling pressure to show parents more "formal" learning.

What your child is learning in this environment is not ideal.

Here is a very amusing article titled "5 Things Children Learn at Preschool That Are a Waste of Time and Not Developmentally Appropriate". The author points out 5 things that she terms 'idiotic' and she is 100% correct.

Activities like reciting the days and months of the year every morning, craft projects with no individual creativity, workbooks, learning a letter a week for months on end, as well as listening to a teacher give a "lesson" are all a great big waste of your child's time. I couldn't agree with her more.

Here is an interesting quote from her article on the topic of workbooks:

"Nothing seems to impress uninformed parents more than workbooks. They have it in their heads that paper-pencil tasks are real learning. The rest of it—painting at the easel, digging in the sandbox, riding tricycles—all seems frivolous and hardly worth the cost of tuition.

When watching children play, they ask impatiently, "Why isn't the teacher teaching them anything?"

Preschool owners must keep their clients satisfied. Therefore, too many of them give in to parental demands for worksheets. It doesn't matter if they're for handwriting, math, reading, or phonics. If kids are sitting quietly at tables writing on them, these parents feel real learning is taking place and the kids are getting ready for kindergarten.

The owners know research doesn't support this. They know workbooks aren't developmentally appropriate. But they want to stay in business so they go with the flow, even though the children suffer."

SAY NO TO WORKBOOKS AND WORKSHEETS IN DAYCARE!!