

## EDUCATION TRENDS

### What's Lost When We Rush Kids Through Childhood

The author of *The Importance of Being Little* on the costs of our collective failure to see the world through the eyes of children.

Erika Christakis is a former faculty member of the Yale Child Study Center and the author of the best-selling book *The Importance of Being Little: What Young Children Really Need From Grownups*. Christakis says that we've reached a perilous moment for very young kids: Increasingly we treat them as commodities and find ourselves "in danger of losing the child in childhood." Instead of imposing adult expectations, she argues, parents and teachers should try to "take their blinders off" and see the world through the eyes of young children—a change in perspective that might allow us to better understand and cultivate their unique abilities.

I recently had the opportunity to ask her about our evolving cultural values around childhood, what good early educational environments look like, and how we can resist the tendency to "adultify" young children. The interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Your book on early childhood education is called *The Importance of Being Little*. Why is "being little" so important? What do you want parents, educators, and policy makers to know about this developmental stage? Traveling around the country, teaching and talking with parents and educators from a variety of backgrounds and environments, has persuaded me that we're in danger of losing the child in childhood. The notion that there is something of value in being a little kid—with little kid desires and, above all, needs—seems to have fallen out of favor. We talk about young children, increasingly, as commodities to "invest" in for future payoffs. Parents express enormous anxiety about

their children's futures, and seem to be curating their children's life experiences in a way that would look quite unnatural and even rather joyless to previous generations.

There's a weird paradox that early childhood is both safe and stressful. On the one hand, for most children, especially in the industrialized world, the early years are safer than they've ever been in human history. Children have fewer fatal accidents and debilitating diseases. We don't send children down coal mines to work. Of course there is poverty, stress, and trauma—and some of these problems affect very large numbers of children—but in general terms, many of the big 'killers' of childhood have been vanquished.

On the other hand, 21st-century American society poses many challenges for young children too. Technology is not always a friend to the young, and there are new and troubling stresses. We have an actual epidemic of preschool expulsions, for example (which disproportionately affect children of color and boys), and increasing numbers of kids with mental health and behavioral challenges.

"Being little" is of critical importance because we see the signature of early childhood experience literally in people's bodies: their life expectancies are longer and their social-emotional capabilities are more robust when they have a chance to learn through play and through deep relationships, and when their developing brains are given the chance to grow in a nurturing, language-rich, and relatively unhurried environment. It's clearer than ever before that young children are not simply mini-adults. Right, and you use the term "adultification" in your writing. How do you define adultification, and what does it reveal about how we think about childhood?

Adultification is the failure to see the world from a child's perspective.

I sometimes ask teachers to get down on the floor of their classroom and just look around from the height of a 4-year-old, or try to put on a snowsuit with the motor abilities of a young child. It's eye-opening to reflect on the many ways that adults inflict adult pacing, adult expectations, and adult schedules on young kids. And for what reason? Young children sleep less and have far more transitions in their days than in previous generations—and I think most educators and parents would agree that their developing brains aren't really designed to cope with adult schedules and pacing.

We all basically know this is a problem, but it's hard to break the cycle. We need to step back and see the world from a child's point of view. We see their development through an adult's eyes, imagining that we couldn't possibly learn anything from an hour digging in a container of mud, so it must be time to whip out the math worksheet! It boggles the mind how little outdoor time and gross motor play many young children have in their days.

Some of this adultification comes from an inattention to what makes little kids tick and a profound lack of faith in what young children are capable of.

What does high-quality early education look like? If you walked into a preschool that uses best practices, what would you see and hear?

Quality education is about relationships. Caring teachers who understand child development and who know and are attuned to the children in their care are far more

important than many of the measures of quality we use today, such as class size, physical environments, or a specific curriculum.

Rich, open-ended conversation is critical, and children need time in the day to experience warm, empathic oral language—to converse with each other playfully, to tell a rambling story to an adult, to listen to high-quality literature and ask meaningful questions.

The research shows that quality caregivers know both the broad parameters of child development (“This is what a 3-year-old looks like”) and know their children as individuals (“This is what this child is like”).

But it’s crucial to keep in mind that intentional, attuned teaching is the opposite of a free-for-all where children are running the show. Quality preschool teachers are intentional about everything they do: the classroom routines, the physical environment, the schedule, the types of materials they make available for children to explore and manipulate. These teachers do an extraordinary amount of observation and reflection—and it’s really almost impossible to do that in a vacuum: the best preschools have collegial, inquiry-based cultures so that they can continually experiment with and modify their learning environments to take advantage of children’s natural curiosity.

This is especially true for the many young children who have backgrounds of trauma and adverse childhood experiences. If a child walks in the door not having had anything to eat the night before—or maybe they are processing something positive, like welcoming a new sibling or a grandparent—the high-quality preschool classroom will

have a mechanism to respond to those experiences and to channel them into cognitive and social-emotional growth.

Educators in these environments take as a starting point that children are fully capable of learning, and they refuse to let school or state mandates dictate how children learn.

You write a lot about the importance of play. How do you define play, and why is it so crucial?

Play is the defining feature of mammalian development: the impulse is hardwired into us and can't be suppressed. However, it's crucial that we recognize that while the play impulse is one thing, the play know-how—the nuts and bolts of playing—is not always so natural, and requires careful cultivation.

We're seeing more dysfunctional play in modern industrialized societies. Children don't play as much in mixed-age groups, where younger kids can learn from older ones, and the older children in turn have to learn to be gentle and fair with their littlest players. Children have less free time to mess around and make their own rules. They need the time and space to learn how to play effectively, and they require a culture that values play. Increasingly, we don't seem to have that kind of early childhood culture.

So if you suddenly tell a child to “go make a fort out of a cardboard box” when they haven't had a steady diet of free, unstructured time and access to open-ended materials, well, you will see a cranky and possibly incredulous child.

You've said, "The authentic early childhood curriculum isn't necessarily contained in the word we reflexively call 'preschool.' It doesn't need to be in a school at all." Would you explain what you mean by that?

Anyone who has seen the wonder on a child's face when they see a butterfly landing on a flower understands that learning goes far beyond a classroom.

The good news is that children are wired with the capacity for learning in almost any setting. With the loving support of responsive adults, they can learn without the bells and whistles of what we call preschool.

So much learning comes about naturally from what scientists call the serve-and-return style of communication between an adult and young child, which others have referred to as a conversational "duet." There's a lot of evidence that we can close some of the gaps between lower-income children's academic trajectories and those of higher-income families by coaching parents and educators to use this approach in their everyday interactions with children. I often coach teachers to ask open-ended questions such as "Tell me about your drawing," rather than "checking" questions like "What color is the apple?" or "What are you drawing?" The open-ended response really opens up a huge space for spontaneous and deep learning.