

Study: Social skills predict success

'Plays well with others' means child is ready to learn, teachers say

By ALISON KEPNER, The News Journal

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Mastering their ABCs may not be as important for children entering kindergarten as knowing how to play and share well with others, a new study suggests.

Teachers say they value social skills -- such as following rules and directions -- over academic skills as a predictor of children's success in school, according to a study released last week by PNC Financial Services Group.

The company commissioned the study as part of its 10-year, \$100 million PNC Grow Up Great initiative to improve school readiness among children from birth to age 5.

The study, which surveyed 1,001 parents of children ages 8 and younger and 516 teachers in pre-kindergarten through third grade, found teachers perceive that children today are less prepared for the two skills they feel are most important for school readiness: the ability to listen and follow rules and directions, and the ability to interact, play, and share well with others. Those skills help them more than knowing their alphabet, numbers or colors as they enter school, the teachers said.

That isn't to say that early childhood education programs should forgo their academic lessons.

"I don't think it's an either-or," said W. Steven Barnett, director of the National Institute for Early Education Research, who also sits on the PNC Grow Up Great Advisory Council. "You don't have to choose between social-emotional development and cognitive development."

Parents of children attending the Wilmington Head Start on North Market Street aren't.

On a recent afternoon, the 3- to 5-year-olds in Jenel Lawrence's class listened attentively as their classmates explained the colorful pictures they had drawn of animals from a book read to them that morning, Bill Martin's "Panda Bear, Panda Bear, What Do You See?" Then they acted out the animals together.

As they ribbited, hopped and crawled around the carpeted room, the children's giggles were evidence that learning can be fun. The activity emphasized literacy skills while incorporating the arts, as well as skills such as taking turns, listening to their classmates and following directions.

"Social skills are important," said Kim Graham, project coordinator for the Christina Cultural Arts Center in Wilmington, which has a \$49,100 grant from PNC to support its three-year-old Early Childhood Arts Education Institute. "But the reality is that African-American children and children in poverty are still starting school [with a smaller vocabulary than classmates]. We can't ignore the literacy part."

Most noteworthy is what the full study emphasized: the importance of preparing children to learn, said Ann Wick, chairwoman of the Governor's Early Childhood Council. "School readiness is often overlooked in the broader debate" about education reform, she said. "The first five years are critical; the first three years are really -- from 1 to 3 -- when vocabulary is developed."

Teachers who understand the kind of academic and social skills children must develop often make the difference.

"Teachers who have education are critical to having quality programs. It is through that sort of sophistication and knowledge of early childhood development that these teachers can work with these children to develop the skills that are necessary to go on," she said.

"I've seen child-care programs where children can sit at a desk -- and that is a very important skill for them to learn -- but it is really how they interact with each other. It goes well beyond the capacity to sit and listen. It's an engagement."

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