

Opinion: Preschool prepares kids for the classroom

By Vicki Barber

Debates continue about whether or not preschool is important for children. For some of us, it's not a debate; we know it works for children. Two states in the nation, Georgia and Oklahoma, have mandated preschool programs and have consistently shown that preschool gives children a jump start in their learning. California has not yet decided preschool is a major player in education, but El Dorado County knows it is important.

So what's so special about preschool that can't be accomplished at home? Most activities of preschool can be accomplished at home with a dedicated mom or dad who is willing to spend time talking, playing, showing, teaching, and demonstrating how the world works. Preparing to read requires a great deal of language development, including such activities as stories, nature walks, and playtime. Some families are geared toward providing just this kind of support for their little ones. However, there are many more families who may not be in a position to provide the structured support that creates a strong learning environment for their voracious learners.



Vicki Barber

High quality preschool does provide the support and

opportunities a child needs to develop the language skills necessary for reading and counting. It provides for nature walks and interactive play with others. Here's what I mean: A child comes to preschool knowing the word "fish." A family might use the word "fishy" for anything in the water. It's easy and logical and fun, so fishy it is. Guppies are fish, tadpoles are fish, crawdads are fish, sharks are fish, and so on. Inadvertently, in our desire to keep things simple for a child's understanding, we often do not use the language that truly describes the thing that is in the water.

A child doesn't know all those other names for fish unless we use the words. Preschool uses the words. "Here's the guppy. See the crawdad. There's a picture of a shark. It's much larger than the guppy."

Now the child is getting more words and a much broader picture of "fish." The wonderful news about this oral language development is that it directly translates into reading. When the child who has these experiences learns to read the word guppy, he or she now has a picture in mind of what a guppy looks like. The same thing happens with a crawdad or a shark. Without these language connections, the child only knows "fish."

Reading becomes a problem when he sounds out the word gu-pp-y only to be left with a blank space in his mind because there is nothing, no picture with which he can connect the word.

Language development in these early years is a major key to reading. Families and preschools can support this development every day simply by asking the question, "What's in my world that my children and I can talk about today?"

Vicki Barber is superintendent of El Dorado County Office of Education.