The Importance of Early Childhood Education
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At Little Sunshine’s Playhouse & Preschool®, we understand that early childhood education (ECE) supports brain development and builds a solid foundation for lifelong learning.

- Decades of research shows that quality preschool prepares students for success in school and has even been linked to positive life outcomes in adulthood.

- 90% of brain development takes place before a child’s fifth birthday.

- The young brain forms 700 new neural connections every second for the first three years of life.

- The quality of preschool matters for preparing kids to succeed in Kindergarten and beyond by developing language, reading and math knowledge, along with motor skills, social-emotional ability and self-care habits.

- The best preschool teachers are kind, patient educational professionals, not babysitters. They understand that all children learn differently and know how to create a safe, supportive classroom environment that lets all kids thrive.

- As a child’s first teachers, parents play an imperative role in early learning. This includes reading together, sharing day-to-day activities at home, as well as active engagement in the child’s preschool.

Little Sunshine’s Playhouse® supports development of the whole child through our proprietary, evidence-based Creatively Shine™ curriculum, which is inspired by the Reggio Emilia philosophy of early education.

We carefully screen and recruit qualified teachers who engage students with hands-on activities that promote cognitive, social, emotional, physical and language skills and prepare kids for a lifetime of success.

Keep reading to learn more about the importance of early education, how the brain develops in the first five years, how preschool prepares kids for preschool, what makes a good preschool teacher and the role of parents in promoting learning and development for preschoolers.
Why Early Education is Important

Research demonstrates long-term positive benefits for children who participate in quality preschool programs, even into adulthood. Two longitudinal studies in particular have followed individuals from preschool all the way to ages 40 and 35, respectively.

The Perry Preschool Study, published by the High Scope Educational Research Foundation (Schweinhart, 2014), followed 123 children from ages 3 or 4 into adulthood. Researchers randomly assigned 58 children to a high-quality preschool program, while 65 children were assigned to no preschool program.

Results indicated a number of positive and statistically significant life outcomes by age 40:

- High school graduation rate -- 77% for the program group vs 60% those who did not attend preschool
- Employment: 76% vs 62%
- Home ownership: 37% vs 28%
- Car ownership: 82% vs. 60%
- Have a savings account: 76% vs. 50%

Students who had attended the high quality preschool also earned higher incomes, were less likely to receive social services and less likely to be arrested. The authors concluded that “...high quality preschool programs for young children...contribute to their intellectual and social development in childhood and their school success, economic performance and reduced commission of crime in adulthood.”

As a child’s first teachers, parents play a crucial role in early learning.

A separate study published in JAMA Pediatrics (Reynolds, Ou and Temple, 2018), included 1,539 children, 989 of whom entered a high-quality preschool and 550 of whom attended a typical preschool program. Data were collected for 1,398 students from the original sample when they had reached the age of 35.
Brain development begins during the first trimester. Most structural features of the brain appear during the first eight weeks of pregnancy. Just two weeks after conception, the embryo develops a neural plate, which folds into a neural tube by the fourth week – this will eventually become the child’s brain and spinal cord. The first neurons and synapses develop by the seventh week, and the fetus is now able to move (Urban Child Institute, 2018).

The cerebral cortex grows in thickness and complexity during the second trimester. Myelin appears on neuronal axons, allowing for faster information processing (Urban Child Institute, 2018).

Early learning actually starts during the third trimester of pregnancy, as the cerebral cortex assumes more duties. The child begins to respond to outside sounds and may even learn to recognize familiar sounds, such as the mother’s voice (Urban Child Institute, 2018).

Brain Development During Pregnancy

At birth, your child’s brain already has almost all of the neurons it will ever have (Urban Child Institute, 2018).

- The fetal brain can be stimulated by sounds from outside the mother, and can also be affected by negative influences such as maternal stress (Hunter, 2017).

Those who had attended the high-quality preschool had achieved higher educational outcomes by age 35:

- 4-year college graduation: 51% for the high-quality group vs. 44% for comparison group
- College attendance: 61.2% vs. 53.1%
- Associate’s degree or higher: 15.7% vs. 10.7%
- Master’s degree or higher: 4.2% vs. 1.5%
- Bachelor’s degree: 14.3% vs. 8.2%
- Any postsecondary credential: 25% vs. 18.1%
Brain Development
Birth to Age 3

The young brain forms 700 new neural connections every second for the first 3 years of life.

- Every experience the child has, both good and bad, influences development, which means parents and others close to the child have a major role to play.

- Language learning begins at birth, and talking to your baby, reading books together and even overheard conversations all contribute to this process (Hunter, 2017).

- Newborns recognize human faces, recognize their mother’s voice, and may even recognize sounds from stories the mother read aloud during the latter stages of pregnancy (Urban Child Institute, 2018).

- The cerebellum triples in size during baby’s first year, which promotes motor skills development. Binocular vision develops, and recognition ability improves. Language circuits consolidate in the frontal and temporal lobes. By one the child’s brain is already wired for his or her native language (Urban Child Institute, 2018).

- During the child’s second year, more synapses in language areas of the brain mean the child’s vocabulary quadruples between the first and second birthdays. Increased myelination promotes development of self-awareness, awareness of emotions, and the child’s ability to recognize his or her name and reflection in a mirror (Urban Child Institute, 2018).

- The brain reaches its peak synaptic density at age 3. The child begins to understand concepts like cause and effect, and past, present and future (Urban Child Institute, 2018).
Brain Development
Ages 3 to 5

The 5-year-old brain uses twice as much glucose as the adult brain. In fact, the brain uses so much energy for its own development that it causes physical growth to slow during the preschool years between ages three and five. Nutrition and proper mental stimulation are absolutely essential during this life stage, and the more you interact with your child, the more you help to increase their usable vocabulary (Hunter, 2017).

In addition to our knowledge of early brain development, we also know that children learn best in a loving, warm and positive environment. This understanding influences teaching methods at Little Sunshine’s Playhouse®, as our program relies heavily on the Reggio Emilia approach that learning should be relationship driven and by building strong, positive relationships with students at an early age, as they’re preparing to become successful lifelong learners.

“Children learn best in a loving, warm, and positive environment”

Skills Your Child Needs by Kindergarten

Pre-K educators at Little Sunshine’s Playhouse® work closely with families to actively prepare their students for Kindergarten. Many of our Pre-K teachers are former Kindergarten teachers who understand the importance of early preparation and how we can work together in the classroom and mold life-long learners at a young age.

What does your child need to know at Kindergarten entry? On the following page are some of the most important skills that prepare children to succeed in Kindergarten and throughout their academic careers (Morin, 2018):
# Skills Your Child Needs by Kindergarten

## Language
- Speaks in complete sentences
- Can be understood by others most of the time
- Uses words to express needs and wants
- Understands two-step directions
- Makes comparisons and describes relationships between objects

## Fine Motor Skills
- Uses scissors
- Copies basic shapes
- Can draw lines, symbols and letters
- Can complete simple puzzles

## Gross Motor Skills
- Running
- Jumping
- Hopping on one foot
- Climbing stairs
- Bouncing and catching a ball

## Math Schools
- Count to 10 without skipping numbers
- Match a number to 5 or fewer items
- Names and recognizes shapes
- Understands more than or less than
- Knows colors in box of eight crayons
- Can arrange picture cards in order -- such as smallest to largest
Reading

- Can listen to stories
- Knows how to find first page of book and turn pages
- Recognizes familiar signs like traffic signs
- Can recite alphabet and identify letters
- Can write own name
- Recognizes rhyming words
- Connects letters to sounds
- Can draw a picture to express an idea

Self-Care

- Uses restroom and washes hands independently
- Basic self dressing -- may need help with buttons, zippers and shoelaces
- Can say full name and age

Social-Emotional

- Can separate from parent without getting overly upset
- Interacts with other kids
- Can pay attention for at least five minutes
Does preschool play a role in Kindergarten readiness? One article published in Early Childhood Research and Practice assessed a number of studies pertaining to early childhood and Kindergarten entry (Linder, Ramey and Zambak, 2013).

Authors identified child care experience, which includes preschool, as one important factor affecting early learning. They also pointed out that the quality of early child care matters, not just whether the child attends any preschool or daycare.

*Several predictors of school readiness were associated with quality of child care:*

- A high quality child care environment includes a variety of spaces for play, materials that encourage exploration, opportunities for discourse, high-quality curriculum and instruction methods.
- A high quality child care curriculum features lessons that allow teachers to engage children in tasks that build understanding in literacy and math.
- With high quality child care instruction, children are encouraged to investigate ideas, with teachers acting as facilitators who encourage discussion and representation.

In essence, the type of child care makes a difference. High-quality center-based care is a predictor of success, compared with lower quality center-based care.

Another study identified seven preschool experiences that are essential for school readiness. A high quality preschool should include these elements (Ramey and Ramey, 2004).

- Encourage exploration
- Mentor in basic skills
- Celebrate developmental advances
- Rehearse and extend new skills
- Protect from inappropriate teasing, disapproval and punishment
- Communicate richly and responsively
- Guide and limit behavior

One innovative service Little Sunshine’s Playhouse® offers is a developmental checklist portfolio that teachers complete in our Infant Program. This follows students throughout their time in our program, ensuring children are hitting developmental milestones cognitively, physically, social and emotionally. This aids in Kindergarten readiness and can be individualized per a child’s needs.
Preschool Teacher Qualifications

At Little Sunshine’s Playhouse®, we strongly believe that preschool teachers are educational professionals, not babysitters. The number one quality we look for in an educator is their personality and how it correlates to children.

- We’re looking for kind, patient and loving individuals who can be partners in learning with our students.
- We also look for good communicators who will be able to positively articulate a child’s day and their behavior with parents.
- Educators must understand that all children are different and they will all learn differently, but in fostering a safe environment for that learning, children will thrive.

Specialized training in early childhood education can help aspiring preschool teachers acquire the skills they need to support early learning. One study published in 2016 looked at over 30 years of research and found an overall positive relationship between teachers having a bachelor’s degree and preschool outcomes. However, the analysis also indicated that specific training in early childhood education (ECE) makes a positive difference, regardless of whether the teacher has a BA (Kelley and Camilli, 2016).

Little Sunshine’s Playhouse® provides all teachers with ongoing professional development training and team building activities. Every classroom includes all of the supplies teachers need to create a positive learning environment and provide an individualized experience for each child.

Recruiting the best educators to our team is a top priority for Little Sunshine’s Playhouse®. We offer competitive pay, benefits, advancement opportunities, training and time off for all teachers. Outstanding educators have the opportunity to earn National LSP Teacher of the Month or Teacher of the Year honors.

In addition to recruiting the best teachers, Little Sunshine’s Playhouse® works to go beyond minimum state licensing requirements to provide children with an excellent preschool experience that prepares them for success in kindergarten and beyond.

The appendix contains links to information about licensing requirements in states with a Little Sunshine’s Playhouse® location.
Parental Involvement Makes a Difference

As the child’s first teachers, parents play a crucial role in the ECE process. Over twenty years of research has shown that when parents support early learning and become comfortable working with teachers, it can help with school readiness, classroom behavior, attendance, test scores and overall academic achievement (Kirkwood, 2016).

There are many ways parents can actively participate in their child’s early learning, both at home and at school (Edwards, Sheridan and Knoche, 2010).

At Home

Parents can encourage learning and exploration at home through complex and constructive play, asking questions, shared book-reading, involvement in household tasks, and open-ended exploration.

- Interacting with “environmental print” including books and other materials teaches children about print, signs, books, sounds, words and sentences.
- Decontextualized language, which includes talking about the meaning of words encountered in songs, poems and stories, prepares kids for formal literacy instruction later on.
- Parents can support language learning through mimicking, commenting, expanding on play and speech.
- The home literacy environment predicts language and academic outcomes.
- Good book-sharing habits include labeling pictures, pointing out words and letters, relating the story to the child’s life.
• Parents can increase engagement with reading materials by using open-ended questions (for example, “Why do you think he’s laughing?”) during shared activities instead of only using closed questions (“Is he laughing?”) or directions (telling the child to laugh).

• Informal daily activities are also an opportunity to learn, as when children watch their parents dialing the phone, doing chores, making a grocery list or going to the park.

Involvement with preschool

Parental involvement with their child’s preschool includes everything from selecting a quality preschool to interacting with staff and participation with teachers and other educational professionals.

“Parent participation in many activities has been linked to school success.”

• Parent participation in many activities has been linked to school success. These include school activities, parent-teacher conferences, involvement in class activities, observation visits and take-home activities.

• A strong connection between school and family “assists children in developing the skills needed to be successful socially and emotionally, as well as academically, and has been shown to be a significant factor in children’s overall achievement.”
Parent involvement in schooling supports a number of adaptive outcomes for the child, such as pro-social behavior, self esteem, perseverance, mastery motivation and participation in learning activities.

Little Sunshine’s Playhouse® recognizes the importance of involving parents in our students’ educational experiences. Our secure, user-friendly LuvNotes™ platform lets parents know what their children are doing throughout the school day, and can be accessed by any device with internet access, including a smartphone.

LuvNotes™ include many helpful features for parents:

- A classroom snapshot, which includes planned activities, menu and announcements for each day.

- A personalized daily report for your child, which includes specific activities, disposition and mood, sleeping and eating trends.

- Photos and videos of your child while at school.

- Daily email notification when reports are available.

LuvNotes™ system fosters open parent-teacher communication and plays a critical role in keeping families informed so they can stay involved in our students’ success.
Conclusion

Little Sunshine’s Playhouse® works closely with families to provide a high quality preschool experience that develops the whole child and paves the way to success in Kindergarten and throughout the student’s life.

Our Reggio Emilia-inspired Creatively Shine™ curriculum is informed by up-to-date research and is grounded in a firm understanding of the importance of early education and brain development.

Project-based assignments, guided by qualified professional teachers, engage students in hands-on activities that promote Kindergarten readiness and positive relationships between students, peers, teachers and parents.

Are you interested in enrolling your child in Little Sunshine’s Playhouse®? Would you like to learn more about our curriculum or schedule a visit?

Visit the Locations page on our website at www.littlesunshine.com/locations/ to get in touch with a Little Sunshine’s Playhouse® near you!
Appendix

Minimum preschool licensing requirements for states with Little Sunshine’s Playhouse® location, along with inspection and background check information, can be found at the following links:

- Arizona:  
  http://www.childcareaware.org/state/arizona/.
- Arkansas:  
  http://www.childcareaware.org/state/arkansas/.
- California:  
  http://www.childcareaware.org/state/california/.
- Colorado:  
  http://www.childcareaware.org/state/colorado/.
- Georgia:  
  http://www.childcareaware.org/state/georgia/.
- Illinois:  
  http://www.childcareaware.org/state/illinois/.
- Kansas:  
  http://www.childcareaware.org/state/kansas/.
- Missouri:  
  http://www.childcareaware.org/state/missouri/.
- Tennessee:  
  http://www.childcareaware.org/state/tennessee/.
- Texas:  
  http://www.childcareaware.org/state/texas/.

References

- Kelley, Pamela, and Gregory Camilli. (2016). The Impact of Teacher Education on Outcomes in Center-Based Early Childhood Education Programs: A


