

## **GUEST COLUMN: Early childhood education critical for successful life**

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All children are unique and individual, yet similar in their thinking.

They learn through meaningful relationships.

That's why at a time when the value and methods of early childhood education fill our news with questions and debate, we need to champion this important period in our children's lives, recognizing both its critical importance and its unique characteristics.

Why is it so important?

Research has shown that the early years in a child's life are their most formative. The capacity of the brain to absorb new learning actually peaks at the age of 3. Research has not only shown that the early years are an important window of opportunity to develop academic skills, but these years are also critical for developing social, emotional and physical skills. Providing young children with a positive, high quality education, helps ensure they receive a strong foundation for their future in school and in life. It is the important role played by this formative period that has sparked the growth of early childhood programs and companies to serve it, including calls from President Obama to expand access to high quality early childhood education.

But saying it's important only touches the surface. The way that early childhood education works is about helping children become confident individuals and skilled students. It's an approach that we have seen work again and again during our two decades of business.

Children need options and choices to build emotional development. They need teachers who are "encouragers." We work with our students to develop a vocabulary to label their feelings in order to grow socially, and we staff with teachers who help children grow. Children need to feel safe to explore and be creative. They create work that they are proud of, which leads to confidence and independence that follows them into kindergarten and lasts a lifetime. Children need the freedom to try out their own ideas and feel the pride that comes from succeeding when teachers build on their success.

Children need to learn their ABCs, but sitting them down to "teach" them isn't the way to do it. Young children learn best by doing activities they find fun and interesting. They end up with a lot of knowledge when we disguise academics through play. By playing games and making up stories children acquire social skills along the way.

Academics has changed dramatically over the past 20 years. Many Kindergarten teachers have shared with us that the group experience in preschool teaches kids how to be students. They tell us that the students who they consider ready to learn are those who come into school with good social and behavior skills. They are ready to be respectful of others and compromise.

These children also learn independence before starting school. Some of that is expressed in the simple act of pouring their own milk and setting the table for snack, along with bigger issues like determining how to spend their free time playing respectfully with friends.

Early childhood education is the building block for our children's lives. Providing distinctive and focused programs for these critical first five years will have a benefit for our children, preparing them for leadership and life.

**Guen Campbell and Lori Perry are the founders and owners of Tots' Landing Learning Centers. The company offers early childhood education through its five area locations and is celebrating its 20th anniversary this month.**