

What Kids Need From Grown-Ups (But Aren't Getting) : NPR Ed : NPR

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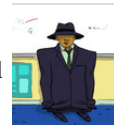


Annelise Capossela for NPR

Erika Christakis' new book, *The Importance of Being Little*, is an impassioned plea for educators and parents to put down the worksheets and flash cards, ditch the tired craft projects (yes, you, Thanksgiving Handprint Turkey) and exotic vocabulary lessons, and double-down on one, simple word:

Play.

That's because, she writes, "the distinction between early education and official school seems to be disappearing." If [kindergarten is the new first grade](#), Christakis argues, preschool is quickly becoming the new kindergarten. And that is "a real threat to our society's future."



NPR ED

[Why Kindergarten Is The New First Grade](#)

If the name sounds familiar, that's likely because Christakis made headlines last October, [writing an email](#) that stirred angry protests at Yale, where she is a lecturer at the Yale Child Study Center.

When a campus committee sent students a [memo](#) urging restraint in choosing Halloween costumes and asking them to avoid anything that "disrespects, alienates or ridicules segments of our population based on race, nationality, religious belief or gender

expression," Christakis wrote a memo of her own. She lauded the committee's goals of trying to encourage tolerance and foster community but wondered if the responsibility of deciding what is offensive should fall to students, not their administrators.

"Have we lost faith in young people's capacity — in your capacity — to exercise self-censure, through social norming, and also in your capacity to ignore or reject things that trouble you?" Christakis wrote.

Many Yale students accused Christakis of being racially insensitive and called for her ouster. In December, she stepped down from her teaching duties, telling [The Washington Post](#), "I worry that the current climate at Yale is not, in my view, conducive to the civil dialogue and open inquiry required to solve our urgent societal problems."

What does Christakis' role in the heated debate over racial insensitivity and free speech on campus have to do with her views on preschool? Surprisingly, a lot. I spoke with Christakis about her new book and the turmoil at Yale. Here's an edited version of our conversation.

What is this phenomenon that you call "the preschool paradox"?

It is the reality that science is confirming on a daily basis: that children are hardwired to learn in many settings and are really very capable, very strong, very intelligent on the one hand. On the other hand, the paradox is that many young children are doing poorly in our early education settings.

We've got a growing problem of preschool expulsions, a growing problem of children being medicated off-label for attention problems. We have a lot of anecdotal evidence that parents are frustrated and feeling overburdened. So that's what interests me: What is going on?

We have very crammed [preschool] schedules with rapid transitions. We have tons of clutter on classroom walls. We have kids moving quickly from one activity to another. We ask them to sit in long and often boring meetings. Logistically and practically, lives are quite taxing for little kids because they're actually living in an adult-sized world.

On the other hand, curriculum is often very boring. A staple of early childhood curriculum is the daily tracking of the calendar. And this is one of those absolute classic mismatches, because one study showed that, after a whole year of this calendar work where kids sit in a circle and talk about what day they're on, half the kids still didn't know what day they were on. It's a mismatch because it's both really hard and frankly very stupid.

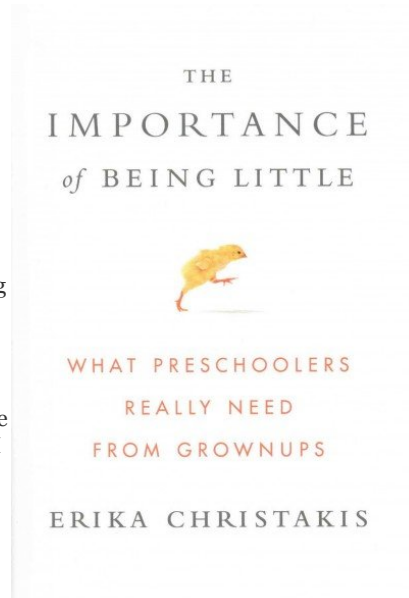
We're underestimating kids in terms of their enormous capacity to be thoughtful and reflective, and, I would argue, that's because we're not giving them enough time to [play](#) and to be in relationships with others.

Why do you think so many educators and policymakers have come to see play and learning as mutually exclusive?

Yeah, it's incredibly weird — this fake dichotomy. The science is so persuasive on this topic. There's all kinds of research coming not only from early childhood but animal research looking at mammals and how they use play for learning.

I think there are two answers. There really has been tremendous anxiety about closing achievement gaps between advantaged and less advantaged children. You know, we're always as a society looking for quick fixes that might close those gaps. Unfortunately, it's had downstream consequences for early learning, where we're going for superficial measures of learning.

I think the other problem is that the rich, experience-based play that we know results in



The Importance of Being Little

What Preschoolers Really Need from Grownups

by [Erika Christakis](#)

Hardcover, 376 pages

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learning — it's not as easy to accomplish as people think. And that's because, while the impulse to play is natural, what I call the play know-how really depends on a culture that values play, that gives kids the time and space to learn through play.

What does playful learning look like?

Playful learning is embedded in relationships and in things that are meaningful to children. I use the example of the iconic [handprint] Thanksgiving turkey. When you really get into what's behind those cutesy crafts, a lot of curriculum is organized around these traditions, things around the calendar, things that are done because they've always been done.

When you look at how kids learn, they learn when something is meaningful to them, when they have a chance to learn through relationships — and that, of course, happens through play. But a lot of our curriculum is organized around different principles.

It's organized around the comfort and benefit of adults and also reflexive: "This is cute," or, "We've always done this." A lot of the time, as parents, we are trained to expect products, cute projects. And I like to say that the role of art in preschool or kindergarten curriculum should be to make meaning, not necessarily things. But it's hard to get parents to buy into this idea that their kids may not come home with the refrigerator art because maybe they spent a week messing around in the mud.

Preschool teachers are very interested in fine motor skills, and so often they think that these tracing and cutting activities [are important]. I would argue that those are not the most important skills that we need to foster.

What are the most important skills we need to foster?

I think the No. 1 thing is that children need to feel secure in their relationships because, again, we're social animals. And children learn through others. So I think the No. 1 thing is for kids to have a chance to play, to make friends, to learn limits, to learn to take their turn.

You're talking about soft skills, non-cognitive skills ...

I actually won't accept the term non-cognitive skills.

Social-emotional skills?

I would say social-emotional skills. But, again, there's a kind of simplistic notion that there's social-emotional skills on the one hand ...

And academics on the other ...

Right, and I would argue that many so-called academic skills are very anti-intellectual and very uncognitive. Whereas I think a lot of the social-emotional skills are very much linked to learning.

I think the biggest one is the use of language. When kids are speaking to one another and listening to one another, they're learning self-regulation, they're learning vocabulary, they're learning to think out loud. And these are highly cognitive skills. But we've bought into this dichotomy again. I would say "complex skills" versus "superficial" or "one-dimensional skills."

To give you an example, watching kids build a fort is going to activate more cognitive learning domains than doing a worksheet where you're sitting at a table. The worksheet has a little pile of pennies on one side and some numbers on the other, and you have to connect them with your pencil. That's a very uni-dimensional way of teaching skills.

Whereas, if you're building a fort with your peers, you're talking, using higher-level

language structures in play than you would be if you're sitting at a table. You're doing math skills, you're doing physics measurement, engineering — but also doing the give-and-take of, "How do I get along? How do I have a conversation? What am I learning from this other person?" And that's very powerful.

What is high-quality preschool to you?

The research base is pretty clear. I'll start by telling you what it isn't. We start by looking at two variables. One set are called "structural variables" — things like class size, student-teacher ratios, or even the square-footage of the classroom and what kinds of materials are in the classroom.

And then there are so-called process variables, which are different. They tend to be more about teaching style. Is the teacher a responsive teacher? Does she use a responsive, warm, empathic teaching style? And then the other key process variable is: Does the teacher have knowledge of child development? And is that teacher able to translate that child development knowledge into the curriculum?

Which seems like a hard thing to measure.

It's actually not. And there are many good measures — things like: Is the teacher on the floor with the child? Is the teacher asking open-ended questions? You know: "Tell me about your picture" versus "Oh, cute house, Bobby." It's actually not that hard to measure.

But here's the thing. The structural variables are easier to regulate. And, if you have a workforce problem where you're not paying teachers well and a pipeline problem where there aren't good career paths to get into teaching, it's much easier for us to focus on the structural variables when those have an indirect effect only. The direct effect is the process variables.

My colleague Walter Gilliam at Yale has come up with this wonderful mental health classroom climate scale, which really looks at these process variables in very granular detail — so, not only looking at the interactions between the teachers and the children but how the teachers are interacting with each other.

You mount a spirited defense of unscheduled kid time [at home]. Less shuttling to and from sports practice, dance practice, swim lessons. Be sure, you say, to give your child time to sit on the floor and stare at the ceiling if that's what they want to do. I know a lot of parents who would find that view heretical.

That's because we don't have faith in young children. And we don't really have faith in ourselves. And we've been programmed to believe that the more enrichments we can add on [the better].

I think boredom can be a friend to the imagination. Sometimes when kids appear to be bored, actually they haven't had enough time to engage in something. We quickly whisk it away and move them along to the next thing. And that's when you say, "How can I help the child to look at this in a new way? To try something new, to be patient."

You've really kind of adultified childhood so kids really don't have those long, uninterrupted stretches of time to engage in fantasy play. And because we've kind of despoiled the habitat of early childhood, a lot of times they don't know what to do when given that time. So we kind of have to coach them.

I think there's a little bit of a repair process that we need to engage in. Because if you've got a kid who's used to going to a million lessons and only uses toys that have one way of using them and then, suddenly, you put them in a room with a bunch of boxes and blocks and say, "Have fun!", the kid's gonna say, "Are you kidding me? What?!"

I want to transition to Yale now. You were talking about creating a safe space

earlier — for preschoolers. In a video taken of Yale students responding angrily to your Halloween email, one African-American woman berates your husband, who co-manages a residential college with you. She yells, "It is your job to create a place of comfort and home for your students, and you have not done that." Is it possible to create a space that is intellectually safe, where free speech prevails, that is also comfortable?

I guess the question would be, "Is comfort the goal?" My hope is that young people of all ages could feel safe in a community where dialogue is welcome. That doesn't mean you get to scream at people and throw things at them. I would like to see people feel safe in a community where they could have different ideas.

We had at Yale a representative from Planned Parenthood come to speak. I think it would be really great if we also had an alternative view, and that people could listen and say, "You know what? I really disagree with that, but this does not threaten me to my core. I can disagree. Maybe I can even hone my argument better by hearing an alternative view."

I think we can have a safe community, but does that mean that we're always comfortable? Well, I think that's very unrealistic and probably not a good idea to aspire to being comfortable all the time.

You wrote in your email: "Have we lost faith in young people's capacity — in your capacity — to exercise self-censure, through social norming, and also in your capacity to ignore or reject things that trouble you?"

The counter-argument, lodged by many Yale students, is that some things — including Halloween costumes — are simply so offensive, culturally, that not only can they not be ignored, they shouldn't be allowed in the first place. What do you make of that argument?

I want to be clear that I would probably agree with the vast majority of things that my critics find offensive. So I think I have been very misunderstood. Yes, there are things that are horrible. There are things that offend all of us and hurt our feelings.

I also would argue that much of it is context-based. As I heard from many students after the fact, people have really different ideas of what is hurtful. And there were things in the [Yale committee's] email that didn't address some people's hurts. For example, costumes about disability.

I think my point was, because context matters and because the world is full of injury and there is no question that some people bear a disproportionate burden — I accept that — we can't really create a world where administrators, teachers or parents can insulate people from these kinds of things.

Now, I do want to be clear: There are all kinds of ways to respond to being hurt, including filing a police report, reporting to your supervisor or professor or RA in a dorm, talking with your friends, ignoring. To me, I think the social norming piece is really important because I believe we put way too much faith in these administrative guidelines, "suggestions."

Is that really how behavior change happens? I don't know. I think for some things, absolutely, legal recourse makes a difference. But for other things, I think, peer norming is highly effective, and to me, Halloween costumes would be in that category.

We can't really predict people's intent. Often people use Halloween as an expression of satire, biting humor, and so we don't know. In fact, we had an amazing conversation with David Simon [creator of HBO's *The Wire*]. He came to speak to our students, and he was really pushing them. If you go to a Mardi Gras parade in New Orleans, you know, you're gonna see things that would strike the average Yale student as offensive. But if you understand the history and the context, then there's a different interpretation.

As I've grown older, I've grown more confident in young people to have these conversations, to fight for their rights, to sometimes ignore things. They have a whole toolkit of strategies, and we have to start at a really young age, giving kids the space to talk to each other, to get to know each other, to listen to each other. That's linking back to my book.

I think the habitat has to be one that prizes dialogue and talking and listening skills. We have an opportunity right now to do that for a whole generation. We're kidding ourselves — like with the [preschool] worksheets — there is no limit to the number of suggestions and guidelines we can offer to students, but if they don't understand each other and are not willing to talk to each other and listen to each other, I think that's going to have limited impact.

Halloween costumes are sometimes indicative of a long and tortured past of institutional racism and oppression, and it seems what the students were arguing for here was institutional *protection* — an expectation that, "Why can't the institution just protect us from this craziness?"

And how well has that worked out [historically]?

Not very.

I don't mean to be callous. I have great empathy, and I think my teaching and my syllabus reflect that. I'm on the side of young people. But I'm more of an old-school lefty. I think it's very important for us to question establishment responses to things. Sometimes it's very important to have an establishment response, and other times I think it's less helpful.

And I would say, proactively trying to manage Halloween costumes, however gently worded, I think there's a downside. Or, at least, let's talk about the potential downside. And I think it might be an erosion of the faith in young people to influence one another and to listen to one another and learn from one another.

Why did you resign your teaching post?

I have great respect and affection for my students, but I'm worried that the climate of civil dialogue and openness — I'm not sure we're there yet. I have a lot of faith in students. And I think time is a great healer of wounds.

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Brian Schafer · 7 days ago

I take my children to the local park and I always hope there will be other children there for them to play with. When there is they play for hours with each other and I only intervene if there is some dire threat of imminent danger. Biggest problem is that many times my children are the only ones at the park