



Illustration by

# A Playful EDUCATION

**Michaela Fox** learns about the serious side of fun in the pre-school years.

**B**efore my daughter turned two, she could recognise and recite every letter of the alphabet. On walks she would read out letters on road signs, car-registration plates and letterboxes, and at home she recited letters from cereal packets, magazines, advertising material and on the fridge.

"She's gifted," people would say. I wondered if they were right. She showed a natural inclination for learning, and her language developed at a rapid rate from the age of two. I was eager for her to start preschool, believing her academic development would escalate. At her orientation I asked about the 'program' and what they would be learning. I was told, "They will be having fun".

I was stunned. I thought preschool was the pathway to school, and would introduce my daughter to learning in a focused and formal setting. This was the first time I'd heard the term 'play-based learning'. Initially, I was sceptical. I felt my daughter spent enough time playing and having fun at home. It was time to learn; she needed to be stimulated intellectually.

I was wrong. I learnt that while my daughter's language might be advanced, she lacks the confidence and maturity to use it. She finds group environments intimidating, and has trouble participating. She also lacks emotional maturity, and has difficulty separating from me. At home she is talkative, bright and energetic, but outside her comfort zone she is deeply reserved and shy. My daughter can best be described as a 'slow to warm' personality. Walking into a room, she puts her head down and often cowers between my legs. She is clingy in social situations, preferring to stay in the background and watch. When she started preschool at the age of three, I began to see the importance of pre-school learning, and most significantly, learning through play.

The pre-school years are important in building emotional, social and cognitive skills. I have seen many developments during my daughter's first year at preschool.

She is building confidence and important social skills through shared play, and is also exploring mathematical concepts, showing increasing independence, and developing imagination and creativity. Play is teaching her concepts of symmetry, balance and design and problem-solving skills, while also extending her self-expression, hand-eye coordination, counting, sorting and classifying.

My eagerness to accelerate her academic learning has stalled. I now realise there is no hurry, and that I want my daughter to flourish, not just cope. After all, education is a lifelong process.

Watching my daughter grow and develop is one of the most fascinating aspects of parenting. I now value her social and emotional development as much as her oral language and numeracy skills. I am more interested in seeing her establish friendships with her peers and building confidence, than academic learning.

Recently she reached a significant developmental milestone that had nothing to do with letters or numbers. We were at her music class, and the instructor called for volunteers to help her with a song. I sat back and waited for all the other children to jump over each other to get to the front. Then, quietly and tentatively, my daughter stood and walked up. While she was almost bowled over by the more-confident kids, the instructor noticed her coming and welcomed her to the front. I watched as my daughter stood before the class, shaking a maraca and dancing to the song with a shy smile and a sparkle in her eyes. I can't fully express the pride I felt witnessing this display of confidence and joy. My eyes welled with tears, and at that moment I had never been more proud.

I have realised essential life skills are learned through play, and this can't be undervalued. There is plenty of time to learn to read and write. Pre-school years should be about fun, and I want my daughter to have a lot of it. ●