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The Importance Of Being Little: What Preschoolers Really Need From Grownups

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Unabridged

THE
IMPORTANCE
of BEING LITTLE



WHAT PRESCHOOLERS
REALLY NEED
FROM GROWNUPS

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Synopsis

A bold challenge to the conventional wisdom about early childhood, with a pragmatic program to encourage parents and teachers to rethink how and where young children learn best by taking the child's eye view of the learning environment. Parents of young children today are embattled: Pick the "wrong" preschool and your child won't get into the "right" college. But our fears are misplaced, according to Yale early childhood expert Erika Christakis. Children are powerful and inventive; and the tools to reimagine their learning environment are right in front of our eyes. Children are hardwired to learn in any setting, but they don't get the support they need when "learning" is defined by strict lessons and dodgy metrics that devalue children's intelligence while placing unfit requirements on their developing brains. We have confused schooling with learning, and we have altered the very habitat young children occupy. The race for successful outcomes has blinded us to how young children actually process the world, acquire skills, and grow, says Christakis, who powerfully defends the preschool years as a life stage of inherent value and not merely as preparation for a demanding or uncertain future. In her path-breaking book, Christakis explores what it's like to be a young child in America today, in a world designed by and for adults. With school-testing mandates run amok, playfulness squeezed, and young children increasingly pathologized for old-fashioned behaviors like daydreaming and clumsiness, it's easy to miss what's important about the crucial years of three to six, and the kind of guidance preschoolers really need. Christakis provides a forensic and far-reaching analysis of today's whole system of early learning, exploring pedagogy, history, science, policy, and politics. She also offers a wealth of proven strategies about what to do to reimagine the learning environment to suit the child's real, but often invisible, needs. The ideas range from accommodating children's sense of time, to decluttering classrooms, to learning how to better observe and listen as children express themselves in pictures and words. With her strong foundation in the study of child development and early education and her own in-the-trenches classroom experience, Christakis peels back the mystery of early childhood, revealing a place that's rich with possibility. Her message is energizing and reassuring: Parents have more power (and more knowledge) than they think they do, and young children are inherently creative and will flourish, if we can learn new ways to support them and restore their vital learning habitat.

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Customer Reviews

A wise, comforting book. Children generally do not present problems to be solved or blank slates to be filled. They are just small people who are eager to learn the game of being human. What they need most of all is kindness and support. There are moments when it may be necessary to instruct them from a position of authority, such as telling them not to cross the street without holding hands. Learning the alphabet, numbers and so on should generally not require that kind of pushing. Kids will learn when they are ready. It is more important that they want to learn than exactly what and when they learn. Christakis is kind to preschool professionals. They have a hard job. Their young charges cannot articulate what they want – the teacher has to guess. Administrators and parents want to see concrete results – paper Thanksgiving turkeys are a classic example – but mass producing such banal stuff is likely to be boring to both the student and the teacher. It can also be frustrating. Some kids don't have the attention span, fine-motor control or even the interest. Even if everybody gets a gold star and a pat on the head, they know that Debbie's turkey looks better than Janny's. Kids aren't dumb. What I take out of this, as a retired guy who spends full time with his four-year-old, is that giving them a lot of time and attention is the main thing. The materials, even curriculum are not terribly important. If the kid is talking, asking questions, seeing new things, and telling you about his life, you are doing the right stuff.

I saw this (Ladybug's) same review on Goodreads just a few days ago, and I disagree as much now as I did when I first saw it. The chief complaint seems to be that there are just too many ideas in the book. Unlike a lot of non-fiction, this book is beautifully written. Erika Christakis is, first and foremost, a wonderful and funny storyteller and a keen observer of our smallest humans. This book is such a

delight to read and is so full of witty and charming stories and examples, that a reader might not be prepared for the many thought provoking ideas it contains. But make no mistake this is an important and scholarly book. Impeccably researched, it makes a strong and revolutionary case for a complete rethinking of our country's approach to early childhood education. As such, it does not lend itself to simplistic, one note analysis. There are a lot of ideas in this book. It is challenging. It will make you think. It will make you question what you believe. It is a serious book about a serious subject and it requires a serious reader. Would you want anything less from someone who is proposing a complete sea change in how our culture understands young children? I ask anyone who cares about our future - and who cares about ideas -plural- to read this wonderful, thoughtful, beautifully written book.

This book is a stream of consciousness rambling of one person who has worked in the field of Child Development for a long time. That's not a bad thing (in my opinion) but there's really no main point to the book. Sometimes she seems to contradict herself. She writes that Head Start curriculum prohibits teachers from cooking with children. That isn't the case at all. I believe the Head Start teacher in the book was misinformed. Towards the middle of the book, I found her to be pretty sanctimonious about petty things and wondered what she was going to criticize next - bulletin board borders, really? She saved the best for last, so if you find yourself flagging at the middle, skip to the last few chapters. She presents a great idea on how to offer children who attend full-day preschool a preschool curriculum in the mornings and then relaxing the ratios and standards in the afternoon to keep costs down. I have my B.A. in Child Development and worked at everything from NAEYC preschools to Head Start programs. Now I have my own 3 year old who I have just enrolled in a preschool that makes handprint turkeys, celebrates Groundhog Day, and does the calendar during circle time. My training as a teacher balks at those things but my heart for my son wins out. What matters is that he is attending a preschool where he has plenty of free time to play with other kids, where the teachers are kind and fair, and where he is able to play outside in the fresh air. None of the other things matter. I believe the author made that point in one section where a mom criticizes her daughter's Kindergarten curriculum but then changed her mind when she realized how much the teacher loved and cared for her daughter. Relationships are what define a child's experience so let's not get bogged down in the details.

This is a compelling, "bottom-up" view of pre-schoolers and their world. Informed equally by scholarship and practice, Christakis puts the child first. And it's refreshing to come away with

constructive insight rather than guilt about what, as a parent, I should do or have done differently.

What a wonderful peek into the lives of preschoolers! Erika's™s entertainingly honest writing style and intelligent, well-researched insight provides a new guide for "curating" childhood. We all want so desperately to get this right for those we love and care for, and *The Importance of Being Little* provides just the right guidance and unjudgmental perspective to honor our little ones. Sitting back and letting our kids play with open-ended time rather than rushing them to all those classes - I'm glad our dress-up closet was full and our blocks and fort-making blankets were always in sight.

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