

# NURSERY SCHOOL EXPERIENCE

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## NURSERY SCHOOL EXPERIENCE

**Primary Disciplinary Field(s):** Developmental Psychology; Early Childhood Education; Sociology

### 1. Core Definition

The **Nursery School Experience** refers to the structured, group educational and social setting provided for children, typically aged three to five, prior to formal entry into elementary schooling. Extensive academic research has been dedicated to evaluating the complex effects of this experience across multiple domains of child development, including **intellectual**, **social**, and **emotional growth**. Fundamentally, the nursery school environment is designed to offer critical early stimulation, facilitate essential socialization opportunities, and provide effective preparation for subsequent formal education. It is widely understood, however, that the success and magnitude of positive outcomes are heavily reliant upon the institutional atmosphere, the resources available, and the quality of the pedagogical approaches implemented by the staff.

### 2. Intellectual and Cognitive Effects

Studies designed to quantify the cognitive impact of early nursery school attendance consistently reveal a moderately positive influence on measures such as **IQ scores** for the majority of participating children. These observed cognitive gains are believed to stem, in part, from the children's increased exposure to and familiarity with the types of materials and structured tasks commonly featured in **standardized intelligence tests**. Furthermore, improved **rapport with adults**--teachers and administrators--is also thought to contribute to enhanced performance. Crucially, empirical evidence demonstrates that the most significant and pronounced cognitive improvements occur among children from **deprived socioeconomic backgrounds**. This differential impact was strikingly illustrated in an early, influential experiment conducted by Skeels, Updegraff et al. (1938). This research compared a group of orphanage children who attended nursery school (the experimental group) with a control group that did not receive this intervention. The findings showed that after twenty months, the experimental group registered a notable average gain of 4.6 IQ points, while the control group, lacking the early stimulation, experienced an average loss of 4.6 points, thereby highlighting the significant compensatory role of high-quality early educational settings for vulnerable populations.

### 3. Social and Emotional Adjustment

The most robust and consistent positive outcomes associated with the **Nursery School Experience** are typically observed within the spheres of **social adjustment** and emotional development. When compared with peers who have not participated in such programs, children who attend nursery school customarily demonstrate significantly higher levels of **independence**,

**spontaneity**, and **self-reliance**. They also exhibit an increased sense of **curiosity** and a greater capacity to react constructively and resilience to failure, as detailed in foundational studies by Van Alstyne and Hattwick (1939) and Walsh (1931). Moreover, attendance effectively fosters enhanced sociability and active participation in **group activities**. Children also show marked improvement in practical **self-help skills**, general dexterity, and resourcefulness in effectively utilizing play materials and equipment. These wide-ranging positive social and emotional trends have been demonstrated to persist throughout the critical transitional period into elementary school, reinforcing the fundamental importance of early intervention in establishing a strong trajectory for long-term psychological development.

#### 4. Importance of Teacher Sensitivity and Environment

It is crucial to understand that the beneficial trends associated with the **Nursery School Experience** are neither universal nor automatically guaranteed. Outcomes are highly dependent upon individual child responses, meaning the environment is inherently better suited to the needs of some children than others. Consequently, it represents a substantial mistake to assume that a brief attendance in nursery school will automatically transform a child's behavior patterns or instantaneously remedy existing shortcomings. While changes can certainly occur, their depth and permanence are largely determined by the overarching **atmosphere of the school** and, most critically, the **sensitivity of the teacher**. Thompson (1944) demonstrated this critical link, showing that children in a school where teachers were described as warm, helpful, and perceptive rated far higher in markers of **constructive activity**, **social participation**, and **leadership**, compared to those attending a school where educators offered minimal guidance or rarely engaged in the children's activities. It is often observed that many teachers dedicate an excessive amount of time to practical externals--such as arranging materials or assisting with clothing--at the expense of addressing children's profound **emotional needs**. Yet, when educators actively focus attention on the individual child and their specific problems, effectively setting the stage for planned growth experiences, remarkable therapeutic and developmental progress frequently takes place.

#### 5. Benefits for Special Populations

The therapeutic and developmental value of the nursery school setting is increasingly acknowledged for **handicapped** and **retarded children**, even though adequate community facilities remain sparse. Under the specialized guidance of trained teachers, for instance, **blind children** benefit profoundly from opportunities for structured social play and the necessary development of **compensatory skills**. Beginning the experience early is highly advantageous, as it allows these children to more readily learn to respond to non-visual stimuli, such as touch, taste, and smell, and to effectively orient themselves through alternative sensory means. Furthermore, school activities are vital in preventing social withdrawal and counteracting the potential negative consequences of parental **overprotection** and **oversolicitude**. Equally significant benefits are

observed for children who are mildly or moderately **retarded**. These children typically respond optimally to the structured stimulation provided by group games, musical and rhythmic activities, and the chance to interact with brightly colored materials of various shapes and sizes. Just as important is consistent practice in attending to their own daily needs, including **toileting**, changing clothes, and maintaining order in their designated storage space or "cubby."

Cutting-edge programs, such as the specialized nursery school recently organized by the New York University Institute of Rehabilitation Medicine, have demonstrated that children with severe disabilities resulting from congenital defects, brain, or spinal diseases profit immensely from specialized opportunities for varied sensory experience, activity, and emotional release. This school features a gaily colored room that was meticulously designed for these patients, incorporating innovations such as cut-out tables for children in wheelchairs, easels specifically slanted to permit armless children to paint with their feet, and toys and puzzles fitted with knoblike handles to assist those with limited grasp. These design considerations, including easily opened shelves and cabinets, are intended to actively encourage **independence**. Finally, special nursery schools, notably those conducted by the Child Development Center and the Riverside Church in New York City, have been successfully organized to support children suffering from severe **emotional disturbances**.

## 6. Case Study: Dramatic Play as an Instrument for Growth

The following case, documented by Hartley, Frank, and Goldenson (1952), illustrates the power of one specific nursery school activity--**dramatic play**--as a therapeutic instrument for fostering profound growth and self-realization. Four-year-old **Donnie**, who resided in a fatherless home, was initially characterized by his teachers as "a quiet and scared kid" who consistently avoided group participation for fear that he would "get my clothes dirty." The brief protocols from observers demonstrate his gradual, successful process of freeing himself from debilitating timidity and previously observed feminine tendencies, enabling him to adopt a more **masculine and assertive role**.

**Initial Stage (Record 1):** Donnie engaged in highly passive play, pushing doll carriages with Alice and seeking security by holding hands and whispering in enclosed spaces, indicative of his need for comfort and reluctance toward independent action.

**Transition Stage (Record 2):** Five months later, Donnie demonstrated a cognitive interest in the more exciting, physically demanding play of the boys (building blocks, pretending to burn a car). However, he remained emotionally unable to participate fully, withdrawing to whine and demand his toy car back when the play escalated, reflecting the internal conflict between his desired masculine identity and his established timidity.

**Assertive Stage (Record 3):** The construction of a large block structure, which Donnie identified as a "jeep car"--a profound symbol of power and **mastery**--provided the emotional space for him to

assert his long-felt need: "I have to drive, let me in, let me in." Despite his articulation, he did not immediately act, likely inhibited by his fear of rejection, yet the conception of the assertive role was successfully established.

**Role Assumption and Defense (Record 4):** He successfully assumed a leadership role, issuing instructions to Rex ("Get me two blocks to put here"). The car then functioned as a place of refuge and satisfaction: "We could sleep in the car, couldn't we?" Critically, when an aggressive peer (Bud) attempted to disrupt the peace, Donnie's face puckered in fear, but he actively pushed back and whined, marking the first documented attempt at an **aggressive defense** seen by the observer.

**Mastery and Independence (Record 5):** In the final stage, during free play in the gym hall, Donnie fully adopted powerful, masculine roles of his own making (cleaning windows for "thirty cents," moving large, bulky blocks he identified as "ice"). He performed these strained tasks with evident pride. In the final confrontation with Bud, Donnie clung to his block with all his strength and successfully managed to keep it **without calling for the teacher**, demonstrating successful acquisition of independence, resilience, and an assertive self-concept.

## 7. Debates and Caveats

Despite the substantial empirical support for the positive impacts of the nursery school experience, particularly concerning social adjustment and compensatory cognitive gains, it is vital to maintain a balanced and cautious perspective. The experience is not a universal solution; observed developmental trends are not strictly universal, and attendance alone cannot be expected to automatically remediate all pre-existing behavioral or developmental shortcomings. The primary debate centers on the critical distinction between the **quality** and the mere **quantity** of the experience. The effectiveness of the intervention is intrinsically linked to the pedagogical environment; therefore, poorly managed programs or those characterized by insensitive teaching staff may yield minimal benefits or even potentially negative outcomes. Consequently, maximizing the substantial positive potential inherent in the **Nursery School Experience** requires a concentrated focus on resource allocation for high-quality teacher training, fostering **perceptive guidance**, and ensuring the creation of consistent, emotionally supportive educational settings.

## 8. Further Reading

[Skeels, H. M., Updegraff, R., et al. \(1938\). A study of environmental stimulation in children.](#)

[Van Alstyne, D., & Hattwick, L. W. \(1939\). A comparison of the performance of preschool and non-preschool children on the Kuhlmann-Binet Tests.](#)

[NYU Langone Health. Rusk Rehabilitation.](#)

[Wikipedia. Preschool Education.](#)