



Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood

October 10, 2018

The undersigned are deeply alarmed by the latest high-tech industry push to target young children: the growth of so-called online “preschools.”

Recognizing the estimated \$70 billion a year “preschool market,” an increasing number of Silicon Valley companies with names like “K12 Inc.” and “CHALK” are selling families and policymakers the idea that kindergarten readiness can be transmitted through a screen.^{1, 2} What these companies offer is not preschool, but a marketing scheme designed to sell a virtual facsimile of real preschool. By adopting online pre-k, states are selling out kids and families for the benefit of private industry.

All of our knowledge about human development demonstrates that children learn best through exploratory, creative play and relationships with caring adults. As the American Academy of Pediatrics notes, “Higher-order thinking skills and executive functions essential for school success, such as task persistence, impulse control, emotion regulation, and creative, flexible thinking, are best taught through unstructured and social (not digital) play.”³ By contrast, there is virtually no evidence showing that online preschool improves outcomes for kids.

Online pre-K may expose kids and families to new types of risks. Research shows that screen overuse puts young children at risk of behavior problems, sleep deprivation, delays in social emotional development, and obesity.^{4, 5, 6, 7} Extended time on screens diminishes time spent on essential early learning experiences such as lap-reading, creative play, and other social forms of learning. Relational learning requires healthy interactions with adults, and online experiences falsely marketed as “preschool” sabotage the development of these essential relationships. Diminishing the role of early educators both deprives kids of crucial relationships and threatens needed investment in actual high-quality preschools. Children without access to quality pre-K (often the targets of these online programs) already face a higher risk of academic difficulty than their peers, and online pre-K threatens to expand, not close, that gap.

The growth of online preschool hasn’t happened in a vacuum. As more and more research shows the importance of quality pre-K education, there’s a push to make early learning more “academic” and achievement-based and less about social-emotional learning. At the same time, school budgets are being slashed, and educators are asked to do more with less. Ed-tech companies have taken advantage of these trends by marketing technology and machine learning as a more efficient way of teaching than “old-fashioned” hands-on, face-to-face, school experiences.

Moreover, these programs and their “curricula” raise the real possibility of data mining aimed at young children and their families. In this era of big data, predictive analytics, biased algorithms, and documented data harms, online preschool threatens our most vulnerable and disenfranchised communities. With “social impact” capital flooding the early learning sector, online preschool is part of a larger set of trends to further digitize and privatize public services.

As educators and advocates, we are alarmed at the adoption of online preschool across the United States. The state of Utah, citing the need to serve families in remote areas without spending much money, sponsored the first state-funded online program of this kind, called UPSTART, and thousands of families have enrolled.⁸ Alarmingly, UPSTART has expanded pilot programs to at least seven other states.

Virtual preschool may save states money, but it’s at the expense of children and families. Early learning is not a product. It is a process of social and relational interactions that are fundamental to children’s later development.^{9,10} Asserting that this process can take place online, without human contact, falsely implies that the needs of children and families can be met with inexpensive, screen-based alternatives.

All children deserve high quality early education, and we call on local, state, and federal agencies and policymakers to reject online preschools and invest in fully-funded, relationship-based, universal pre-kindergarten programs with proven long-term benefits.

Defending the Early Years

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¹ GSV Asset Management. (2012). *American Revolution 2.0 How Education Innovation is Going to Revitalize America and Transform the U.S. Economy*.

² Mader, J. (2017, November 3). Thousands of parents are enrolling their children in online preschool. *The Hechinger Report*.

³ Radesky, J., & Christakis, D. (2016). Media and Young Minds. *Pediatrics*, 138(5), 1-6.

⁴ Lillard, A. S., & Peterson, J. (2011). The immediate impact of different types of television on young children’s executive function. *Pediatrics*, 128(4), 644–649. <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2010-1919>

⁵ Genuneit, J., Brockmann, P.E., Schlarb, A.A., & Rothenbacher, D. (2017). Media consumption and sleep quality in early childhood: results from the Ulm SPATZ Health Study. *Sleep Medicine*, 45, 7-10. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sleep.2017.10.013>

⁶ Hinkley, T., Verbestel, V., Ahrens, W., Lissner, L., Molnár, D., Moreno, L. A., ... De Bourdeaudhuij, I. (2014). Early Childhood Electronic Media Use as a Predictor of Poorer Well-being: A Prospective Cohort Study. *JAMA Pediatrics*, 168(5), 485. <https://doi.org/10.1001/jamapediatrics.2014.94>

⁷ Robinson, T. N., Banda, J. A., Hale, L., Lu, A. S., Fleming-Milici, F., Calvert, S. L., Wartella, E. (2017). Screen Media Exposure and Obesity in Children and Adolescents. *Pediatrics*, 140(s2) S97-S101. http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/pediatrics/140/Supplement_2/S97.full.pdf

⁸ Brown, E. (2015, October 9). Preschool is good for children, but it’s expensive. So Utah is offering it online. *The Washington Post*.

⁹ Christakis, E. (2016). *The Importance of Being Little: What Preschoolers Really Need from Grownups*. New York, New York: Viking.

¹⁰ Trafton, A. (2018, February 13). Back-and-forth exchanges boost children’s brain response to language. MIT News.

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** indicates sign on after October 10 publication date*

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