

- Can worksheets build a foundation for “real” learning—reading, writing, and math?

In the early years, children construct numbers by thinking about them and by manipulating materials, whether they are table blocks or dishes in the dramatic play center. Worksheets only permit children to copy or match numerals or letters, often out of context.

Furthermore, it is more meaningful for children to see letters in their natural surroundings, such as in the “EXIT” sign by the door. Introduce sounds by reading and discussing well-illustrated, exciting, thematic alphabet books.

- Can worksheets provide a good way to assess knowledge?

Just because a child circles a set of three items on a worksheet does not mean he or she understands what “three” means. Instead, the child’s concept of numbers can be evaluated during daily activities such as counting out three cookies for a snack or by sorting a button collection according to color or the number of holes. You can photograph their fascinating findings for documentation.

- Can using paper and pencils provide concrete experiences?

Although children may be capable of holding a pencil and moving it across the paper, preschoolers must have access to a wide variety of manipulatives (e.g., beads, Legos, sand, dress-up clothes, musical instruments) in order to develop physically and intellectually. Rather than being concrete, the marks on the worksheets are symbolic representations, which may be confusing for toddlers and 3- to 4-year-olds.

## Conclusion

Often, early childhood educators give children worksheets because they and the parents want to see evidence that the children are learning. However, all young children, including kindergartners, learn best through appropriate hands-on experiences and interactions with others. Playing and talking with friends enhances children’s whole development. Continuous opportunities to think and act creatively are essential if children are to develop their minds to the fullest potential. Children need to be involved with many meaningful problem-solving situations, rather than sitting passively while filling in worksheets.

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# ACEI SPEAKS

## Worksheets in Preschool: Too Much, Too Soon

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You may remember worksheets as a “tried-and-true” method of learning when you were a child in school. If you went to school before the advent of the photocopier, you might even recall ditto sheets—those funny-smelling worksheets stamped with purple ink. Sometimes the teacher would group a number of worksheets together to form a workbook. If you did well on your worksheets, receiving lots of gold stars and happy faces, you may have good memories about worksheets and, thus, feel comfortable with their use. You may, however, not have liked worksheets or you may have been bored or frustrated by them. Today, many early childhood programs still use worksheets despite prominent education researchers’ recommendations for other, more developmentally appropriate ways for young children to learn. On the other hand, if your child’s program does not use worksheets—a readily available, inexpensive teaching method—you may be wondering why.

## Questions About Worksheets

Let’s explore some common questions parents have about the use of worksheets and their paper-and-pencil activities. These questions represent what parents may believe to be the goals or purposes of effective preschool programs. Given recent research into ways young children learn, however, there are better ways to achieve these objectives.

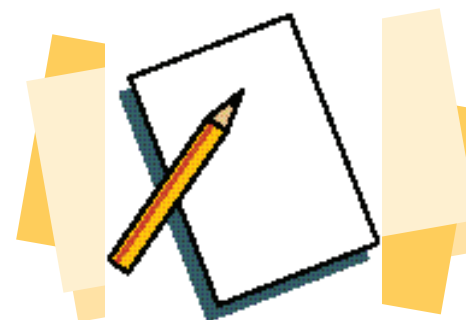
- Can worksheets help develop fine motor skills?

Young children’s small finger muscles and hand-eye coordination develop slowly. Children need time playing with paintbrushes at the easel and squeezing play dough before trying to grip a pencil and confine their marks on a small sheet of paper. The young child can be frustrated by not being able to stay within the lines while copying letters, and children may find little meaning in coloring an adult-created illustration.

- Can worksheets teach self-discipline and how to focus on a task?

It is often difficult for preschoolers to sit and do paper-and-pencil tasks conceived by adults. Young children construct their learning from active participation. They learn best when manipulating concrete materials like wooden blocks and clay, which allow them to use appropriate gross and fine motor skills while focusing on meaningful activities that interest them.

- Can worksheets enhance creativity? Some adults believe that young children are learning how to draw when they color in adult-created illustrations on worksheets. Adults praise children for staying in the lines and coloring neatly in one direction. Young children’s immature fine motor skill development, however, may make this goal impossible to achieve. It is true that many children like to



color in pre-drawn pictures. Other children, however, receive the message that their own drawings are not acceptable, and so they may stop trying to draw creatively. It is more beneficial to give young children blank paper and crayons, allowing them to express themselves freely.

- Can worksheets stimulate interest? Worksheet activities may be a relaxing, entertaining way for some children to fill in the time. Many children successfully complete worksheets. When they already know the material, however, worksheets become simply low-level, non-productive busy work. Instead, children need to be challenged to develop their skills. As children use hands-on materials, adults should ask open-ended questions such as, “How many things can you do with this box?” Children should be able to explore questions that have more than one right answer, unlike those on most worksheets.