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# teacher tom

TEACHING AND  
LEARNING FROM  
PRESCHOOLERS.

friday, june 09, 2017

## "School Readiness" Fear-Mongering

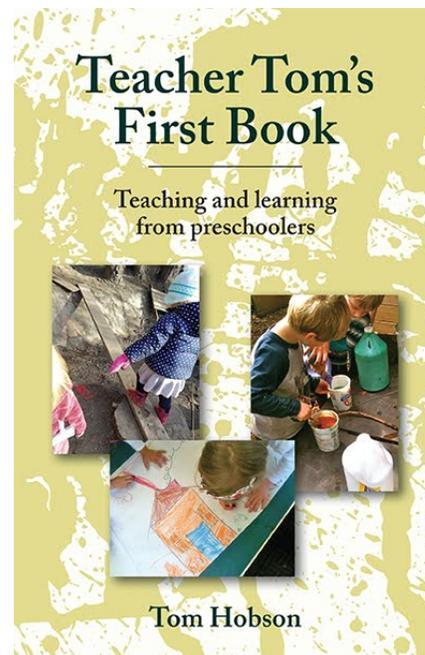
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*Yesterday, my friend [Denita Dinger from Play Counts!](#) shared a post from a year ago on Facebook entitled Five-Year-Olds "Falling Behind." I agree with her that it's a message that bears repeating, so I thought I would re-publish it here this morning. Thanks Denita!*

\*\*\*\*\*

What would you think if you saw a mother hovering over her two month old infant drilling her on vowel sounds? Or how about a father coaching his five month old on the finer points to walking? I expect you would think they were at best wasting their time: two month olds can't talk and five month olds can't walk, let alone be taught. Talking and walking are

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things children just learn. Now imagine that when these babies failed to acquire these capabilities that are clearly beyond their developmental grasp, these parents began to fret that their child was "falling behind." You would think they were crazy. If a doctor told these parents their child was "falling behind" we would think he was either incompetent or cruel.

Sadly, there are actually people out there doing things like this. I've written before about hucksters who assert that babies can be taught to read and there are devices on the market that purport to help babies learn to walk. The good news is that while there are some naive parents who fall for such gimmickry in the misguided attempt to somehow one-up nature's long, successful history of "teaching" talking and

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walking according to well-established developmental timelines, most of us know better than to worry about these things that virtually every child stressless-ly learns without any special interventions.

My own daughter spoke her first word at 3 months old, consistently saying "Papa" when I played and cared for her: she was putting together full sentences before 6 months. This same "advanced" child didn't crawl until her first birthday and wasn't walking until close to 20 months, a full lifetime "behind" some of her peers. Today, as you might expect, she talks and walks like the rest of the teenagers: if she was ever behind she caught up, and if she was ever ahead, the others caught up with her.

This unsavory practice of taking advantage of new parent insecurities in the name of profit is one that deserves to be called out wherever it rears its nasty head, and it's borderline criminal when they play the "falling behind" card, which is why I'm writing today.

I've had the opportunity these past few years to travel around the world to talk to teachers and parents. Every place I go I find myself discussing this bizarre notion of "school readiness." Often translated in the US as "kindergarten readiness," it is essentially code for reading. It seems that the powers that be in our respective nations have decided to sell parents on the snake oil that if your child isn't starting to read by five-years-old she is "falling behind." They are doing this despite the fact that *every single legitimate study* ever done on the subject recommends that formal literacy education (if we ever even need it) not begin until a child is seven or eight years old. They are telling parents and teachers that children are "falling behind" despite the fact that *every single legitimate study* ever done finds that there are no long term advantages to being an early reader, just as there are no long term advantages to being early talkers or walkers. In fact, many studies have found that when formal literacy instruction begins too early, like at 5, children grow up to be less motivated readers and less capable of comprehending what they've read. That's right, if anything, this "school readiness" fear-mongering may well turn out to be outright malpractice.

But the worst thing, the unforgivable thing, is the cruelty of the assertion that five-year-olds are "falling behind." It's one thing when commercial interests attempt to move their crappy merchandise by playing on fears, but when schools

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## about teacher tom



**Teacher Tom**  
Seattle,  
Washington,  
United States

I am a preschool teacher, blogger, speaker, artist and the author of Teacher Tom's First Book ([teachertomsfirstbook.com](http://teachertomsfirstbook.com)) For the past 15 years, I've taught preschool at the Woodland Park Cooperative School. The children come to us as 2-year-olds in diapers and leave as "sophisticated" 5-year-olds ready for kindergarten. The cooperative school model allows me to work very closely with families in a true community setting. I intend to teach at Woodland Park for the rest of my life. I love the kids and I love the families. It's an incredibly rewarding job.

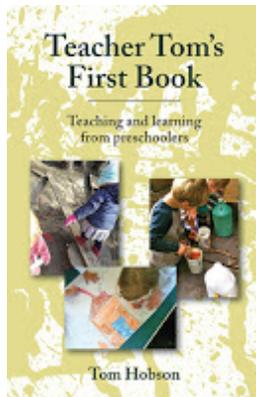
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are doing it, when teachers are doing it, that's unconscionable. Listen, I'm a staunch supporter of my fellow teachers here on these pages, but I am calling my colleagues out on this one. Teachers should know better than to help these guys sell this stuff: it's bad for kids, it's bad for families, and it's bad for society. We are the professionals. Teachers need to put our collective foot down, point to the research, rely on our own experience, and if we can't refuse to subject young children to developmentally inappropriate, potentially harmful "readiness" garbage for fear of losing our jobs, the least we can do is refuse to take part in the crass abusiveness of "falling behind." If we can't do that maybe we don't deserve to call ourselves professionals.



(I've just published a book! If you are interested in ordering *Teacher Tom's First Book*, [click here](#). Thank you!)

I put a lot of time and effort into this blog. If you'd like to support me please consider a small contribution to the cause. *Thank you!*

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Public education is BIG business, and \*fear\* is an incredible motivator for teachers, schools, districts, parents, and our nation to buy, buy, BUY any and all snake oil. Any new mantra, tool or schtick is packaged up and sold hard, backed by the threat of loss of school funding and less-than-stellar teacher evaluations unless standardized tests (yet more must-have products) are administered often and inappropriately. It is notable how developmentally appropriate practice and deep knowledge of how children actually learn are purposely avoided and/or ignored. Fear and threats sell more products than trust in the natural work and growth demonstrated by children.

6:34 AM

**lisa m said...**

I am sad that I fell for the scheme when both of my children were entering K. The reading specialist at the school strongly suggested every child entering K know the 50 sight words and I spent all summer doing the drill and kill. Kill I did.....both of my children (MS & HS) now see reading as nothing but a bad chore. I listened and started it and the teachers just piled it on with more reading "stuff" and book logs and timed reading. It's one of my regrets as a parent.

7:22 AM

**jen&quin said...**

Thank you for this!! I didnt do any formal reading work with my eldest (apart from reading to him all the time) and he picked up reading in kindergarten (5.5 years) no problem at all. Do you have a similar post about being able to write their name by kindergarten? Both my boys have strong gross motor skills but at 3 and 4 have/had zero interest in drawing so my eldest was much slower being able to write his name and at 6.5 years his handwriting is 'behind' his peers. I'm trying to resist the scaremongering!

2:24 PM

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