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Push for success sends more kids to pre-K tutoring

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The Arizona Republic

Jun. 24, 2006 12:00 AM

When Austin Hendrix of Chandler turned 3, a tutor started working with him twice a week so he could get a jump-start on kindergarten.

Austin's younger brother, Xavier, turns 3 in August. Then, he will start being tutored, too. The boys' mother, Monique, wants her sons to get a good foundation in math and reading.

"There is such competition nowadays to get into college," she said.

The Hendrix family is an example of the latest trend in tutoring, which caters to pint-size students as young as 2 ½ and 3 who aren't in school. Over the past few years, some of the largest tutoring companies have started programs aimed at the younger set.

Kumon Math and Reading Centers, an international tutoring company, started Junior Kumon three years ago for preschoolers and kindergartners. The young kindergarten preparation market now accounts for 18 percent of its business.

Last year, Sylvan Learning Center began offering a beginning reading program for students 4 ½ and older. Several Arizona school districts also offer kindergarten-prep summer school for a fee.

Reasons for the increase

Several factors are driving the trend. Demand for K-12 tutoring is increasing, and parents who get tutors for their older children are requesting similar programs for their preschoolers.

The national trend toward all-day kindergarten is another reason that preschool tutoring is on the rise. Parents, even those whose children have preschool experience, see tutoring as a way to ensure their children do well.

"I would recommend it to every parent. It doesn't hurt them," said Elaine Nowlin of Casa Grande, whose daughter was tutored for three months the summer before kindergarten. Kalee Nowlin went to a Sylvan Learning Center two hours a day, three days a week.

Costs range from less than \$100 to more than \$1,000 a month, depending on the program and company.

Preschool tutoring is such a new trend that it has not been widely researched.

Most of the research relates to academics in preschool. A study on academic content and preschool at State University of New York at Stony Brook found that children who started to learn about letters, sounds and writing during preschool were more likely to read successfully in elementary school. Parents who seek out tutors often want their children to get more academic instruction on top of what they get in preschool.

The trend concerns some educators, who worry that tutoring too early may create pressure at a time when kids are better off playing. But tutors say they tailor the lessons for younger kids and screen the youngest children to see if they are mature enough to sit and handle direction.

A learning session

At the Ocotillo Kumon Center in a Chandler shopping center, the Junior Kumon program is so popular there is a waiting list.

The junior students sit on tiny blue chairs at horseshoe-shaped tables, working three to a tutor. *Dr. Seuss* books line the shelves. Flash cards with simple words hang on hooks along the wall.

The lessons are short, 20 to 30 minutes, with only one or two concepts covered each time. In math, students first learn to count to 10, then 30, then hold a pencil and draw short lines. They also learn to write numbers on a board after the tutor calls out the number.

For reading, students start with pictures of familiar objects like cats and dogs and connect them with words.

Center Director Young Suh said the biggest challenge with the youngest students is getting them to calm down because the idea of study is new. Some don't even know how to hold a pencil.

Practice on rise

The trend in preschool tutoring mirrors an increase in academic tutoring. The national tutoring market has more than doubled in the past five years, with about 10 to 12 percent of students, more than 6 million, expected to receive tutoring this year, according to Eduventures, a Boston-based market research and consulting company. It is unknown how much of this is preschool tutoring.

Education experts say several factors are influencing the tutoring trend, including an emphasis on standardized tests that place more importance on reading, writing and math. Parents say they feel obligated, even if their children are only slightly behind, to make sure they keep up with their peers.

Sheryl Williams enrolled her daughter, Shay, in tutoring four months ago in preparation for kindergarten. She wanted to avoid having her 5-year-old daughter fall behind in school, which is what happened to her 9-year-old son, James.

Williams said the tutoring isn't too much for her daughter. The tutor works on only a few skills for 20 to 30 minutes twice a week.

"I don't think she knows it's work," Williams said.

Opinions on tutoring

Early-childhood experts have different views on when to start tutoring.

Lesley Mandel Morrow, a professor at Rutgers University's Graduate School of Education, said tutoring is appropriate if a child is behind but not if parents want the children to get ahead.

"To sit a 3-year-old down and drill the alphabet is inappropriate," she said.

Parents should instead pick real-life activities where they can incorporate the alphabet, words and numbers. Visiting the grocery store and pointing to the names of food can help with alphabet and word recognition.

If parents choose tutoring, they should make sure it is age-appropriate, said Alan Simpson, spokesman for the National Association for the Education of Young Children in Washington, D.C. Youngsters learn best in environments that emphasize play, he said, and too much pressure can cause children to become frustrated. He recommends parent first observe other children in a tutoring session. If it's a pressure-filled environment, the children will look like they aren't having fun.

Andrea Pastorok, an educational psychologist who helped develop Junior Kumon, said the program gives students pre-reading skills like awareness of phonics and an appreciation of books and stories.

"A lot of our detractors will say kids should be out playing, but at this age, if you take a 4-, 5- or 6-year-old and make learning fun for them, they don't know the difference," she said.

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