

A Brief History of Kindergarten

Friedrich Froebel, a German educator, opened the first kindergarten in Blankenburg, Germany, in 1837. During the 1830s and 1840s he developed his vision for kindergarten based on the ideas of the French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau and the later Swiss educator Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi. These progressive education reformers introduced the concept that children were naturally good and active learners. At the time, this thinking was quite radical. The common belief until then had been that children were little creatures who needed stern handling to become good adults. Play was seen as a waste of time and proof that children should be tamed so they could be more productive.

Undaunted, Froebel argued that teachers should use music, nature study, stories, and dramatic play to teach children. He encouraged the use of crafts and manipulatives, such as small building blocks or puzzles. He also promoted the idea of circle time for children to learn in a group. Froebel proposed that children acquire cognitive and social skills by using their natural curiosity and desire to learn. He believed women had the best sensitivity and qualities to work with young children in developing their emotional skills. Consequently, Froebel opened a training school just for women.

Froebel's ideas were so new that the Prussian government closed all kindergartens in 1851, fearing a socialist revolutionary movement. Nevertheless, the concept spread quickly throughout the rest of the world, and by the end of the nineteenth century, many countries had started kindergartens for middle-class children. Then, between 1900 and the start of World War I, England and France began to establish free kindergartens for poor children. Kindergartens also reopened in Germany at the end of the nineteenth century, and they still serve children who are three to six years old. The word *kindergarten* means "garden of children," a beautiful metaphor for what happens there—children growing like flowers and plants, nurtured by a positive environment with good soil, rain, and sun, as well as an attentive gardener.

In the United States, Margarethe Schurz opened the first kindergarten in Watertown, Wisconsin, in 1856 for her immigrant German community. This kindergarten caught the attention of Elizabeth Peabody, who started the first American English-language kindergarten in Boston in 1860. Then, in large cities, charities began to fund private kindergartens to care for the three- to six-year-old children of immigrant factory workers, which meant these children were healthy, clean, fed, and clothed. The goal was not so much to teach reading and writing but to develop overall cognitive and social-emotional skills—the beginning of considering the *whole child*.

In 1873, Saint Louis, Missouri, became the first school district to have a public kindergarten. By 1914, the beginning of World War I, all the major American urban school systems had publicly funded kindergartens that were open for five-year-olds. Mississippi was the last state to offer public kindergarten, in 1986. Today, kindergarten is available in all states. Forty-two states mandate every school district to offer it. Children are eligible to attend kindergarten at the age of five, although some states allow for four-year-olds. In many states, the compulsory age for starting school ranges between six and eight years old, so families can decide to skip kindergarten and enter school in the first or second grade. In 2008, about four million children attended half-day or full-day kindergarten in the United States (Hussar and Bailey 2009).

Philosophical Foundation for the American Kindergarten

Many educators and psychologists have influenced the philosophy of the modern American kindergarten, including John Dewey, Maria Montessori, Erik Erikson, Jean Piaget, and Lev Vygotsky. To combine their ideas and create the ideal prekindergarten and kindergarten program, this is what the composite list would look like: