



Prepare Your Child for Kindergarten

Dr. Christopher Brown
Author & Professor, U of Texas

EPISODE 39

[Quote]

“The current focus is on outcomes. So, we’re thinking more about children as test scores, rather than thinking about who children are”

[Description]

When your young child reaches school age, there is anxiety for both parents and children to start kids in school. For parents - doubt of whether their child is ready for school, are they going to be ok, how will they survive without us? For kids, they might even be a little scared – new teachers and a new environment, without mom and dad.



In this episode, Christopher provides insight into how to support your child’s learning, how to address common issues that might arise during the kindergarten year and how we could help reform the current early childhood methods.

[Intro]

Jaison Dolvane: When your young child reaches school age, there is anxiety for both parents and children to start kids in school. For parents - doubt of whether their child is ready for school, are they going to be ok, how will the kids survive

without us? For kids, they might even be a little scared – new teachers and a new environment, without mom and dad.

Dr. Christopher Brown is a professor of early childhood education at the University of Texas at Austin. Christopher left his job as a teacher to pursue his Ph.D., because he was troubled by how teachers and families were forced to focus on standards and assessments rather than on the children he worked with daily.

Chris is the author of 2 books, *Ready for Kindergarten* and *Kinder-Race*. He devoted these books to helping parents free themselves from the readiness trap, so your child will succeed in kindergarten.

In this episode, Christopher provides insight into what is known about school readiness, how to support your child's learning, how to address common issues that might arise during the kindergarten year and how we could help reform the current early childhood methods.

[Episode]

JAISON DOLVANE: Okay. Welcome Christopher.

CHRISTOPHER BROWN: Thank you for having me. I appreciate it.

JAISON DOLVANE: Yeah. Good to have you here. So, Chris, by the way, can I call you Chris or Christopher?

CHRISTOPHER BROWN: Either one is fine.

JAISON DOLVANE: Okay. So Chris, tell me a little bit about just your background and that, you know, I know you're a professor now, but you know, how did you sort of really get to a point where you started thinking about this particular problem of kids getting ready for kindergarten?

CHRISTOPHER BROWN: So many past lives I've had, I've done a lot of different things. I once was a preschool teacher. I've done first grade and I taught kindergarten. And as you mentioned in the intro, my experiences in kindergarten led me back to my graduate degree. And I had the good fortune of studying with Elizabeth Grow or Beth Brow, university of Wisconsin, Madison, and her big focus there was on the issue of school readiness. And

my interest has always been on how policies affecting what takes place in the classroom, but within that school readiness becomes a big issue. And so working with her really helped me become more interested and understand this issue in much more complex way. And as you mentioned in the intro, I was really struggling with this idea of what are we asking kids to do in kindergarten.

And then as I was doing my PhD, I started to have children with my wife. I now have three daughters and they're all older, but they've all gone through the kindergarten experience. And the thing we were noticing as they were doing this, the focus on what kids were able to do and what they should be doing when they enter kindergarten, the expectations increased with each child.

And then, so I started to write this book almost a decade ago with my first daughter started go into kindergarten. And then just recently my brother, his daughter went into kindergarten two years ago and they were having even more challenges and negative experiences with this process. And that pushed me to finish the book and also gave me direction. I was struggling where to go beyond just talking about school readiness.

The second part of my book talks about how to support families with this transition into kindergarten. So all those experiences brought me to this issue.

JAISON DOLVANE: Got it. So, were there any personal experiences with your own children that kind of triggered some of this?

CHRISTOPHER BROWN: Well, I think the things that, on a personal issue with my oldest who's Camille, her teacher was very play-based and the instruction that took place in the classroom. And she was very open to having families come into that classroom and participate. As my second daughter went in a couple of years later, it became much more academic and I was becoming a little more nervous. There was a lot more discussion on the skills kids should be having when they enter kindergarten classroom.

And then by the time my third daughter, who's five years younger than my oldest got into kindergarten. I love their kindergarten teachers. Please don't hear negativity in that conversation. Rather, the focus is much more on the academic skills they were doing or what they should have in that classroom.

And I met a lot more parents that were worried, which made me nervous. Like you shouldn't be worried about your child at age five. They're going to be in school for a very long time. And they have a lots of opportunities to succeed, develop and grow.

So if we're coming in from a position where we're feeling like our kids aren't going to be successful or there's something wrong with my child, that shouldn't be how school starts. And so that's one of the reasons that really pushed me to finish this book.

JAISON DOLVANE: Right. So tell us a little bit about, you know, you mentioned reforming the current way of teaching, so what's wrong with the current way or is there anything wrong?

CHRISTOPHER BROWN: Well, I think it's, I don't know if it's, each classroom is going to be different what you see in terms of instruction. I think the current way, the focus is on outcomes. And so we're thinking more about children as test scores and rather than thinking about who children are, when they come into the classroom, what are their strengths? What are their interests? What do they want to do? What do they want to accomplish? As well as for families, families bring a lot of hopes and interests with them as they send their children off to school.

And for many kindergarten classrooms, that's not the focus or the interest. The focus is, I need this child to be reading at a certain level by the time they leave my classroom and that's coming from policymakers or school administrators. So teachers are in this bind where they know that they have kids in there that are interested in a range of different things, but they're being told they have to teach this specific content to make sure kids get to the specific place at a particular point in their schooling.

JAISON DOLVANE: Got it. So it seems like there's sort of like two issues here, right? One of the parents side, which is, you know, what should parents really be thinking about? And you know, in all fairness, I mean their perspective is kind of influenced by whatever the schools have set as the goals. And then I guess there's a teacher part of it also. So, you know, I guess what can parents do and how should they be thinking about getting their kids ready for school?

CHRISTOPHER BROWN: I think there's several things parents can be doing, working directly with their child. They should make the transition to

schooling, be exciting and fun. They shouldn't make it stressful. They shouldn't be worried about their child skills or levels. They should be thinking about what are the strengths their child's bringing into the classroom. How can they build from those strengths? How can they let the teacher know what a wonderful child they have and give them some insight within that process.

So the relationship with your child, you want to make that strong and positive as you can, when a child enter school. As you go into school, as a parent, trying to develop and establish a positive relationship with the teacher is just as important.

Having allies for a teacher with families is really important so that they can accomplish a range of different things within the classroom.

So I think as parents, we need to think about how are we supporting our child? How are we supporting teachers and how are we building a community, not just for my child, but for all the children within the classrooms that they feel successful, and capable within that process.

I sometimes worried because there's so much pressure on the individual, we lose sight that we go into school to learn how to become democratic citizens, to learn how to work with each other and become a larger society. And so as parents, we know should not only focus on our own kids, but also on the classroom environment itself and the other kids that are in there. So everybody's having a good year. We feel like we're working together and moving towards the same direction.

So that might mean talking to the school principal, asking questions. Why are we doing this when it clearly our children, aren't interested in that. And then lastly, at a more global level being active and participating through voting, participating in school board elections, whatever they may be, you know, making sure you're recognizing how others are talking about the education of your child. And if you disagree with them, finding people who do support what you believe in and voting for those folks. And then lastly, as your children age out of school, don't lose sight of where school is or don't stop participating within that process.

I sometimes worry families once their kids graduate high school, they're done with public education. And I think families should always remain a

part of that process because it's a part of their community and it's educating the people that are going to be living with them for the rest of their lives.

JAISON DOLVANE: Yeah, no, that's interesting. So, you know, the last part of what you actually talked about was making sure that parents use their voice to either, you know, let people know how they'd like things to change or to disagree if they don't believe things are going, going the right way. So that, that makes sense. But some of the stuff that you talked about earlier around, you know, the teachers and the parents sort of cooperating to figure out the strengths of an individual child, is there a kind of, I mean, is that too idealistic because obviously there are like different types of sort of early childhood education, right? There's kind of like the Montessori approach and then there's sort of the Reggio approach there's kindergarten and the kindergarten approach in a public system is kind of more structured, more formalized. And you know, there's a lot of times that I hear that I've got three kids too that, you know, where in a way, you know, teachers sort of like [07:30 inaudible] lowest common denominator so that they can bring the rest of the class forward. So what would you say in a situation like that and how it should we be thinking about that?

CHRISTOPHER BROWN: Well, I think you bring up some good points. We're assuming that there's one way to teach kids in public education and that's not necessarily the case. There are schools that emphasize Montessori approach. There are schools that do [07:51 inaudible]. There are all sorts of public education systems out there. So it's possible to do a public education, I think is one thing to say. I think the other thing is I worry that we have this assumption that teachers do teach the lowest common [08:02 inaudible], but that's typically not the case. Teachers are trying to manage as many people as they can in their classroom. What we sometimes think about as adults is that the only way to teach is by providing information. [08:14 inaudible] talks about this banking conception. We just put information in children's brains and that's not how kids learn best. We need to give children the opportunity to explore, the opportunity to engage in different types of learning experiences across the day.

And if we can see more, play more project based learning in the classroom, you're going to see different types of learners emerge within that environment. It's not all just academic knowledge, but we also have social emotional skills, physical skills, so that it becomes part of the process. I think my worry is, a lot of kindergarten classes are simply becoming environments where you have the teacher upfront, kids sitting down quietly

and just being fed information all day. And that's not how kids learn best. So we really need to rethink what's taking place in terms of instruction in the classroom. So Montessori approach is one way, Reggio approach is another, there's many different ways you can do it. I think you have to come at it from the environment, recognize that all kids are smart and capable and they can all move forward in different ways, If we give them multiple opportunities to learn through a range of different experiences across the day.

JAISON DOLVANE: Yeah. I mean, it sounds so wonderful, right? I mean, which parent wouldn't want their kid to be in an environment like that where their strengths are amplified and we work to sort of address weaknesses and things like that or grow them. How far are we from something like that? Because, you know, in most places, parents need to send their kids to schools around their neighborhood, right. They're probably [09:40 inaudible] some sort and, you know, do they really have that choice? Or is this really about kind of starting a process right now and, you know, putting us on track so that kindergarten education system is indeed reformed.

CHRISTOPHER BROWN: I think one thing we have to recognize a lot of kindergarten classrooms looked like that 20 years ago. So there was a lot more play-based instruction. We've pushed it out on our focus on academics. There are a lot of experienced teachers still in classrooms across the country that provide those types of learning experiences for the kids. So one, there are resources there that we can tap into. I think too, in a school environment, you have to have leaders that accept change. That accept difference that are comfortable with a little bit of chaos. Learning is loud. Learning is chaotic. It's not sitting quietly and being told what to do. So there needs to be changed at the leadership level.

There also, some teachers need more training in how to work with young children. There's no doubt about that. And so as a parent, sending your kids to your local kindergarten classroom, having conversations with teachers and with administrators about what types of learning experiences is my child going to have, or all children, not just focused on your child, but the whole class and thinking about how can we create a space where we see these children as assets that are entering this environment, rather than things that need to be controlled and fixed.

So it sounds idealistic, but it's possible it's capable. There are teachers doing it everywhere. But it becomes hard when we just focus on test scores. And so as parents, you have to ask them, you know, teachers and ministers, what's the primary purpose of this classroom, of the school and how are we going to work towards that?

JAISON DOLVANE: Yeah, it makes sense. I mean, you know, I still can't help, but feel like there's a little bit of a, there's a higher barrier for parents to sort of convince the school system to do things in a different way, or to have teachers to do things in different ways. I mean, they can certainly try, right. But if we just switch, if we just switched kind of the attention to the parent themselves, right. I mean, obviously, you know, they can have their voice and they can take all, have the discussions with the teacher and the principals and everybody like that. But are there things that parents can be doing themselves to sort compliment that education or to better prepared their kids to still be able to get the benefits of some of the things that we're talking about?

CHRISTOPHER BROWN: Sure. I think one, as parents, we need to always make learning as fun as possible. We have to recognize there's research by [12:08 inaudible] that kids, kids will not engage in learning unless they feel like they're capable of succeeding in their learning experience. They don't feel like they're cared for, they won't engage. And if they don't feel like they're an environment where someone is going to be there to support them, they're not going to engage. So as family members working with our kids around any type of learning, we wanted to create a safe, comfortable environment. We also want to make it engaging for kids, meaning we need to tap into what they want to bring into the situation. What do kids know about this? How are they feeling about it? If we start to make learning a forceful experience for kids, they're going to shut down and that's the same for adults.

If you're going to force something onto me, I'm going to be like, Hey, I'm not going to do this. So we have to engage in a way that makes them see what the positive it is and try to build from there. I think another thing we need to do for parents is let kids know it's okay to fail. I think failure is a big part of learning. And for some reason, within our country, in our society, we see failure as a bad thing. When failure, you know, Carol Dweck and others talk about this, it's a learning experience. So how can we move through a process where we aren't successful? What can we learn from that? And how

can we figure out how to correct whatever we did incorrectly so that we can be successful within that process.

And the last thing I just want to say is don't overdo it. Don't force it on kids. Don't keep killing it. And you know, like killing drills, this idea of where you drill [13:24 inaudible] so much kill the desire to learn. So as parents, we have to be really careful of that. And we have to, you know, within that, that means you have to listen to your child, you have this idea of where you want to go, but your child has a different idea, maybe so trying to figure out where that is and negotiate with them that process.

JAISON DOLVANE: Yeah. So can you provide some perspective as to, you know, in sort of the grand scheme of the entire sort of school lifespan of a child, you know, how important are those first few years? Because you know, obviously parents feel like it's just, we live in a competitive society, right? So everybody kind of wants to make sure that their four year old can read, right? Or their five year old can read and write. And if they see another child who is able to do some of those things that feel like you know, my child's behind and if it's a first time parent, it's probably even worse, being a parent of three children, we've got much more relaxed on the third one. Can you provide some perspective as to like, cause you mentioned this earlier, which is like, Hey, just relax. It's not going to be the end of the world.

CHRISTOPHER BROWN: Well, I think so one thing we have to recognize is that children develop differently. Their developments' uneven, even every child is different. A lot of what they're doing, you know, learning progresses from the experiences they've been exposed to. So kids who start to read early typically have had literacy be a part of their life since they were born. Parents reading to them every night, being engaged with them, sharing stories, that becomes part of the process. But reading takes time. It takes exposure. It takes experience.

So if your child leaves kindergarten and he, or she is not reading at the level that they're supposedly should be according to the kindergarten classroom, that's okay. Typically you know, kids come into reading at different ages and at different times, I think what you want to watch out for, as a parent is that you're forcing expectations on a human being that may not have had the experiences that they need to be successful within whatever skill or knowledge you want to show them.

I think there are kids who do have developmental issues and that's why you should always have a close relationship with your pediatrician. My wife is a physical therapist. She works in pediatrics. So there are some ages and stages that are big milestone markers that we need to keep an eye on. And those are important to think about, but they're not set in stone. Every child they come to these learning situations differently.

So I think you just have to block out all this pressure from society and focus in on your own child. If your child, hasn't had a lot of exposure to literacy experiences, it's going to take a little extra time. If he or she, hasn't had a lot of exposure to math, it's going to take a little more extra time. And that doesn't mean you should force it on the child, but try to think about how you can take advantage of literacy opportunities across the day. How can you take advantage of mathematics opportunities across the day.

With math, cooking's a great way to work on math. With literacy oral language is a huge skill, but also like writing letters, reading books, all those things come into play. And then also giving your child social opportunities. Because a lot of kids, particularly with the pandemic going on in the past two years, haven't had a lot of social experiences. So thinking about as we come out of this pandemic, what types of social opportunities are you providing your child so that they can build those skills to learn how to communicate and interact with others who may not be related to them or may have totally different interests than they do, because that's part of learning how to operate in the classroom is, you know, getting along with others is so important.

JAISON DOLVANE: Yeah. Yeah. So tell me about the two books that you've written and sort of, what were the themes of the two books or were they different?

CHRISTOPHER BROWN: The themes of the two books are around kindergarten, but they're totally different in many ways. As I kind of mentioned at the beginning, the ready for kindergarten book is around this idea of school readiness. I feel like parents are sometimes put in uncomfortable situations and thinking about if their child's ready or not for school. And I think we are asking the wrong questions when we come to that. Instead, how are we supporting kids so that they are successful as they enter kindergarten and move forward within that process?

So that book looks at the issue of school readiness, how it became such a big deal. What does a school readiness really mean? And what's the research around that? That's the first half of the book. The second half of the book looks at how parents, it gives suggestions to support their child as a learner, across different content areas, as well as how to prepare themselves and their child for kindergarten entry.

The other book comes more from my research perspective, research job. I've been doing a lot of research around how kindergarten has changed. And the book, what I'm arguing is kindergarten has become a race, a place where we raise kids from skill to skill, and we need to rethink that. We need to think about for me, what I argue in that book is that kindergarten should be the expansion of learning, rather than thinking about raising kids from skill to skill, how are we growing these learners and making them confident who they are and capable so that they can move forward within this process.

And I think we can do both those things. We can support kids so that they feel successful and families feel successful as they enter kindergarten. And then once in there, these are things we can do to help grow them as learners, so they can achieve the goals they want to achieve, because I think we have to sometimes recognize we need to give children choice and voice in their learning. And we don't do that always in kindergarten classrooms. And so that's what that conversation goes into.

JAISON DOLVANE: Right. That makes sense. So tell me along the way, have you sort of experienced any challenges in terms of being able to get this message across?

CHRISTOPHER BROWN: Oh, of course. I think challenges, there's so many challenges within this process. I mean, one when I was a kindergarten teacher, unfortunately in this society, we don't always view teachers with the most positive lens. And I can't tell you when particularly being, you know, going to a party with my wife and our friends and meeting new people and they ask what you do. Well, I'm a kindergarten teacher that doesn't get a lot of response. That's positive necessarily. I think we have to recognize teaching is a field, it's a profession and we need to support our teachers in that sense. And that's something I become more an advocate for the longer I've been in this field.

In terms of the school readiness issue, it's a challenge for me to talk to families. I've had to learn how to talk to it in a positive way, in the sense that, I get so frustrated when parents get scared or worried about school readiness. I sometimes forget to humanize it. I look at it a much more political way. So it's been a challenge for me to talk to families in a way that becomes and being a parents helped me do that.

And then in terms of changing kindergarten, politically, we aren't even focused on what happens in classrooms. All we talk about is outcomes. We don't talk about what teachers do on a daily basis. And as I said before, a lot of families they only care what's happening within that immediate environment. And as their kids age out, they lose, their focus shifts other places, which I totally understand, but I think we have to remember, there's more kids coming through the system and how can we support them within that. So trying to think about how to talk about that in a way we're always engaged in this process of talking about public education. It's not just a phase of life, but it's a part of our society and we should always be thinking about it no matter what age we are.

JAISON DOLVANE: Right. Yeah. And in terms of sort of you know, obviously you've talked about the challenges and things like that, but your own, like, you know, you've been doing this, you've been trying to talk to parents about it. I'm sure you've talked to sort of a lot of teachers or schools, has this process changed you in any way. Like, has there been any kind of transformation for you on a personal level?

CHRISTOPHER BROWN: Oh, I think there's been several different changes on a personal level. One, I think when I went into teaching, it was something I cared about, but I wasn't, I always felt that people always made me feel like I wasn't doing what I should be doing. And now I see myself as a teacher first, I'm much more proud of that aspect of my life. Even as a professor teaching is one of my passions in the classes, I engage with my students. Other, you know, things that have happened across my life that made me question these processes of being a parent and watching my own kids go through the school system. And thinking about how can I be more supportive there? I don't always tell the teachers, my kids have what I do. I just come in from a more of a parent perspective.

I think that is much more softening and much more easy to have those conversations around what's taking place there. And I think ultimately I've

really refocused my own where I see my life going. I wasn't always sure this was the right path for me, but I've become much more sure about that in the past 5, 10 years. And I feel very passionate about what I'm trying to accomplish within that. And I know that there's going to be more generations of students, of families, of teachers, and I want to continue to work, to support them so that they can have successful opportunities within the school. Because my kids are aging out of public education. My youngest is now a freshman in high school. But I don't want to age out of the system myself. I want to continue participating as being supportive of throughout that process.

JAISON DOLVANE: You mentioned people were telling you not to feel what you're feeling. Can you talk a little bit about what that meant?

CHRISTOPHER BROWN: Well, what I mean by that is, you know, people see teaching, isn't always seen in a positive life. People think people choose teaching because they can't do anything else or people choose teaching because what they tried to do and they fail that. And that's not why I chose teaching. I choose teaching because I'm passionate about, and I care about it. And I've had the pleasure at university of Texas of working with pre-service teachers, you know, for 15 years. And no one, not one of them chose teaching because they didn't know what else, what we want to do. They chose teaching because that's what they wanted to do. And I think we have to really rethink about teaching as a profession, because it really matters having teachers who are passionate and who in care in the classroom, they can change children's lives in so many different ways.

And when they're told, you're just choosing this profession, cause you can't do anything else. That's a hard message to live with. And I no longer pay any attention to that. And I'm much more of an advocate teaching matters and teaching is a skill to be good. As a teacher takes time, it takes patience. It takes learning more on the daily basis. And I think as a society, we need to really recognize that.

JAISON DOLVANE: Right. Actually, you know obviously it's just my opinion, but I don't think I've ever actually ever thought that. So the fact that you're actually mentioning that is eye-opening in itself because I've always thought as teaching as a very, very difficult job and an extremely important part of our child's life.

CHRISTOPHER BROWN: Thank you. I think there's cultures that think about teaching in different ways. I've had the good fortune of working with students from all over the world at the university of Texas. And the teaching profession is thought about very differently in very different cultures. So depending on your upbringing, your family, how you think about teaching really matters. But politically the way teaching talked about is not in a positive light. And I think we have to shift that conversation and we have to stop thinking of it as a service and thinking much more of as a profession. Teachers should be able to afford to buy a home. Teachers should be able to afford to have a family. And that's really hard in many states like my own, where the cost of living is much higher than what teachers make in salary.

JAISON DOLVANE: That's amazing. I feel like there's a whole other podcast there.

CHRISTOPHER BROWN: Oh yeah. We can got a lot of different directions.

JAISON DOLVANE: Yeah, exactly. So Chris I ask this question to all my guests. Is there one feeling you have as a parent that you would rather not feel?

CHRISTOPHER BROWN: I think that's a great question. I think there's a lot of self-doubt in being a parent and that's a hard feeling to have, even with all my training and my experience in early child education, there were moments of doubt of whether or not I knew what I was doing at the point. Cause it was my own child. You are so much in love with your own child. You worry that you're going to do something that may cause damage, not to the child, but maybe to the relationship you have with them. And I wish I didn't have that so much, particularly, as you mentioned with your first child. That first child going through it all together, the first time, it's a really powerful experience and it's an amazing experience.

And I think sometimes we don't give families enough information and knowledge to feel successful within that process. And so by the time that doubt goes away with the second a little bit more. And then with the third, for me, I was much more confident in what I was doing. My relationship with my wife and I, we were both more confident as a team in what we were doing with our child. And I think that's one wish I didn't have so much [25:26 inaudible] at the beginning, it may be hesitant. And some of the decisions I was making where I knew what was, what was I thought right at

that moment, but I doubted it and I should've just gone into the moment and done what I thought was appropriate at that month time.

JAISON DOLVANE: Yeah. Yeah. I think we, all feel that way. You're not alone by any means. Well, thanks for chat. So Chris, tell me or maybe tell the audience where, where could they reach you? Where can they get ahold of your books?

CHRISTOPHER BROWN: Sure. I have a website it's Christopher P. Brown . Com P as in Pierce, that's my middle name. And it has links to all my stuff. If it, my, my emails there, everything you need. So it's www.christopherbrown.com. Or if you're interested in my books, you can go to Amazon and type in my name, Christopher P. Brown, and my author page will come up and everything's there as well. Or you can Google me through the university of Texas type in Christopher P. Brown and the university of Texas search and it'll come in there as well.

JAISON DOLVANE: Okay, great. And we'll add some of those links to the show notes when we actually publish it.

CHRISTOPHER BROWN: That'd be great. Thank you.

JAISON DOLVANE: Well, thank you so much, Chris. I really appreciate you being here today.

CHRISTOPHER BROWN: I really appreciate you having me on your podcast. It's meant a lot.

[Outro]

Thank you for listening.

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Christopher Brown books... (Ready for Kindergarten?, Resisting the Kinder-Race)
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