Preschool Teachers

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Work Classification Based Related D.O.T. Occupations:
- Day Care Center Directors
- Elementary School Teachers
- Kindergarten Teachers

Interests Based Related G.O.E. Occupations:
- Special Education Supervisors
- Special Education Teachers
- Teachers of Students with Disabilities

Skills Based Related O*NET Occupations:
- Personal and Home Care Aides
- Recreation Workers
- Social and Human Service Assistants

Noteworthy Quote:
“Teaching preschool is a rewarding career because of the great satisfaction of seeing young children grow and develop as individuals. Helping families contend with the stresses of modern life also enhances the satisfaction.”
– Dion Dubois, Owner, Temporary Tot Tending, Inc., South San Francisco, California

Preschool teachers (‘pre-school ‘teach-ers) teach basic physical, mental, social, and developmental skills to children from birth up to five years of age. They also work closely with parents—communicating regularly with them about their children.

Preschool programs are designed to provide a safe, comfortable, nurturing, and educational environment in which children can grow and learn. In these programs, preschool teachers are responsible for a combination of care and preschool teaching for young children normally three to five years of age.

As education systems become more challenging, many parents feel it is advantageous for their children to experience the structured environment of preschool. In small group lessons, one-on-one instructions, and learning through play, preschool teachers help young children develop their talents, build self-confidence, and learn how to get along well with others. They pay attention to and nurture all areas of the child’s development (social and emotional, cognitive, and physical). Researchers in education and psychology have found that when preschool programs do a good job, the children are well prepared for entry to kindergarten and primary school (grades 1 to 6) programs.

Work Performed

In preschool and early childhood education, the teacher’s relationship with each child is critically important. When young children feel cared about and safe, they are eager to listen to and learn from the experiences their teacher is providing. Preschool teachers make sure that they get to know each child in their classroom by observing and interacting with the children and talking with parents and guardians.

In order to insure a well-balanced program, preschool teachers, sometimes referred to as early childhood education teachers, prepare daily and long-term schedules of activities consisting of individual and group play. They plan noisy sessions of beating drums, cymbals, and tambourines, as well as quiet times working with puzzles and books. Preschool teachers plan a learning environment in which there is a balance between activities the teacher directs and activities the children initiate based on their interests.

Preschool teachers use games, music, artwork, films, books, computers, and other tools to teach basic skills. They help children identify colors, shapes, and textures. They introduce children to basic counting principles (usually 1 through 10) as well as the alphabet, including number and letter recognition. Much of what children do in preschool helps them get ready to read, to work with numbers, and to prepare for kindergarten and the primary grades.

Most children learn best by doing. For this reason early childhood education teachers see that the children engage in hands-on experiences and other interactive activities. Recognizing the importance of play, teachers also incorporate play as a natural part of preschool programs. They capitalize on play to encourage physical, mental, and language development; improve social skills; and to introduce scientific and math concepts.

Preschool teachers may, for example, use storytelling, rhyming games, or acting games to further language and vocabulary development. They may have the children work together to build a neighborhood in a sandbox to teach them how to work as a team. They may introduce scientific and math concepts by showing the children how...
to balance and count blocks, or how to mix primary colors into secondary colors when painting.

Some activities help develop coordination; others instill confidence. Some show children how to lead; some teach them to follow. Early childhood education teachers guide the children to help them learn from these activities. They also provide the children with opportunities to observe, question, and investigate. To extend these efforts, the teachers may introduce new materials and increase the difficulty of the tasks.

Arts and crafts allow children to experiment with paints, crayons, chalk, clay, wood, yarns, and other materials and simple tools. Learning through art and other types of creative activities such as dance and music, not only builds motor-skills but gives children a chance to create things and to express themselves.

Preschool teachers encourage children to talk about the things they do. This helps build verbal communication skills, and strengthens critical thinking and problem solving skills. They help them to express their feelings in a calm and productive manner, such as talking things out instead of hitting or yelling. Preschool teachers also help children to build strong listening skills, and to be open to or considerate of what others think and feel.

Early childhood education teachers welcome children from varied ethnic backgrounds. To enrich their program for all children, preschool teachers incorporate multi-cultural materials and activities into the curriculum. In religiously affiliated centers, teachers also supply religious instruction and activities appropriate to the age level of the children.

Preschool teachers begin each day by preparing materials and classrooms for class activities. They greet arriving children and help them remove coats, gloves, and hats. A nutritious snack time is a part of most preschool programs. Teachers help children learn to pour without spilling and to clean up after they eat. In full-day programs, teachers may use the noon meal to engage the children in conversation about the day’s events as well as to teach good eating habits, table manners, and the skillful use of forks and spoons.

Early childhood education teachers teach the children proper personal hygiene, including washing their hands before they eat and after using the bathroom. Most states also require a rest period each day. During the daily rest period the children sleep on cots or mats or sit quietly. The teachers may read stories, play music on CDs or tapes, or play an instrument such as a guitar or recorder.

Although most preschool programs have a less structured approach than primary school programs, preschool teachers must maintain classroom discipline and be alert to each child’s needs. They observe and evaluate the children’s performance and behavior during activities, and offer correction, reprimands, encouragement, or assistance as needed. They comfort quiet, shy, scared, or lonely youngsters; take care of scrapes and bumps; and listen to complaints. Preschool teachers may also identify physical or mental problems which need to be addressed by a specialist.

Preschool teachers are increasingly using computer resources, such as educational software, to expose students to a range of information and experiences that promote interactive learning. Teachers also use computers to perform administrative and clerical duties, such as creating lesson plans and keeping records.

Preschool teachers keep in touch with parents through progress reports, conferences, and newsletters, as well as informally through notes and in meetings before or after school. Teachers encourage parents to observe or participate in class sessions. Occasionally they may also make phone calls or home visits to get to know children and parents better.

After the children go home for the day, teachers often attend meetings with other staff members. They discuss the progress of the children in their care, and make plans and prepare materials for future activities. In some schools or centers teachers may talk with social workers, psychologists, and other experts about children and families with special needs. In many programs, teachers are increasingly involved in making decisions regarding the budget, personnel, curriculum design, and teaching methods. Early childhood education teachers must also know about the laws and regulations that govern their work.

**Working Conditions**

Preschool operations may take place in schools, religious institutions, workplaces where employers offer care, or private buildings. Individuals who offer care in their own homes are usually called family day-care providers.

Most preschools have both indoor and outdoor space for play and learning. They may have swings, slides, climbing equipment, sandboxes, and playhouses. In most schools and centers the tables, chairs, and other furnishings—even the bathroom fixtures—are child size. However, some preschools may lack the amenities (conveniences or resources) of preschools in wealthier communities.

Most states issue health and safety standards the schools must meet. State regulations also require certain ratios regarding the number of teaching staff to children. The ratio varies with the age of the children. Child care experts usually recommend that a single teacher/care giver be responsible for no more than ten preschool children (three to five years old). For this reason, preschool teachers often have assistants to help them with the children.

Preschool work is demanding. Preschool teachers spend much of their time standing, walking, kneeling, crouching, or sitting on the floor. Almost all of their working hours consist of interaction with the children. Coping with unruly behavior can be stressful at times. Nevertheless, seeing children develop new skills and gain an appreciation of knowledge and learning can be very rewarding.

**Hours and Earnings**

Some preschool teachers are part of a large teaching staff. Others may be the only teacher and work with paid or volunteer aides. They may work a two-, three-, or four-hour
shift in the morning and/or in the afternoon. Others work with children for six or seven hours each day.

Many preschools are open only during the months of the regular school year. Preschool programs in child-care centers, however, are generally open year-round. Many of which also have extended hours so that parents can drop-off and pick-up their children before and after work.

The pay of preschool teachers depends on the employer, and the education and experience of the teachers. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, in 2007, preschool teachers earned an average of $25,800 a year. Overall, earnings ranged from a low of $15,000 a year to a high of over $40,000 a year. Teachers with the most education, training, and experience, and those who are certified tend to command the highest earnings.

Fringe benefits vary with the employer. Most full-time preschool teachers receive paid holidays, vacation, and sick time; health insurance; and retirement benefits. Preschool teachers may also get discounted or free tuition for their own children. Some employers offer continuing education assistance for courses preschool teachers take to increase their knowledge and skills, to keep up-to-date with new teaching requirements and methods, or to earn a Child Development Associate (CDA) credential. The credential is available for three certification. Candidates who successfully complete the program earn the Child Development Associate (CDA) or other credential, or a bachelor’s degree.

Education and Training

Educational standards for preschool teachers vary by state. Sponsors of many schools and centers set their own guidelines for preschool teachers. They may require their teachers to have an associate’s or bachelor’s degree in early childhood education or human development, or certification in child care. Individuals who supervise and train staff or organize and run preschool programs often need a bachelor’s or advanced degree in early childhood education or a related field.

Studies for a degree in early childhood education include child psychology, child development, nutrition, children’s literature, and teaching methods. Students may take courses in art, crafts, and music, and also home economics and science. They also do practice teaching in a preschool and work with families.

Another method of preparing for preschool teaching is through the Child Development Associate (CDA) Program offered by the Council for Professional Recognition. It combines a mix of classroom training and experience working with children, along with an independent assessment of an individual’s competence. Candidates who successfully complete the program earn the Child Development Associate (CDA) credential. The credential is available for three child care settings: center-based (with endorsements for preschool 3-5 years or infant/toddler 0-3 years); family child care; and home visitor. Bilingual endorsements are also available for all of the three settings.

Other groups for child development also offer similar programs to individuals who meet specified training and educational experience requirements, and successfully complete performance-based observational assessment and an examination. The National Child Care Association (NCCA), for example, offers the Certified Childcare Professional (CCP) credential. The American Montessori Society (AMS) also awards certificates to those who have completed an AMS teacher education program.

Regardless of their educational background, all preschool teachers must continually update their skills. Most participate in educational conferences, workshops, courses, and in-service training on a regular basis. Many of these experiences count as credit toward a degree or other credential for those seeking such qualifications.

To prepare for this career, high school students should take courses in home economics, nutrition, child development, and family living. Courses in English, math, science, art, music, drama, and physical education are also important. The ability to speak a second language is valued in many locations where children and families do not speak English or are just learning it. Those who plan to go to college must take college entrance courses.

High school students can also visit local preschools, child care centers, Head Start programs, Montessori schools, and the like. They can offer to help in those programs, or in church, temple, or public child care centers—either as volunteers or paid part-time workers. Babysitting, working for summer camps, and participation in scouts or similar activities for children all provide valuable experiences in child care.

Licensing, Certification and Professional Societies

All states require public school teachers to be licensed. In most states, preschools must be licensed. Some require preschool teachers to have a bachelor’s degree in early childhood education or child development; others require an associate’s degree. Some states require preschool teachers to have state certification. In many states, a CDA or similar credential from a nationally recognized authority is satisfactory proof of teaching skill. Some states also fingerprint and check the background of all who would serve as preschool teachers.

Preschool teachers may join any of a number of national or local organizations which support their work. Such groups include the National Association for the Education of Young Children; the Association for Childhood Education International; the National Head Start Association; the Council for Exceptional Children; and the National Association of Child Care Professionals.

Personal Qualifications

Preschool teachers must like, understand, and respect young children. They should have patience, enthusiasm, and a sense of humor. An inventive mind and creativity are important in this work. Preschool teachers should be fair, firm, and flexible. They should be mature and reliable. Skills in music, art, drama, and storytelling are useful. The ability to handle stress is a significant advantage.

Occupations can be adapted for workers with disabilities. Persons should contact their school or employment
counselors, their state office of vocational rehabilitation, or their state department of labor to explore fully their individual needs and requirements as well as the requirements of the occupation.

Where Employed
Preschool teachers hold around 437,000 jobs throughout the United States. Geographically, preschool teachers are generally distributed much the same as the population. More than half (59 percent) are employed in child day care services. Most of the rest work for religious organizations (15 percent), public educational services (9 percent), and private educational services (7 percent).

Employment Outlook
The employment of preschool teachers is expected to increase faster than the average for all occupations through the year 2016. The Bureau of Labor Statistics projects a 26.29 percent increase in employment—roughly 115,000 jobs. An additional 72,000 positions are also expected to open due to replacement needs.

This increase is due mostly to a rising demand for preschool services, including mandatory preschool for 4-year-olds in a growing number of states. Parents are becoming more aware of the benefits their children get from a structured learning and social environment. More mothers of preschool children are also working away from home.

In fact, experienced preschool teachers are in short supply in many regions. Most qualified teachers should easily find a job that matches their interests and lets them use their talents. In general, those with the most training and experience will have the best opportunities for positions with the highest pay and responsibility.

Entry Methods
Those who wish to enter this field should talk to local directors and teachers of preschools, nursery schools, and child-care centers. Some beginners start as aides, then become teachers after they get more training and experience. College students may get job leads from their school career services office. The Internet and Web sites maintained by organizations which offer training and credentials for preschool teachers may be particularly useful in searching for jobs. Newspapers and professional journals also often have want ads for preschool teachers.

Advancement
With experience or further training, preschool teachers may become head teachers and then directors. Those in organizations that run a number of child care centers or preschools may also work their way into management positions. Some may take jobs in state or federal agencies that direct or regulate child development and education programs. Preschool teachers with a bachelor’s degree frequently are qualified to teach kindergarten through grade 3 as well.

Preschool teachers with advanced training and experience may start their own child care centers. They may earn much more than those who work as teachers or directors. They must, however, have the money to pay for a building and equipment. Knowledge of small business finances is also essential.

For Further Research

Council for Professional Recognition, 2460 Sixteenth Street, N.W., Washington, DC 20009-3547. Web site: www.cdacouncil.org


National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1313 L Street, N.W., Suite 500, Washington, DC 20005. Web site: www.naeyc.org

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