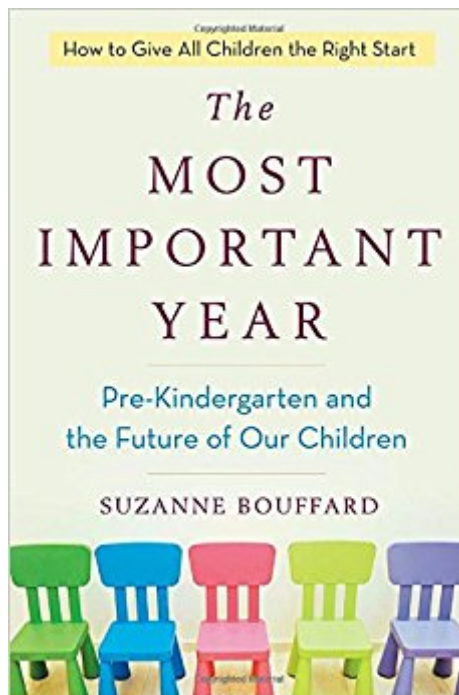




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# The Most Important Year: Pre-Kindergarten And The Future Of Our Children





## Synopsis

An eye-opening look inside pre-K in America and what it will take to give all children the best start in school possible. At the heart of this groundbreaking book are two urgent questions: What do our young children need in the earliest years of school, and how do we ensure that they all get it? Cutting-edge research has proven that early childhood education is crucial for all children to gain the academic and emotional skills they need to succeed later in life. Children who attend quality pre-K programs have a host of positive outcomes including better language, literacy, problem-solving and math skills down the line, and they have a leg up on what appears to be the most essential skill to develop at age four: a strong self-control. But even with this overwhelming evidence, early childhood education is at a crossroads in America. We know that children can and do benefit, but we also know that too many of our littlest learners don't get that chance—millions of parents can't find spots for their children, or their preschoolers end up in poor quality programs. With engrossing storytelling, journalist Suzanne Bouffard takes us inside some of the country's best pre-K classrooms to reveal the sometimes surprising ingredients that make them work—and to understand why some programs are doing the opposite of what is best for children. It also chronicles the stories of families and teachers from many backgrounds as they struggle to give their children a good start in school. This book is a call to arms when we are at a crucial moment, and perhaps on the verge of a missed opportunity: We now have the means and the will to have universal pre-kindergarten, but we are also in grave danger of not getting it right.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

“Something amazing is happening in America: We are building a new public education system, nearly from scratch -- to serve 3 and 4 year olds. The grand "pre-K" experiment has consequences for our economy, our democracy, and, of course, the little children who will one day lead us all. Suzanne Bouffard is the tour guide we need to understand what is happening and what we can all do to make the experiment a success.”

—Elizabeth Green, author of *Building a Better Teacher*

“Anyone who cares about children, their future, and the future of our country should read *THE MOST IMPORTANT YEAR*, Suzanne Bouffard’s compelling investigation into the state of preschool education in America. Bouffard sheds light on how and why educational inequity exists, delves into the research on how young children learn best, and offers important insights on how to change early childhood education for the better. Essential reading for any parent, teacher, or policymaker who believes that all American children deserve a quality pre-K education that will set them up for a lifetime of learning.”

—Christine Gross-Loh, author of *Parenting Without Borders*

Suzanne Bouffard is a writer with a background in child development and education. She received her Ph.D. in developmental psychology from Duke University and has spent the past ten years conducting and writing about education research at Harvard University. Bouffard’s articles have appeared in *The New York Times*, *Parents* magazine online, *Educational Leadership* magazine, and *The Harvard Education Letter*, and she is the coauthor of *Ready, Willing, and Able*. She lives in Massachusetts with her husband and two children.

As an interested community member who has volunteered in several classrooms and a grandmother who wants the best for her grandchildren and all other children, I have been horrified when I’ve observed stressed, undertrained, under-resourced teachers struggling with a classroom of rowdy kids. I’ve been thrilled when I’ve seen talented, well-trained teachers capably providing stimulating environments and experiences for happy, energetic, engaged children. Now, as my son and daughter-in-law begin looking for a good pre-K for my youngest grandson, I decided to read this book in hopes of being able to give them some assistance. As it turns out, there is so much of value in this book that they are going to read it too! The author is a real advocate for children. She recognizes systems that work and individuals who have the right inclinations for giving children the



best chance to grow and learn. Her narrative style is to combine profiles of individuals with descriptive information about teaching methodologies in order to create a book that not only engages the reader emotionally but also informs us about different systems of teaching. We meet three-year-old Luca Murthy on page 1 and continue to follow his journey throughout the book. His mother, Maria Fenwick, is looking for the right fit for his needs and is both enlightened and articulate about her search. We also meet four-year-old Jeremiah Hilton, whose needs and family situation are dramatically different. Both children need a good classroom situation even though they are under five. As the author says, "The real question is not whether pre-K matters. The real question is: How can we make sure that Jeremiah, Luca, and all preschoolers get what they need to succeed in school and life?" Bouffard attempts to answer that question through the remainder of the book. It's a big question and can only be answered in part in the 250 pages of this volume. But the author does an excellent job of describing many of the challenges and some of the answers. She spends a great deal of time observing the Boston Public Schools' approach to pre-K. She always profiles the people who have made things happen and thereby keeps her narrative lively and engaging. Jason Sachs, Marina Boni, and many others populate these pages. Bouffard's appreciation for them brings color and energy to the page. I took away a lot from the book. I feel more informed about helping my son and his wife make decisions for my grandson. We now are doing additional reading about Tools of the Mind, about BPS's Eliot school, and others. There is no doubt that this book is already delivering for us in the way we hoped it would.

This is a wonderfully written book by Suzanne Bouffard. On her LinkedIn site she notes "I'm a writer with a background in developmental psychology and a passion for making research accessible to the general public." I think she's done that beautifully. This book is not a "workbook" per se, as the previous reviewer noted, for skills your child needs to acquire during or before preschool. It's probably more like *Waiting for 'Superman'*, where the book starts out with parents trying to get into a prestigious public preschool and why preschool is, as the title notes, "the most important year." The author sites lots of studies and some of them I delved into and did more research on. One of them was Vygotsky and Tools of the Mind, and research on play improving executive functions -- the ability to sit and listen and do tasks, something preschoolers have trouble with, or children with sensory or spectrum disorders. I also came away with some interesting ideas for supplemental schooling with my kids (we do homework during the summer, and I'm still not sure if I'll homeschool). For the average parent, I actually do recommend this book, especially if you have a child about to begin preschool. My last child just moved on from preschool and is about to start



kindergarten. I SO wish I had read this book before any of them had started. I would have known what to look for when researching and interviewing preschools, as well as confronting some of the issues we faced with teachers. Namely, that my energetic son was not a bad kid. He'd been labeled that way, maybe not directly by his teachers, but certainly by their actions. The other kids always saw him getting into trouble and would tell me. Legitimately, as a child with sensory integration, his executive functions were poor(er than that average child's), and match that with a teacher that had a stricter/rigid/old school ways of teaching wasn't a good fit. I read this book seeing the problems we faced as a result of the way his teachers were trained, and also the stresses they might have been under from administrators. The author discusses the stresses preschool teachers have with the expectations placed upon them, the poor pay, and the lack of education and skill, and then throw in the needs of preschool kids (diverse given their backgrounds, development, and personal challenges). Each chapter is divided up nicely, discussing topics like math, as it relates to children, but also preschools funding and how that impacts a child's education. The amount of money does affect the education a child receives in pay for the teachers, supplies/resources the children get, and funds for additional training for the teachers and support they need to teach with aids and mentors. The author also talks about reading, how it's important, but unfortunately so many preschools are focused on the memorization (and teachers are penalized for not reaching goals), that children do not understand the meaning behind the words, which is more important for comprehension and learning. I was quite intrigued with the Token Economy of rewarding preschool children. Certainly at my children's preschool (which was private) this was often used as a way to keep the kids in line. We had it one year as different color faces, or cards, and other years as pompoms in a cup. My son would often come home sad that he didn't earn enough, or any at all. I can only think of two times when he earned enough to go to the treasure box. The author talks about how these programs can create troubling issues -- humiliation for the child when they are called out for not earning enough, or being left out, and can create the opposite effect where the child acts out because it's a no win situation (since they can never earn enough). They are preschoolers after all, and helping them learn how to control their impulses is much better than punishing them. Preschoolers need positive and nurturing environments so they feel engaged, motivated, and safe to learn (pg 134). I can honestly attest that my son was trying his best, but he felt deflated when he didn't earn enough rewards or was called out for his behavior constantly. My son was in therapy with special programs and wasn't terribly bad. But even with all we were doing to help him, I could see his self-esteem being affected by those reward systems, and definitely his behavior would go the other way when he perceived he didn't have a prayer's chance of earning enough rewards. One of my favorite books



that I highly recommend for any educator, but parents should read it too and be informed about what they're about to send their child into.

Well written book that gives you a good idea of what to look for in Pre-Schools, teachers and any red flags to watch out for. The main questions the book assists in: What do our young children need in the earliest years of school and how do we ensure that they all get it? The author Suzanne Bouffard is a writer with a background in child development. She has her PhD in developmental psychology and does research at Harvard on various educational research projects. This book is Eleven chapters long and is 227 pages.

We have several youngsters in our extended family who are all raring to get to pre-school soon. They are already well balanced on the playground and even in very introductory school lessons, and concerns. This book is a short trip to some of America's best early or pre-school programs, and is a great learning experience even for those who may have left any school decades ago. To learn about how the old and the new may work together to help out the youngest of students, this book is a requirement!

Glad I got this book. It really enlightened me on what type of preschool to look for and why. It couldn't have showed up at a better time. My twin girls just turned 3 and we are just starting to look for preschools.

My 4 year old Great grandson will be starting Pre-K in August. We've been going through all the skills a 4 year old should know before school and this book confirmed what we are doing is right on track. This is a well developed workbook of sorts to ensure success in their most important step of school life.

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