

## Why Gradinita is Good Business

by Leslie Hawke

On February 12, 2013, President Barack Obama called for making preschool available to every 4-year-old in America, opening a national discussion that continues to permeate the front page of every newspaper in America. And China has set a goal of giving its children *three years* of preschool education by the year 2020.

Why all this focus on early education? **And why should it matter to *each* of us that *every* child is in gradinita?**

Well, the international data is undeniable: children whose minds are challenged in early childhood do much better when they enter school, and this makes an enormous difference for their later success in life. From birth to age 5, a child's brain undergoes its most rapid growth and development. This period sets the stage for all later learning and adult functioning.

Studies have shown that well-educated parents talk to their children much more often, use a wider and more varied vocabulary, and speak more positively to their children than parents with low education levels. And of course, they are more likely to read to their children from an early age.

All these activities build skills that are key to literacy. So it is hardly surprising that children who are exposed to early language and books become better students in school – and better employees in adulthood!

“Children who are not proficient in reading by third grade are four times more likely to drop out of high school than children who read at or above grade level — and 13 times more likely, if they live in poverty. These are also the years when a child's sense of what is possible is being formed.”  
*The New York Times*, March 1, 2013

However, all across Romania, children from the poorest quartile of the population enter school without the most basic literacy skills (such as the ability to identify ten letters of the alphabet). Their homes are devoid of books and their parents are not even aware of the importance of talking to their children, much less reading to them. **Unlike the print-rich homes of better educated families, their homes may have no printed matter at all.** Thus, these children enter the school system far behind their peers and are unable to *ever* catch up. “School After School” programs just aren't enough to close the gap, or more accurately, the *gulf* that has already separated poor rural children from their middle-class urban peers by *clase pregatitoare*.

And the most disturbing thing of all is that that this wide gap, although not “repairable” is *preventable*. The solution begins with quality early education. **The skills gulf is not just a problem for the poor, on the wrong side of the gap – it creates a social and economic burden borne for the most part by those who are educated, productive members of society. Doing the right thing for one's own children is vitally important, but if we do not do the same for the children of the uneducated and illiterate, our legacy to our own children will be a society with built-in costs and handicaps that will stifle their own potential.**

Getting every poor child in gradinita is not only the right thing to do, but the smart thing to do. It raises lifetime wages (and thereby tax revenues) and reduces the likelihood that children will drop out of school, **be unemployable**, get involved in crime and become a burden on society **in every way**. And these outcomes more than make up for the costs of early childhood education. In fact, Nobel laureate economist James J. Heckman has shown that high-quality preschool brings a 7- to 10-percent annual return on investment. Romania needs an educated workforce, and early education is the first step in raising the literacy rate among the poor. If there ever was a nonpartisan issue, this is it.

## SIDEBAR

What you can do to improve your own preschool age child's literacy skills

1. Read to your preschool child every night at bedtime. **As they learn, have them "read" to you.**
2. When you read to your preschooler, run your index finger under the line of print. It helps children begin to notice words and that words have meaning. They also gain an awareness of the conventions of reading (e.g., one reads from left to right and from the top of the page to the bottom; sentences are made up of words; and some sentences extend beyond a single line of print).
3. Use car time to talk with your preschooler, pointing out shapes, colors, and simple words on signs and playing car games like "20 Questions".
4. When waiting in line, entertain your youngster by using your mobile phone to teach numbers and letters.
5. Each day, eat at least one meal together as a family **and make it a time for talk** – without the TV on.
6. Each week, give children a certain number of "TV time" tickets. Each ticket can be used for 30 minutes of TV time – and any tickets remaining at the end of the week can be cashed in for 2 lei.
7. On weekends, let your children know that they can stay up as late as they want, as long as they are reading in bed.
8. Help your children start a home library and encourage them to swap books with friends.
9. Let them see you reading, and not just on your **Hi**-phone. **Make your home a print-rich environment with words and printed matter throughout.**