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From diapers to diplomas

Preschools to hold own graduations. Some say events are positive; others say they can be stressful.

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Like so many other graduates this month, Delilah Parkes will soon walk down the aisle to accept her ribbon-wrapped diploma.

A professionally taken 8-by-10 photograph of Delilah in her gold cap and gown already is proudly displayed on the mantel at home.

She's ready to take her education to the next level — kindergarten.

For the past three years, Delilah has attended a morning preschool program at Child's Play Early Learning in Woodstock, where she's learned to identify some words by sight and write her name. She's also studied weather patterns and farm animals. On Thursday, she and 64 other Child's Play grads — called "seniors" during the month of May — will take part in a commencement at the center.

Once an event reserved for young adults leaving high school and college, graduation increasingly has become a rite of passage for children just beginning school, too.

Preschool graduations — complete with child-sized caps and gowns, performances, slide shows, cherry punch and chocolate-chip cookies — are often held off campus in churches or party spaces to accommodate throngs of extended family members and friends.

At the Goddard School in Suwanee on Johns Creek Parkway, the pre-K kiddies taking part in its recent commencement sang "I'm a Little Graduate" to the tune of "I'm a Little Tea Pot":

"I'm a little graduate, dressed in blue

Wearing a cap and gown, just for you.

When I leave pre-K, I'll feel smart,

A kindergartner ready to start.”

“I think wearing the cap and gown makes the kids feel very special, and it fills them with a great deal of pride,” says Delilah Parkes’ dad, Gary Parkes of Woodstock. “If it helps instill confidence in the kids heading off to kindergarten in August, then all the better.”

Pomp and pressure?

But not everyone celebrates the idea of holding graduations for kids who are pondering their next playdate, not where they’ll go to college or work.

While some believe these early graduations send a positive message about the value of education, others say such ceremonies hold little value for children and may even be stressful for them.

Professor Diane Bales, an early childhood specialist at the University of Georgia, said while she thinks it’s a good idea to mark milestones at an early age, she believes the pomp and pressure of a graduation could be confusing for children.

“These children will not understand what these little pieces of paper mean, and children won’t remember wearing caps and gowns,” Bales said. “While some kids will love it, it could be very stressful for other kids.”

Patrick Scullin, father to two sons, now 19 and 16, admits to reveling in his kids’ pre-K graduations, but he now sees them in a different light.

“We parents ate it up, capturing every moment with teary eyes looking through the eyepieces of our video cameras and point-and-shoots,” he said. “Afterward, the kids went back to running and screaming, smearing food on their faces and sticking crayons up each other’s noses. In other words, they went back to being kids.”

A ‘motivator’ for kids

Steven Mintz, a University of Houston expert on rituals and trends in pop culture, said preschool graduations are an invention of today’s generation of parents — many of whom have fewer children and tend to be more emotionally and financially invested in them.

He also believes that many working, time-strapped parents feel guilty about being pulled away too much by their jobs, so they try to compensate by making every step in a child’s life a picture-perfect moment.

The trend may also reflect the fact that the academic stakes are higher for kids today. It’s not enough for kindergartners to simply learn to color and get along with their playmates as in the past; they are now expected to read and write.

For Ivan Page, an adjunct professor of sociology at Clayton State University, those increased expectations are more reason for marking every academic step with celebrations complete with special garb and certificates.

“The family and the student gets something out of it. It acts as a motivator for the next accomplishment. For pre-Kers, you are saying, ‘This is the beginning. It’s a small milestone leading to greater graduations.’”

Page said many families, particularly in the black community, have long marked early achievements in school with a party or special dinner, but more formal ceremonies have developed in recent years.

‘Not a beauty pageant’

Whatever the merits of kiddie commencements, it looks as though they’ve become firmly established, vying for attention during the coming weeks with the waves of seniors graduating from high schools and colleges.

Mary Zurn, vice president of education and professional development for Primrose Schools — a national operator of preschools with more than 200 across the country, including 36 in metro Atlanta — said parents have come to expect a graduation ceremony, and she’s never heard of a parent opposing the idea.

“I can’t help but think this sends the message that education is important to me and my family,” Zurn said. “It’s not a beauty pageant. We are talking about education and learning and honoring those milestones. ... It’s part of our cultural values.”

For the Parkes family, enthusiasm is building for the big day on Thursday.

Delilah and her classmates have been rehearsing “Tomorrow” from the musical “Annie,” as well as some dance steps to go with “Singin’ in the Rain.”

“We are excited, and Delilah is over-the-top excited,” Gary Parkes said. “Quite simply, it’s a fun and festive time for all.”

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