



SECTION II
VITAL CONCEPTS FOR PLANNING EARLY EDUCATION PROGRAMS



II. VITAL CONCEPTS FOR PLANNING EARLY EDUCATION PROGRAMS

The type of early childhood programming that develops young children's language and cognitive abilities for school success has distinguishing characteristics that make it a resource-intensive but worthwhile undertaking. Without specialized training in the early childhood field, it is sometimes difficult to distinguish the program options and settings that will have a long-term payoff for young children in later school achievement from those that merely have the *appearance* of quality. Seven vital concepts can guide the planning of effective early childhood programs.

1. INTENSITY OF PARTICIPATION MATTERS.

Intensity refers to the amount and length of time a child participates in high-quality experiences as well as the degree to which those services are tailored to a child's individual development. In general, the younger the child, the more individualized the programming. Preschool children learn best in small group settings with experienced adults who have the time each day to devote to their individual development. Early childhood education is more expensive to provide than elementary education simply because more adults are needed for the same number of children. Intensity and length of participation matter a great deal, especially for children who are living in circumstances that place them at greater risk of school failure, including poverty, low level of maternal education, and maternal depression.⁵ To realize cognitive benefits from preschool, children need to experience educationally-focused programming on a regular basis over the course of their years of development. Fortunately, high-quality education can take place in a wide range of settings because some children now spend eight or more hours a day in care settings outside the home. It may be unrealistic to expect that all aspects of the child's day would have an education focus, but it is important that time is devoted each day to cognitive and language development.

2. TEACHER EXPERTISE IS THE CRUCIAL INGREDIENT.

Children's cognitive growth and language development are primarily influenced by the daily interactions between children and the adults who are guiding their learning opportunities. Quality depends on the expertise of adults in listening to, observing, talking with, and asking questions of children over time. How able is the teacher to use a child's interests and daily activities to extend vocabulary, introduce numeracy concepts, and reinforce language sounds that are the building blocks of reading? How facile is the teacher in observing signals that suggest a child is ready for new cognitive challenges? While the classroom setup and materials available to children are important elements of quality, it is the teacher's ability to help the child learn about his or her environment on a daily basis that makes a long-term difference for learning. Teachers with early

childhood expertise have backgrounds that are different from those of elementary school teachers. They require additional training in child development, language acquisition and early literacy, observation and assessment, cultural diversity, special needs, and parental involvement.⁶

3. LINKS WITH FAMILIES ARE ESSENTIAL.

Preschool sets the pattern for the family's contact with the formal learning system. Early childhood teachers have the responsibility for reaching out to parents and engaging them with their children's learning so that parents begin to understand the responsibility they have for supporting their children through the school years. Teachers must work to bridge cultural and language differences with both parents and children. If preschool is the child's first independent foray outside the language and culture of the home, it becomes the job of the early childhood teacher to recognize and build on the strengths of the child and family while introducing the expectations of the formal learning environment. The language of the home that children have used since birth is most likely the language they will use for meaningful communication and construction of knowledge. The native language can be the foundation for English language acquisition.⁷

4. CHILDREN'S PACE OF DEVELOPMENT IS NOT UNIFORM.

Children enter preschool with many significant differences in their cognitive, social, physical, and motor skills. Those differences arise from family experiences, individual biology, and social and cultural contexts, and thus any approach that assumes "lock-stepped development" is not productive. The role of the preschool teacher is to learn about and build upon the individual and developmental characteristics that the child brings to the learning situation.⁸

5. EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION CAN BENEFIT ALL CHILDREN.

Children with disabilities and children who may be not as advanced as their age peers in some areas of development are likely to benefit most from high-quality preschool experiences. Because advantages in literacy resources and activities, language development, and some aspects of social and physical development are correlated with higher socioeconomic status, it is especially important that children from lower income backgrounds have access to quality early childhood education. Delaying children's entry into group settings because of disabilities or into preschool because of presumed lack of readiness denies opportunities for growth through interaction with peers of the same age. In the words of the National Association of Early

Childhood Specialists referring to the practice of delaying entry to kindergarten, “[delaying entry] implies that children have failed at school even before they begin.”⁹

6. CONTINUITY SUSTAINS POSITIVE EFFECTS.

Continuity has several dimensions. Children thrive in stable relationships with adults who know and care for them. The strongest programs keep staff turnover to a minimum, employ staffing patterns that keep primary caregivers with the same children over several years, use a team approach, and try to keep the peer group stable over time. Transitions across institutional structures must be carefully planned. Children who receive consistent services as they move from preschool to kindergarten and first grade will be more successful academically and socially.¹⁰

7. QUALITY REQUIRES RESOURCES.

Not every early care and education experience yields outcomes that are visible as success in elementary school; preschool programs that economize on the extent of children’s participation, teacher expertise, or ratio of adults to children are not likely to provide visible benefits. High-quality early childhood programming is worth the investment of resources in terms of its promise of school success.

If the principles described above and the quality indicators found later in this document are absent, it is unlikely that learning outcomes will be realized for many children.