

What the Research Says About Early Learning Environments

Academic achievement in adolescence and adulthood can be traced to children's coping skills and competencies at school entry.

The commitment to lifelong learning and achievement must start during the preschool years. Abilities at school entry can be traced to experiences in and out of home from birth on. How children do in grade one is a measure of the developmental opportunities available in a community, just as infant mortality and low birth weight rates reflect the supports and resources available to pregnant women.

Having a specific program focus affects children's outcomes.

Programs for young children should support all aspects of development – physical, social, emotional, creative and cognitive. However, it is important to identify a few specific learning goals to help guide planning and activities. Vocabulary skills and familiarity with letter-sound associations and print, number concept understanding and planning and organizational abilities seem to be particularly important to later academic and social achievements. Of course, young children do not learn these skills and concepts in isolation, but teachers and early childhood practitioners can focus on these areas within the context of a child-centred play-based program.

Even when research studies show that early childhood programs make a significant difference in children's learning and development, families and home life have a bigger impact.

Parents and other significant family members really are children's first and most powerful teachers. Parents are experts about their own children. Early learning revolves around relationships and children's deepest relationships are with parents and other family members. Even children who attend child care programs several hours each day, the home environment accounts for most of the differences among children's skills and abilities when they start school.

Effective early childhood programs have specific goals to support and increase parent's active participation in their children's early learning. Most families welcome information about early development and how to extend learning opportunities at home. For example, parents can be encouraged to read books, play simple games and celebrate children's small achievements. They can set up ordinary home environments to foster early learning.

Parents want their children to get along with others and to succeed when they enter the formal school system.

Parents want their children to do well at school – socially and academically. They want to know more about early development and about what they can do to help prepare their child for academic success. Parent may be anxious to see signs that children are really learning and programs may need to explain relationship between play activities and preparation for school. They do know that children's readiness for school learning in grade one is a powerful predictor of later school achievement.

Practitioners in different settings share common values and goals.

People who work with young children and their families have a lot in common with each other. They share many similar goals and philosophies about how children learn and develop. Kindergarten teachers, early childhood educators, parent workers, and family resource program staff typically rank getting along with others, ability to regulate emotions and attention, and language abilities as important achievements during the preschool period. Practitioners also agree that children's understanding of print and numbers at school entry is a prerequisite for reading, writing and arithmetic.

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The most effective preschool programs are custom designed for each setting.

The implementation of ready-made program models may be easier at first but they are usually less effective (in terms of children's outcomes) than programs that construct their own learning environments. Having a clear program direction and specific learning goals for children and families is more important than what program model is adopted. The putting together of a learning environment creates a more effective setting than trying to transplant a particular program model.

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