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Report # 75

Focusing On Early Literacy

July 2005

Early literacy given greater emphasis

Benefits of an early foundation in reading are more widely understood

Reading has long been accepted as the foundation for learning. Until recently, however, literacy has been underemphasized in many child care and preschool programs.

Today, early literacy is increasingly recognized as an essential part of getting children ready for school. As research sheds light on the secrets of how the brain develops, educators gain greater insight into how literacy can be promoted at an early age. Meanwhile, policymakers in Pennsylvania and elsewhere are showing greater interest in improving early literacy and raising the overall quality of child care and early education.

In Pennsylvania, early literacy is a key part of a recent comprehensive program to improve the learning opportunities available to children in four low-income Allegheny County neighborhoods by raising the quality of child care and preschool programs.

“Literacy is very important to all of the outcomes you are looking for,” said Laurie Mulvey, Director of Service Demonstrations, University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development.

“If you want children to be ready for school, you have to address literacy.”

Insight Into The Early Years

For more than a decade, brain research has been reshaping approaches to learning by revealing that the brain develops from the earliest moments of life and that experiences, nurturing, and positive relationships with parents, teachers, and other adults are highly

influential to that development.

Studies suggest that building a strong foundation in reading during those early years is essential, paying significant dividends when children enter school and beyond.

For example, how well they read in first grade has been found to predict how well they read in the third, fifth, and eleventh grades.

Studies also suggest children from low-income and minority backgrounds are often behind more advantaged children in reading during the preschool and early primary school years.

Unfortunately, the inability of children to read at grade level is a growing problem in America.

An estimated one child out of three has significant reading problems, which usually begin early in the reading acquisition process, are rarely over-

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come, and are often associated with school achievement problems.

Earlier The Better

A greater emphasis on early learning, particularly emerging literacy, offers hope that debilitating reading and learning problems can be avoided, studies suggest.

Better school performance and reduced grade retention, special education services, antisocial behavior, and delinquency are seen among low-income children who are given high quality child care and early education. High-quality programs include well-trained staff who provide children with warm and stimulating relationships and teach them numeracy skills and emergent literacy.

New, innovative early learning strategies recognize that literacy begins long before formal reading instruction and that preparing young children in speaking, listening, and emotional development is the cornerstone to reading success and success in school.

Challenge To The System

But moving new ideas about early literacy into practice is a challenge at the moment. Although the demand for early literacy is rising, child care and preschool programs skilled in promoting early literacy are in short supply.

One reason is that early literacy in early childhood care and education programs has traditionally been underemphasized. Even in Head Start classrooms, which rank high in overall quality, language and reasoning scores are lower than other quality measures the Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scales (ECERS) uses to assess quality.

Another reason elevating early literacy is a challenge is found in the experience of the teachers, administrators, and staff who work in early childhood

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Laurie Mulvey, Director of Service Demonstrations, University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development.

care and education. Many enter the field with little training in how to help young children build a foundation in literacy.

For example, only about 29% of the Pennsylvania colleges and universities that offer early childhood personnel preparation programs require students to complete one or more courses in early literacy training to earn a bachelor's degree, according to a survey by the University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development.

Greater Awareness

Several signs suggest the importance of early literacy is better understood today as debate rages over how to help children get ready for school.

Early childhood care and education professionals in western Pennsylvania recognize the need for in-service training in literacy. More than half surveyed say they want more training in promoting literacy.

And across the state, low-income parents surveyed say they want a greater emphasis on literacy and

school preparation for their children.

As the benefits of preparing children to read early in their childhood become clear, efforts to improve the overall quality of early learning experiences are placing a greater emphasis on early literacy.

In Allegheny County, for example, improving early literacy among young, low-income children is a key goal of the Strengthening Early Learning Supports (SELS) Project to reverse poor school performance, high drop-out rates, and other disturbing trends in at-risk neighborhoods by creating high-quality learning opportunities.

The project, managed by the University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development, emphasizes collaboration, thorough training of teachers and staff, technical assistance, and other supports to create high-quality learning environments. These services include training in integrating literacy strategies into home visits and how to make literacy part of parent education and support groups for mothers and fathers.



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