



CHILDREN'S EARLY LEARNING: *What the State of Missouri Can Do*

Findings from the Midwest Child Care Research Consortium indicate early childhood education settings are of low quality in three areas that are key to early learning: Learning Activities, Language and Reasoning and Social Interactions

policy brief

Background

In 2001, university researchers and state program partners in four states (Missouri, Iowa, Kansas, and Nebraska) initiated the Midwest Child Care Research Consortium (MCCRC). The focus of the Consortium's work is to conduct a large longitudinal study on a range of issues associated with child care quality and conditions. Across the four states, a random selection of 2,022 child care providers participated in the study representing licensed infant, toddler, and preschool centers including Head Start and Early Head Start programs, license exempt centers, and licensed and unlicensed family child care homes. In Missouri, 517 providers participated in telephone interviews and 110 of those providers were randomly selected to have a researcher visit her program to conduct an on-site quality assessment¹.

What is "Early Learning"?

It's easy to identify some of the types of knowledge needed for achievement in school: learning to count, recognizing the "A, B, C's", and identifying concepts such as colors, shapes, and size. But "early learning" is more than intellectual skills. Research indicates early learning also includes socio-emotional development: experiencing safe, trusting relationships with adults and peers. This doesn't diminish the importance of cognitive development; rather, cognitive development and socio-emotional development work together to create a healthy foundation for important learning experiences and teacher-child relationships^{2,3}. This foundation, created in early childhood, is critical for success in school⁴.

Research Findings

Quality assessments were conducted at each of the early childhood programs. Across the three types of programs, the research findings were consistent: Overall mean quality scores were in the "minimal to good" range (See chart, p. 2). Although the environmental rating scales have numerous subscales, three are of particular interest in regard to early learning experiences:

1. **Learning Activities:** The Learning Activity subscale addresses items such as math/numbers, nature/science, fine motor skills, and play activities (dramatic play, blocks, and sand/water experiences).
2. **Language/Reasoning:** This subscale addresses items such as emerging literacy, encouraging communication skills, and helping children to reason using concepts such as size, color, and number.
3. **Social Interaction:** The Social Interaction subscale includes a wide range of items such as how the caregiver interacts with children (e.g., tone of voice, discipline, and supervision of children), relations among children (e.g., conflicts or biting), and supporting cultural awareness.

Type of Program (N = 110)	Learning Activities	Social Interaction	Language/ Reasoning	Full instrument Mean Score ¹
Family Child Care Homes (n = 33)	4.49	4.81	4.83	4.88
Infant-Toddler Centers (n = 33)	3.74	5.66	4.47	4.57
Preschool Centers (n = 44)	3.71	4.97	4.48	4.62

Environment Rating Scales¹: 7.0 (Excellent); 5.0 (Good); 3.0 (Minimal), and 1.0 (Inadequate)

Implications of the Research

With the exception of the two lower scores on the Learning Activities subscale, all of the subscale scores are over 4.0⁵. However, “minimal to good” (scores between 3.0 and 5.0) should not be viewed as an acceptable level of quality. These scores indicate, across the sample population, children are not having the learning experiences, or the consistently positive relationships with peers and adults, that are equated with healthy development and high quality early childhood programs.

What Can Missouri Do to Address Basic Learning?

Policy makers can support the early learning needs of young children by addressing two factors associated with high quality care: teacher education and program standards. Related research indicates the quality of an early childhood program is related to the teacher’s education. Along similar lines, program performance standards (in the form of state licensing regulations, accreditation status, or organizational expectations) are also of critical importance and should be written in such a manner as to promote child development^{6,7}.

Policy Recommendations

- **Establish a task force to address the following critical issue:** Across the three types of care, consistently lower scores occurred on the Learning Activities and the Social Interaction subscales. To what degree does this impact child outcomes and school readiness? What efforts can be made to raise the quality of care, education, and related services in these important areas?
- **Support the education and training of early childhood professionals:** Like all teachers, early childhood professionals need appropriate education/training. Efforts to support early childhood professionals would include:
 - Provide tuition/fee waivers and financial incentives for educational achievement.
 - Expand on-site training and technical assistance programs.
 - Phase-in a lead teacher professional development requirement reflecting baseline education/training qualifications.

¹ Each child care program was observed for two- to three-hours using one of the following instruments: Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale-Revised, Family Day Care Rating Scale, or Infant-Toddler Environmental Rating Scale.

² The Kauffman Early Education Exchange. (Summer 2002). *Set for success: Building a strong foundation for school readiness based on the social-emotional development of young children*. The Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation: Author.

³ National Research Council. (2000). *From neurons to neighborhoods: The science of early childhood development*. National Academy Press: Author.

⁴ National Research Council. (2000). *Eager to learn: Educating our preschoolers*. National Academy Press: Author

⁵ The score of 4.0 represents the midpoint on the three 7-point environmental rating scales. A score of 3.0 represents “minimal” quality care and 5.0 represents “good” quality care. The midpoint of 4.0 was chosen as a demarcation point for analysis.

⁶ NICHD Early Child Care Research Network. (2002). Child-care structure – process – outcome: Direct and indirect effects of child-care quality on young children’s development. *Psychological Science*, 13(3), 199-206.

⁷ Frank Porter Graham Child Development Center. (2000, Summer). Improving early care and education. *Early Developments*, 4(2), 10-13.

(Thornburg, K. Scott, J., & Mayfield, W., 2002)

The Primary Investigators of the Midwest Child Care Research Consortium are: Kathy Thornburg (Missouri), Helen Raikes, Carolyn Edwards, and Julia Torquati (Nebraska), Susan Hegland and Carla Peterson (Iowa), and Jean Ann Summers and Jane Atwater (Kansas). Funded by HHS Child Care Bureau and the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation.

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