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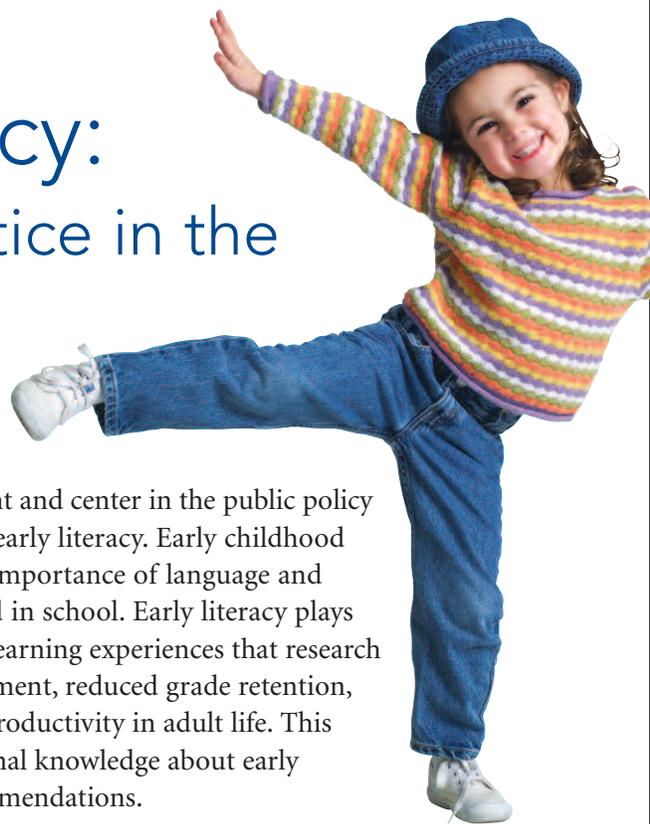
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Early Literacy: Policy and Practice in the Preschool Years

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As early childhood education moves front and center in the public policy debate, more attention is being paid to early literacy. Early childhood professionals have long recognized the importance of language and literacy in preparing children to succeed in school. Early literacy plays a key role in enabling the kind of early learning experiences that research shows are linked with academic achievement, reduced grade retention, higher graduation rates and enhanced productivity in adult life. This report synthesizes the body of professional knowledge about early literacy and offers research-based recommendations.



What We Know:

- Literacy development starts early in life and is highly correlated with school achievement.
- All of the domains of a child's development—physical, social-emotional, cognitive, language and literacy—are interrelated and interdependent.
- The more limited a child's experiences with language and literacy the more likely he or she will have difficulty learning to read.
- Key early literacy predictors of reading and school success include oral language, Alphabetic Code, and print knowledge.
- Well-conceived standards for child outcomes, curriculum content, and teacher preparation help establish clarity of purpose and a shared vision for early literacy education.
- Increased demands for program accountability are often heavily focused on assessments of children's early literacy development.
- Highly capable teachers are required to implement today's more challenging early literacy curriculum.
- Teacher knowledge, respect and support for the diversity of children's families, cultures, and linguistic backgrounds are important in early literacy development.

Policy Recommendations:

- All children should have access to early childhood programs with strong literacy components that include clear adaptations for children with special needs.
- Early literacy curricula and teaching practices should be evidence-based, integrated with all domains of learning, and understandable to staff members.
- Early literacy standards should be established that articulate with K-12 programs and reflect consistency and continuity with overall program goals.
- Early literacy assessment should use multiple methods and use the information to improve both teaching and the total preschool program.
- Standards for early childhood professionals should require staff to meet early literacy instructional standards.
- Parent involvement programs should have a strong early literacy component that guides parents and caregivers in providing early literacy experiences at home.
- Support for English Language Learners should be specified and provided in both the home language and English where feasible.

Although the abundance of research supports the need for attention to early literacy, it also raises essential questions about how early childhood programs can foster the skills and abilities young children need to become successful readers and writers. The answers to these essential questions involve consideration of the following five issues: 1. early literacy learning standards, 2. curriculum, 3. accountability and assessment, 4. teacher education and professional development, and 5. home-school connections.



Issue 1: Developing and Using Early Literacy Learning Standards

Three reasons for the development and use of standards are: to establish clarity of curriculum content, to raise expectations for the achievement of all children, and to ensure accountability for public education. A major risk of any standards movement is that the responsibility for meeting the standards will be placed on children's shoulders rather than on the shoulders of those who should provide opportunities and supports for learning. Nevertheless, research-based expectations for the content and desired results of early literacy learning experiences can help focus curriculum and instruction and increase the likelihood of later positive outcomes.

Issue 2: The Early Literacy Focus of Effective Curriculum

Those who develop and use curricula are expected to support their claims with a research base. Key components of an early literacy curriculum grounded in evidence-based early literacy research include: (1) oral language development, which includes vocabulary and listening; (2) an understanding of the alphabetic code, which includes phonological/phonemic awareness and knowledge of the alphabet; and (3) knowledge and understanding about print and its use.

Issues related to a child's linguistic and cultural background represent a growing challenge for early literacy educators and curriculum developers. Curriculum should be implemented in ways that foster respect for what children bring to the learning situation and provide continuity between the child's experiences at home and those within the early childhood program.

Issue 3: Accountability and Assessment

Concerns about trends in early literacy assessment include the use of assessments that focus on a limited range of skills and the nature of the assessments in use. Both factors may cause teachers to narrow their curriculum and teaching practices, especially when stakes are high.

Issue 4: Teacher Education and Professional Development

Teacher education is an ongoing process involving rigorous pre-service training and experiential opportunities along with continued professional development. Schools of education must provide pre-service programs that are grounded in current scientific knowledge about how children learn to read and write and the best instructional practices to help them learn. For classroom teachers, the appointment of literacy coaches, who are teachers with special expertise and training, provides continuing support and guidance to in order to improve classroom instruction.

Issue 5: Home-School Connections

The link between supportive parental involvement and children's early literacy development is well established. The challenge is to get the message across to all parents, particularly to those considered to be at greater risk, that everyday activities, accompanied by interesting talk with lots of new vocabulary words, can play an important part in their children's language and literacy development.