



Center for Family Policy
and Research
University of Missouri

Supporting Children's School Readiness

Instructional Strategies for Language and Literacy Development

Background

This document reflects research findings from over 155 classroom observations located at early childhood programs in urban and rural communities across Missouri (data collection occurred 2009-2011). Observations were conducted by trained and reliable data collectors using the *Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale, Revised* (ECERS-R) and the *Early Childhood Environment Scale Extension* (ECERS-E). The ECERS-R and the ECERS-E examine the quality of the preschool classroom environment with the ECERS-E focusing primarily on the classroom's academic curriculum. Based on the research findings, the data indicate some particularly strong areas of teacher-child interactions. The findings also indicate some needed instructional practices in the areas of supporting children's language development. The specific areas of concern, along with recommendations, are presented below.

Key Findings

To help prepare children for kindergarten, teachers must focus on children's language skills, book handling skills, and print awareness. In each of these three areas, teachers are doing some of the most desirable instructional practices with children. However, there are also some areas of concern. These strengths and areas of concerns are noted below.

#1: Children's Language Development

Based on the research findings, teachers do a good job of encouraging the development of children's language skills. This occurs as teachers lead large and small group instructional activities. Teachers also encourage children to communicate with their peers during learning activities and free play. Last, teachers frequently talk with children during meal/snacks, at the learning centers, and on the playground.

The research findings also indicate that teachers tend to not ask children to explain their reasoning or elaborate on their responses to questions. When a teacher encourages a child to explain their reasoning (what the child is thinking), it encourages a dialog between the child and the teacher. This, in turn, creates a learning opportunity for the child.

Recommendation: Teachers can model this "talking out of ideas" for children by explaining their reasoning and related concepts through games and learning activities. Consider the following examples.

a. Reading to Children

As children listen to their teacher read a story, the teacher can promote children's thinking and language development by asking thought-provoking questions. Consider the following questions teachers can ask. A teacher can focus on...

- a. Children's comprehension by asking, "What is happening? Tell me more about the story."
- b. Children's prediction skills by asking, "What do you think is going to happen next?"
- c. Targeted vocabulary words by asking, "What is the name of this?" "Clap when you hear the word... (target vocabulary word)"

b. Playing at the Learning Centers

If a child is in the block center building a tower and the tower falls down, a teacher might ask, “*Why do you think the tower fell down?*” A teacher can help the child learn new vocabulary words and math concepts related to the size and weight of various blocks, “*I saw that when you put the big block on top, the tower started to lean and then it fell over.*”

#2: Use of Books and Reading in the Classroom

Based on the research findings, teachers do a good job of encouraging reading and book handling skills within the classroom by making a wide range of books available to the children. Teachers also encourage children to actively participate in book reading activities. However, an area of concern is that while the books are available, they are not always in a central location that is consistently and easily used by children.

Recommendation: Teachers can make sure books are in areas of the room that are more easily accessed by the children (the books are not limited to shelves or corner areas). For example:

- Book areas need to be comfortable (rugs and cushions for comfortable seating) and the book shelving in these areas need to be designed so the front of the books (rather than the spine of the books) can be easily seen by the children at eye-level.
- A few books, related to the classroom’s theme or special event(s) can be placed in small baskets or on a child-size table in several learning centers around the room.
- During circle time, a teacher can introduce new books that are being added to the classroom and these books can be displayed during the day.

#3: Print Awareness

Based on the research findings, print awareness scored quite low. Print awareness focuses on helping children become aware of the many different types of print and how print (letters and words) is related to various sounds (the sounds of letters, syllables, words).

Recommendation: Teachers can encourage children’s print awareness by:

- Placing a label on objects and pictures in the classroom. When interacting with children, point to the label and say the word.
- Displaying the week’s targeted vocabulary words. Talk with the children about the word, letters, and the sounds of each syllable.
- Modeling print awareness by writing down what children say and display their words.
- Creating an area for writing with paper, pencils, pens, and markers.

Impact on Children: Research has shown that if language and literacy is addressed early on, young children will be more prepared when they enter kindergarten. This study found that early childhood programs in Missouri are already doing a number of positive things in this regard; however, concerns were also raised in several areas. Results suggest that teachers can support children’s school readiness by helping children talk through their reasoning; teaching children the sounds in words through rhymes and learning activities; creating a print-rich environment with books and labeled pictures throughout the classroom.

For a list of fun activities, teachers can go to the following web link: <http://www.readingrockets.org/article/377>

Mascendaro, P. & Hawks, J., 2011

The Center for Family Policy & Research is housed in the Department of Human Development and Family Science at the University of Missouri. The center serves as a resource for the development of effective public policies relating to all children, families, and communities.

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