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The Importance of Play

CHILDREN FROM BIRTH TO FIVE

A Statement of First Principles on Early Education for Educators and Policymakers

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Academic training is increasingly replacing imaginative play and experiential hands-on learning in the early years of our children's lives. Education is now seen as a race, and the earlier you start, the sooner and the better you finish. Yet there is no evidence that this push for early academics, such as the effort to have children start reading by age five, produces any lasting advantage for children. If anything, research and experience point in the opposite direction.

The current emphasis on teaching reading through formal instruction to five-year-olds is not working, leading many concerned parents and policy makers to assume that reading instruction must start sooner -- at three or four. But that assumption is based on a narrow and thus flawed approach to child development, early education, and the development of literacy.

The key to developing literacy -- and all other skills -- is to pace the learning so that it is consistent with the child's development, enabling him or her to succeed at the early stages. Ensure this initial success and the child's natural love of learning blooms. Doom him to failure in the beginning by making inappropriate

demands and he may well be unable to overcome the resulting sense of inadequacy. This is especially true of children whose families are already under social and economic stress.

A healthy start to a lifetime of learning

Recent research confirms that early cognitive development is inextricably linked with physical, emotional, and social development. All grow out of early relationships with family and care-givers. Relationships with parents are of primary importance.

Essential capacities of childhood that must be fostered and developed during the first five years are listed below. These can be used as indicators of kindergarten readiness, but only when combined with appropriate expectations of a five-year-old's development so that children are not handicapped by unrealistic demands. Five-year-olds entering kindergarten generally can:

- Use ideas and words meaningfully and creatively to make themselves understood and to understand others. This requires an environment that is rich in face-to-face verbal exchanges, including conversation, nursery rhymes, storytelling, and the sharing of books aloud. Orality is a precursor to literacy.
- Form close relationships with adults and other children. From these come the beginnings of empathy and human understanding.
- Read and respond appropriately to emotional and social cues and be able to work in groups.
- Engage in imaginative play, alone and with others.
- Express creativity through a range of activities, including visual arts, music, dance, etc.
- Feel at home exploring and caring about the world of nature.
- Interact with the world through hands-on experiences, handcrafts, and other physically engaging activities.
- Quiet themselves for short times in order to digest experiences or engage in focused activity.
- Perceive patterns, follow simple directions, and solve simple problems.
- Learn to attend to, focus on, and process

experiences in an integrated way through motor, sensory, and affective pathways.

Guidelines for policymaking

How should the recognition of these capacities be translated into policy? As the Institute of Medicine's report, *From Neurons to Neighborhoods*, states, "The policy issue is therefore not one of getting children ready to learn, but rather one of appreciating that they are born to learn and crafting policies and programs that actively build on their considerable capabilities" (p. 148). Children love to learn. This love needs to be fostered at home and in early care and education programs. Policy can support this in a number of ways:

- Provide funding opportunities for parents to educate themselves about the needs of young children and their own capacities for parenting. Possible options include courses for adolescents on child development and the care of children; and for parents, pre-birth and parenting classes, parent-child programs, home visits, etc.
- Create a renewed focus on early-childhood teacher training and better compensation to help teachers and child care staff. In training programs, place a new emphasis on understanding the broad range of capacities children need to develop, especially the capacity to play, and help develop the creativity and insight of the teachers themselves.
- Focus assessments of early care programs on whether children's prime needs for close relationships with caring, responsible adults and for developmentally appropriate care are being met. Developmentally appropriate care includes: a daily rhythm of healthy meals, rest, and activities; daily periods of play, both outdoors and indoors, in a safe environment; music and the other arts; hands-on and other physically engaging activities, which literally embody the most effective first lessons for young children in the sciences and mathematics; and a rich variety of face-to-face verbal interactions, including conversation, nursery rhymes, storytelling, and books read aloud with attentive adults.
- Recognize that when families are under great

stress for reasons of poverty or illness this has a profound impact on children and their emotional readiness to learn. The social and economic stresses on the family need to be addressed as well as the specific needs of the child in the classroom.

- Fund long-term research to identify: when children are developmentally ready to read and to acquire other academic skills; factors that may interfere with their ability to learn, such as overexposure to electronic media; and the best approaches in early education that will lead to a lifelong love of reading and learning.

It is critical that we improve the quality of early care programs. At the same time we must realize that "even for children who spend hours every day in child care programs, the home environment accounts for the lion's share of the variation of what young children know and are ready to learn when they start kindergarten" (*From Neurons to Neighborhoods*, p. 157). One cannot overestimate the importance of supporting parents and family life.

This statement was prepared by the Alliance for Childhood, a partnership of educators, health care professionals, researchers, and other childhood advocates who are working together to improve the health and well-being of all children. It has been endorsed by the following individuals (organizations included for identification purposes only):

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