Outdoor Supervision
Autism
Bilingual Pairs
School Readiness
63rd Annual SECA Conference

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February 2 - 4, 2012

Save the Date!

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E. Anne Eddowes, Editor
I recently attended a conference and heard a well-informed speaker who was very entertaining, but I came away from the sessions with gaps in understanding of his message. What caused the understanding problem? He kept using a confusing multitude of alphabet letters (acronyms) when referring to important laws and organizations.

Professionals who are active in their organizations tend to use these alphabets when they talk to each other. If the person to whom the professional is talking is active in the same organization and/or profession, both people are likely to have a good understanding of the acronyms. However, if a listener is not aware of or knowledgeable about the topic and/or profession, she will have gaps in the information being shared.

Please read the following paragraph to see if you understand the terms that recently were used at several early childhood meetings in the Southern states. How many can you identify? (Answers are at the end of this column.)

I am happy to welcome on SECA’s behalf delegates from AAYC, KAECE, LAECA, GAYC, TAECY, and ECAO to our session on new monies for CCDF. Other delegates are meeting with our President Elect where they will be discussing use of the latest ARRA in our states. We are happy to join with our colleagues in ACEI, CEC, and NAEYC on this important mission. I even thought of inviting delegates from AARP to work with us since so many grandparents are raising their grandchildren. This is the most important new legislation since NCLB, especially for individuals working with the DOE, and in the areas of ADA and IDEA. The CDF has provided us with new information. We are pleased to have Glenda Bean, our executive director, here to help us work through these public policy issues.

Am I really conveying what I want to say? Stop! Think! Have I gotten my message across to my audience? When I speak to state officials, school officials, legislators, parents, or other individuals, they may well have trouble figuring out what I am saying. By creating confusion, I am not helping early care and education professionals. I am not helping the Southern Early Childhood Association.

In 2011, I encourage you to make a new effort to speak so individuals know who we are and what we support. We are the Southern Early Childhood Association, and we are the voice for good-quality programs and support for Southern children and their families.

Answers to the Alphabet Soup Paragraph

AARP—Formerly the American Association for Retired People but now AARP is a name itself
AAYC—Alabama Association for Young Children
ACEI—Association for Childhood Education International
ADA—Americans with Disabilities Act
ARRA—American Recovery and Reinvestment Act
CCDF—Child Care and Development Fund
CDF—Children’s Defense Fund
CEC—Council for Exceptional Children
DOE—U.S. Department of Education
GAYC—Georgia Association on Young Children
IDEA—Individuals with Disabilities Education Act
IEP—Individualized Education Program
IFSP—Individualized Family Service Plan
KAECE—Kentucky Association for Early Childhood Education
LAECA—Louisiana Early Childhood Association
NAEYC—National Association for the Education of Young Children
NCLB—No Child Left Behind
SECA—Southern Early Childhood Association
TAECY—Texas Association for Early Childhood Education
TAEYC—Tennessee Association for the Education of Young Children AND TAEYC—Tennessee Association for Early Childhood Education

Dimensions of Early Childhood
What a perfect day to be outside! It is warm, the sun is shining, and there is a light breeze. A few children are climbing on playground equipment. Some are digging in sand. A few laugh as they chase each other. Four children are standing together, looking around.

The two supervisors are sitting on a bench, drinking their morning coffee and planning their next science project. Inga, a 4-year-old, comes running and in a frightened voice says, “Pedro is hurt!”

Similar scenarios take place every day in early childhood programs around the world, and demonstrate why careful supervision is so important for early childhood professionals.

Early childhood programs strive to provide good-quality care and education as young children develop their physical, emotional, social, and intellectual skills. In order to provide children with positive, developmentally appropriate learning opportunities, educators ensure the safety and security of children, indoors and outdoors.

The outdoor learning environment is an important element of the total care and education of young children. Outdoor spaces can enhance curriculum, especially when teachers responsibly supervise children who are engaged in unstructured play. Supervision is far more than just assuring sufficient teacher/child ratios. The supervision practices explored in this article deal with two primary issues:

- preparation of the outdoor learning environment, and
- watchful guidance of young children by educators

Why Outdoor Play Is Important

Insights about children’s play from Montessori (1966), Piaget (1962), Vygotsky (1978), and the Gesell Institute of Human Development (2010) have contributed to the early childhood literature that clearly indicates that children learn and develop through play.

Play typically happens inside and outside the classroom. The term recess has often been thought of as time spent without any real purpose (Clements, 2000). The values of outdoor play are far more than giving children a break, or allowing them to run off steam or get fresh air. Research has shown that

- outdoor play encourages children to communicate, to express their feelings, to discover and investigate the world around them (Guddemi, Jambor, & Moore, 1999), and that
- play is an important vehicle for developing self-regulation, language, cognition, and social competence (NAEYC, 2008).

The Alliance for Childhood (2010) is focusing its advocacy efforts on creative play, which is disappearing from childhood in the United States. Every child deserves a chance to grow and learn in play-based early childhood programs. Educators are pressured by factors such as preparing children for academic tests and the stress of meeting time limits due to the increase of shared space and structured programming.

Teachers play a central role in children’s play (Wardle, 2008). Teachers spark children’s curiosity and support healthy development so they can become lifelong
learners (Miller & Almon, 2009). The interactions between teachers and children are especially important in “today’s media-saturated world, where many children have not learned how to engage in rich play of their own making and need a teacher’s help creating it” (p. 53).

Children need to be involved with various kinds of play (motor/physical play, social play, constructive play, fantasy play, and games with rules) because play is “the most efficient, powerful, and productive way to learn the information [and skills] young children need” (Wardle, 2008).

Because play is so important to children’s development, teachers are responsible for facilitating safe, appropriate learning experiences. As adults who are alert, are aware, know the play rules, and intervene when inappropriate behaviors occur (Thompson, Hudson, & Olsen, 2007). Among the many factors that constitute adequate supervision are awareness of the children’s developmental stages, identifying any hazards present in the environment, and recognition of the types of injury to which children may be susceptible (Saluja, et al., 2004).

The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), the American Public Health Association (APHA), and the National Resource Center for Health and Safety in Child Care (NRCHSCC) also recognize the importance of supervision. In their comprehensive health and safety standards they note

Children like to test their skills and abilities. This is particularly noticeable around playground equipment. Even if the highest safety standards for playground layout, design, and surfacing are met, serious injuries can happen if children are left unsupervised. (AAP, APHA, & NRCHSCC, 2002, p. 59)

Supervision is more than having an adult present and making sure the children are playing safely. Supervisors in good-quality programs are expected to enhance children’s development by offering developmentally appropriate materials and activities that engage children. Educators provide a space that empowers children to take ownership in their discoveries. These three factors are necessary to implement high-quality supervision practices:

1. Plan interesting, safe learning environments.

Questions to consider about outdoor play

- Why does supervision of young children matter?
- How can adults create dynamic outdoor learning environments to assure meaningful play experiences?
- What level of supervision is needed to ensure children’s safety?
- What adult behaviors are expected during supervision? What adult activities are not appropriate?
- How can adults interact with a child or small group and also supervise other children?

Three responsibilities of early childhood educators who supervise children’s outdoor play

1. create an environment that empowers children to independently pursue creative play
2. enhance the quality of the play experience by interacting with children
3. carefully observe to assure that children play in appropriate and safe ways

How Is Outdoor Play Best Supervised?

The term supervision can be found in any dictionary (e.g., to oversee, direct) (Morehead, Morehead, & Morehead, 1995). Supervision in the field of education has been defined as adults who are alert, are aware, know the play rules, and intervene when inappropriate behaviors occur (Thompson, Hudson, & Olsen, 2007). Among the many factors that constitute adequate supervision are awareness of the children’s developmental stages, identifying any hazards present in the environment, and recognition of the types of injury to which children may be susceptible (Saluja, et al., 2004).

Children require the opportunity to grow, learn, and have enjoyable experiences in a safe play environment. Professionals who supervise children’s outdoor play have three primary responsibilities, to

- create an environment that empowers children to independently pursue creative play,
- enhance the quality of the play experience by interacting with children, and
- carefully observe to assure that children play in appropriate and safe ways.

Early childhood educators have a legal and moral responsibility to keep children safe and provide them with a good-quality learning environment (National Association for the Education of Young Children [NAEYC], 2005a).
2. Actively supervise the children.
3. Develop and follow supervision policies.

**Plan Interesting, Safe Learning Environments**

With planning and thoughtful creativity, educators can design good-quality learning environments that are filled with learning opportunities. The best unstructured outdoor play environments are designed to allow children to explore, follow their curiosity, and express their physical being and body movements. Children choose to play in challenging, inspiring, and inviting spaces that appeal to them. Unique play spaces for children’s informal learning often include:

- natural areas
- objects to manipulate
- swings
- climbing units
- open grass
- pretend play settings
- water/sand spaces
- digging sites

All staff members, especially those who supervise children outdoors, should be part of the planning process to create the unstructured outdoor play environment. Observant supervisors have insights into how children move and behave when they explore. They understand how mixing active and passive areas can create conflict and unsafe behavior. Teachers’ understandings about how children play on different pieces of equipment or use various manipulative objects can be very beneficial in setting up an effective outdoor environment.

For instance, sand and water play are very common features in many programs. If sandboxes have less than an inch of sand and a limited number of tools (shovels, buckets, truck), children may have to wait a long time for a turn and their explorations with the sand will be limited. Spaces such as sandboxes should have plenty of materials and equipment. Sand and water are meant for groups of children to explore, manipulate, and create.

Outdoor play encourages children to communicate, to express their feelings, and to investigate the world around them. It is an important vehicle for developing self-regulation, language, cognition, and social competence.

**Actively Supervise Children**

Unstructured outdoor play areas make it impossible to predict every move children will make. In this article’s opening scenario, two supervisors were present, but they were
not actively taking responsibility. Lack of supervision may well have resulted in a serious injury. Three practical components can result in appropriate supervision in an early childhood setting:

1. Identify each supervisor’s responsibility
2. Be an active supervisor
3. Be prepared to respond to emergencies

**Identify precise responsibilities of all supervisors.**

**Identify responsibilities**

The first component of appropriate supervision is each supervisor’s awareness of his or her responsibilities. Program expectations are to keep children safe and provide enriching environments for learning, but just exactly how is that done? The American Academy of Pediatrics standards for health and safety refer to supervision more than 20 times (AAP, APHA, & NTCHSCC, 2002). These guidelines include:

- “Children shall not be permitted to play without constant supervision in areas where there is any body of water, including swimming pools, built-in wading pools, tubs, pails, sinks or toilets, ponds, and irrigation ditches” (p. 112).
- “Children shall always be supervised when playing on playground equipment” (p. 222).
- “Parents expect that their child will be adequately supervised and will not be exposed to hazardous play environments, yet will have the opportunity for free, creative play” (p. 351).

More detailed written supervision guidelines are still needed to clarify the specific responsibilities of educators who supervise young children.

Most injuries to young children are preventable (Rimsza, Schackner, Bowen, & Marshall, 2002) and happen when an adult is supposedly supervising them. A number of lawsuits against early childhood programs have raised questions about their supervision practices. This case was settled out of court.

Four supervisors were assigned to the play area with 18 children (age range from 15 months to 3 years). One supervisor went inside. A second adult was sitting on a picnic table. The third and fourth supervisors were standing together in a corner opposite from a playhouse. Five children were inside the playhouse, all of them out of direct sight. A child ran to the two supervisors to report that there was something wrong with another child. An adult found him underneath a plastic-ring-filled pool in the playhouse, not breathing.

Had the adults been interacting with the children and present in the playhouse, this incident would likely have never happened. To decrease the potential for accidents and inappropriate children’s behaviors, early childhood programs need to identify precise responsibilities of staff who supervise children during unstructured play. The condition of the environment and the activities that are offered help determine these responsibilities.

Program leaders may find it helpful to identify three types of supervision (van der Smissen, 1990).

- **General supervision**—overseeing a group of young children involved in play. For instance, there may be several children playing in one large space with a variety of activities. Supervisors are dispersed throughout the area and actively watch their assigned territory.
- **Transitional supervision**—observing and overseeing children as they move between activities (van der Smissen, 1990). The supervisors’ level of involvement in transitional supervision will vary depending on the ages of the children and the activity. For example, after a period of unstructured play (using general supervision techniques), supervisors implement transitional supervision techniques when they guide children to put away materials and equipment and move to the next activity.
- **Specific supervision**—constant and continuous monitoring of children, either one-on-one or in a small group. This type of supervision is common when the supervisor is giving instructions to children, the activity performed offers a greater challenge, or there is a need to guide a specific learning concept. In early childhood, this type of supervision is often referred to as play facilitation (Kontos, 1999).
Play facilitation or supervision?
Research on best practices shows that adults who actively facilitate play can extend the learning potential of the experience (Berk & Winsler 1995; Trawick-Smith, 1994). This teaching strategy is often called intentional teaching (Epstein, 2007). At the same time, interfering with and disrupting children’s play is not recommended when children are positively engaged (Miller, Fernie, & Kantor, 1992; Pellegrini & Galda, 1993).

In terms of a supervisor’s responsibility, very few people can do two jobs at once. If a person is teaching swimming in a pool, the teacher is focused on the learners, not the environment. A lifeguard is present to ensure that no participant spends too much time underwater. The same thing happens in an outdoor play environment.

If early childhood teachers are expected to take an active role in play facilitation, then those individuals need to be designated prior to going outside. Thus, if three people have supervision (lifeguard) responsibilities, one may act as the play facilitator.

**Attentively monitor children’s play**
Active monitoring can ensure safety and help prevent injuries. Supervisors are constantly aware of the environment and continually scanning the play area so they can see more actions and behaviors. Scanning also enables a supervisor to give children “the eye” to prevent or stop inappropriate behavior and conflict. By being attentive when children are engaged in play, supervisors are readily available to intervene nonverbally or verbally.

Unsafe situations tend to arise when supervisors are engaged in one-to-one adult conversations or otherwise distracted. Active supervisors position themselves so they can see the children. Supervisors agree beforehand as to who is responsible for what area. Again, a supervisor’s position can be likened to that of a lifeguard. Lifeguards are spread around a swimming pool with each person responsible for a different area, such as the slide, deep end, and shallow end.

Unstructured outdoor play is not a time for supervisors to catch up on each other’s lives. Interactions with other adults and children should be brief and to the point. When supervisors talk with another person, they stop being an active supervisor.

In some situations, leaders must determine appropriate times for adults to facilitate play. Imagine that three classrooms with 15 children each are outdoors. All three classroom teachers are assigned to supervise the children. Then one teacher takes three children to work in the garden. The other 42 children are scattered throughout the large area with two teachers supervising, resulting in a non-compliant (and unsafe) teacher to child ratio (NAEYC, 2005b). Teachers and administrators who discuss expectations and needs for balancing unstructured and more intentional outdoor play would develop a better plan.

**Prepare for emergencies**
Unfortunately, even under the best circumstances, injuries do occur. Early childhood programs must be prepared to respond appropriately to emergency situations, including injuries, natural disasters, and the arrival of unknown or unauthorized adults. All staff must know the procedures to follow in case of an emergency. This emergency plan must be practiced frequently. Whether it is an injury, fire, tornado, earthquake, or hurricane drill, all supervisors, administrators, teachers, children,
and families need to know what to do when an emergency occurs.

An effective emergency plan includes details on how supervisors alert administrators and emergency responders to an urgent situation. Adults must have access to a communication system, such as a walkie-talkie or a cell phone at all times, to be used for work-related situations only. The plan also includes procedures for notifying families.

All staff must have training in basic first aid procedures, which is typically a requirement for licensing. Administrators and specialists provide staff with frequent updates on the latest recommendations for handling emergencies, including tending to children who have specific medical needs such as asthma, diabetes, or allergies.

Proper documentation of emergency situations includes completing an injury report form accurately (see sidebar) and following the program’s submission requirements. Documentation is vital for legal protection and can be helpful in spotting patterns of concern to be addressed.

**Develop and Follow Supervision Policies**

Each early childhood program has different supervision needs, depending on the design and access to the outdoor play environment. The goal of preparing and implementing comprehensive, effective supervision policies is to enable children to have an enriching and safe play environment.

Most programs design outdoor play spaces to provide children with the opportunity to develop physically, socially, emotionally, and intellectually through exploration, interaction with others, and discovery. The supervision philosophy of informal play in this environment would be to maximize the space so children can create meaning from the world around them.

Consistent, clear staff responsibilities must be identified. Supervision policies must be specific to the program, play area, staff skills, and children’s needs. Review them at least once a year.

**Provide Continuing Education for Staff**

Annual staff development about outdoor play is a key ingredient for successful outdoor supervision. Topics to consider include:

- Updating the environment for educational value and safety

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**Information to Report**

Injury report forms should include:
- facility information
- child information
- time and date of incident
- location of incident
- equipment/product involved
- cause of injury
- parts of body injured
- type of injury
- first aid given at the facility
- who was contacted and what time
- treatment provided by whom and how
- follow-up plan for care of child
- corrective action needed to prevent reoccurrence
- name of agency notified
- signatures of staff members and parents (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2009)
• Identifying and revising supervisors’ responsibilities
• Reviewing the components of active supervision
• Practicing current emergency procedures

High-quality early childhood programs address supervision preparation in order to ensure consistency in staff interactions with children and their colleagues. Supervision skills should focus on accountability, alertness, flexibility, and attitude (Thompson, et al., 2007). For instance, sometimes a child does not want to participate in an activity and may prefer to just watch from the side. A well-prepared supervisor would suggest that the child become an assistant or a scorekeeper, or engage in a related project near where the other children are playing.

Program records about supervision development include information such as the date and times, name and qualifications of the leader, content covered, and names of participants who attended (Gaskin & Batista, 2007). These sessions may qualify as continuing education hours for staff in some states and therefore should also be recorded in individual employee’s files.

Supervision Matters

Early childhood professionals provide positive, enriching experiences for young children. To ensure high-quality supervision of children,

• supervisors plan developmentally appropriate spaces, give children ample time to explore with plenty of suitable materials and equipment, and facilitate engaging play
• administrators provide regular professional learning opportunities so staff are confident and competent supervisors
• staff work as a team to carry out their daily supervision responsibilities

An investment in staff supervision preparation, and developing and implementing a comprehensive supervision policy, is essential for all good early childhood programs.

Annual staff development about outdoor play is essential.

During professional development sessions, staff can be encouraged to discuss outdoor activities and behaviors that are and are not appropriate for children. Review the most effective teaching strategies to assure children’s safety and involvement. Supervisors act as a team to develop the basic rules for activities, games, and unstructured play. These rules will then be consistent among all staff members and should be clearly communicated to the children and any other caregivers (Hudson, Bruya, Olsen, Thompson, & Bruya, 2010).

References


Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt.


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**About the Authors**

**Heather Olsen, Ed.D.,** is Assistant Professor, University of Northern Iowa, Cedar Falls. She has given presentations across the country and has written many articles about the design of quality and safe outdoor spaces. Olsen is also the developer and coordinator of the online training programs for the National Program for Playground Safety.

**Donna Thompson, Ph.D.,** is Professor, University of Northern Iowa, Cedar Falls. Thompson is an acknowledged national and international expert in the field of playground safety. She has more than 30 years experience teaching, writing, and researching about playgrounds. She has done numerous presentations on playground development, including national television interviews.

**Susan Hudson, Ph.D.,** is Professor, University of Northern Iowa, Cedar Falls. She is also a national acknowledged expert in recreation management. Hudson has made numerous presentations nationally and internationally on playground design and safety, and is the author and co-author of more than 100 articles concerning playgrounds. She has held numerous leadership and committee assignments in national professional organizations, including the American Association for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance. She holds an endowed professorship at the University of Northern Iowa.

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**INTERESTED IN WRITING AN INFANT/TODDLER BOOKLET?**

SECA’s Editorial Committee is seeking a short book with practical ideas for teachers of infants and toddlers. The booklet is expected to contain captivating classroom stories and recommendations for best practices in working with children from birth to age 3. These topics are to be featured:

- Physical Environment (how to set up space, tips for selecting materials and furnishings)
- Social-Emotional Environment (examples of effective personal interactions, guidance and discipline strategies)
- Cognitive Development (engaging ideas to promote children’s early learning)
- Working With Families (building community, communication)

If you are interested in submitting a detailed outline for review, please review SECA’s book author guidelines at www.SouthernEarlyChildhood.org.

Submit your proposal to editor@southerneverlychildhood.org
Outdoor Learning  
Supervision Is More Than Watching Children Play

Good early childhood programs provide high-quality care and education as young children develop their physical, emotional, social, and intellectual skills. In order to provide children with positive, developmentally appropriate learning opportunities, educators ensure the safety and security of children, indoors and outdoors.

Heather Olsen, Donna Thompson, and Susan Hudson

Resources for ideas to encourage outdoor play
- Alliance for Childhood  
  www.allianceforchildhood.org
- International Play Association  
  www.ipausa.org
- National Program for Playground Safety  
  www.playgroundssafety.org
- Nature Explore  
  www.arborday.org/explore

Three types of supervision to implement
- General supervision—adults are dispersed throughout the area and actively watch their assigned territories
- Transitional supervision—oversee children as they move between activities
- Specific supervision—continuously monitor and facilitate children’s play

Steps to ensure high-quality supervision…
- supervisors plan developmentally appropriate spaces, give children ample time to explore with plenty of suitable materials and equipment, and facilitate engaging play
- administrators provide ongoing professional learning opportunities so staff are confident and competent supervisors
- staff work as a team in their daily supervision responsibilities

Administrators offer continuing education on topics such as these
- Update the environment for educational value and safety
- Identify and revise supervisors’ responsibilities
- Review the components of active supervision
- Practice current emergency procedures

What responsible outdoor play supervisors do
- create an environment that empowers children to independently pursue creative play
- enhance the quality of the play experience by interacting with children
- carefully observe to assure that children play in appropriate and safe ways

Put These Ideas Into Practice!

Note: Dimensions of Early Childhood readers are encouraged to copy this material for early childhood students as well as teachers of young children as a professional development tool.
Grayson and his twin sister, Kaitlyn, started preschool when they were 20 months old. Two days a week they played outside, painted, explored at the sensory table, and sang songs.

Soon, the director and one of the teachers who had experience as a PPCD (preschool program for children with disabilities) teacher both noticed that Grayson exhibited some atypical behaviors. He tended to fixate on certain toys. He liked to spin the wheels of toy cars. He also stared in a classroom mirror for long periods. His teachers noticed that he rarely responded when they called his name. Grayson would get agitated and run around the classroom, away from the teachers, and even try to leave the classroom without supervision. Grayson's safety became an issue.

The director first voiced the staff’s concerns to Grayson’s parents. She suggested that Grayson’s hearing be checked as a first step. Because Grayson was a twin and there had been some complications during pregnancy, his mother was eager to make sure that his development was on track. She hoped that there was a simple solution for the behavioral concerns.

At the same time, the staff recognized that Grayson’s behaviors were possible indicators for an autism spectrum disorder (ASD). They were acutely aware of the serious nature of raising such a sensitive topic with families, so they continued to record their observations of Grayson’s behaviors.

Early care and education providers often are the first to notice children’s developmental differences because their extensive knowledge about and experience with typical development is a baseline frame for recognizing differences. Educators of young children are aware that the earlier children with developmental delays, such as those caused by hearing loss or autism, receive intervention, the better their long-term outcomes are likely to be.

Early childhood professionals also seek to thoughtfully bring developmental concerns to a family’s attention. This article reviews early characteristics of autism, recommends screening procedures, discusses how families might respond when informed, and outlines steps to refer children and their families for early intervention. In order to make accurate referrals, early educators must first be knowledgeable about the early clues or symptomatic behavior that children with autism exhibit.

Early Signs of Autism

Signs and symptoms of autism spectrum disorders are often noticeable as early as infancy (Scheuermann & Webber, 2002). The more severe the developmental impact, the earlier symptoms are noted. The first indicators fall into four broad areas:

• socialization,
• sensory functioning,
• language, and
• cognitive functioning
  (American Psychiatric Association, 2000).

The existence of one or a few of the traits described here are insufficient for a firm diagnosis. Diagnosis of the disorder is based on constellations of differences in many developmental areas. Many disorders fall under the realm of autism spectrum disorders. These conditions are characterized by many of the same atypical behaviors. Therefore, qualified physicians, psychologists, speech therapists, and/or other experts must make the diagnosis (Goin & Myers, 2006).

Early childhood educators play a critical role in early diagnosis of any developmental disabilities. Teachers of
young children and program directors have an obligation to
• document developmental concerns,
• discuss those concerns with families early, and
• make appropriate referrals for Child Find (IDEA, 2004) and early childhood intervention.

For a list of referral and early intervention resources see Table 1. For autism and early child development resources refer to Table 2.

**Early diagnosis and treatment is essential.**

Early diagnosis and treatment of developmental differences has a significant and positive impact on children’s future functioning and independence. When teachers of young children discuss such sensitive issues with families, it is important to express care and concern for the well being and health of the family without attaching diagnostic labels. Educators and families usually start the process by sharing their observations of the child’s development in the four target areas.

**Socialization**

Differences in social interaction are often seen at a very early age in children with autism. From infancy, children with ASD often exhibit different facial expressions or lack interest in objects (Baranek, 1999). For example, an infant with autism might not smile when cooed to, or may smile and laugh when there is no environmental cue to do so.

Toddlers with autism may have a flat facial expression and be unresponsive to excitement in their environment, or they may over respond.

Other socialization characteristics that are indicators of ASD, beginning in infancy and extending through later development include:
• resistance or discomfort when being held or touched,
• lacking response to hugs,
• isolated play in which the child is content with solitary activity rather than interacting with others,
• preferring interaction with objects or parts of objects rather than with humans, and
• atypical object interactions (Baron-Cohen, et al., 1996; Goin & Myers, 2006).

For example, young children may, like Grayson, prefer to spin the wheels on toy cars rather than drive them across the floor. Atypical or intense interest in objects or activities, rather than interacting with people, is also common in children with autism.

**Dependence on ritual and routine.**

When engaging in activities, young children with ASD prefer ritual, routine, and structure. Many rituals or routines seem to serve no identifiable purpose (Greaves, Prince, & Evans, 2006; Larson, 2006). For example, children with ASD may repeatedly arrange food or toys in a specific pattern. If an item is moved, the child will fixate on the initial arrangement, putting items back in the original order before progressing to the next activity.
### Table 1. Referral and Early Intervention Resources

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Resource</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Child Find</td>
<td>Information and resources on earliest possible identification of children and families who may benefit from early intervention or education services.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early Intervention Family Alliance</td>
<td>Provides lead agencies and service providers for early childhood intervention for individual states.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technical Assistance Alliance for Parent Centers</td>
<td>Parent Centers in each state provide information to families of children with disabilities. Helps families and professionals collaborate to meet children’s educational needs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zero to Three</td>
<td>Leading resource on the first 3 years of life. Supports the healthy development of infants, toddlers, and their families.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent Pals</td>
<td>A special education community where parents and professionals share information and offer support.</td>
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### Table 2. Autism and Early Child Development Resources

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<tr>
<th>Resource</th>
<th>Description</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Division for Early Childhood (DEC)</td>
<td>Organization dedicated to improving educational outcomes for individuals with exceptionalities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autism Society of America</td>
<td>Comprehensive source for information to individuals, families, and service providers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autism Research Institute</td>
<td>A parent-driven collaboration dedicated to advancing autism research.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Child Care Information Center</td>
<td>Comprehensive child care policy, research, and practice information. Useful for families and caregivers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Families and Advocates Partnership for Education (FAPE)</td>
<td>Information that aims to improve educational outcomes for children with disabilities.</td>
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</table>
Jenny, who is almost 4, has an evening ritual of bringing out all her stuffed animals, arranging them by size and color, and then moving them in order back to her room. If a family member removes an animal from the arrangement, Jenny might start the routine again from the beginning.

If a daily routine is changed, at home or at school, the transition often result in resistance or tantrums by children who have autism. Resistance to change may result from personnel changes, activity transitions, separation from family, room rearrangement, or changes in food. If crackers are usually the snack, and the day’s snack is applesauce, the change may trigger a tantrum in an autistic child. Resistance to change also is likely to happen when autistic children are asked to stop activities that provide sensory stimulation (Larson, 2006).

**Sensory Functioning**

Young children with ASD frequently have sensory differences and may seek either sensory input or avoidance. Sensory differences often lead to over-responsiveness or under-responsiveness to the environment. Atypical sensory responses may occur with any of the senses: visual, auditory, tactile, olfactory, or taste (Goin & Myers, 2006).

Some children with autism are bothered by bright light or particular visual patterns. Grayson’s teachers noted that he was under-responsive to auditory cues. He would seem to be deaf when his name was called. On the other hand, some children respond to soft sounds as if they were painfully loud. Arianna covered her ears and exclaimed, “Too loud! Too loud!” when she heard the faint ding of an elevator.

Many children with autism will show a preference or aversion to specific fabrics or types of touch. For example, they may prefer one type of pants such as sweat pants and refuse to wear jeans. They may tolerate only a few types of food textures, such as dry and crunchy, and reject chewy wet foods. Food preferences may also be exhibited based on smell or taste. These patterns of preferences and aversions are usually consistent over time.

Atypical sensory preferences may also be tied to self stimulation. Self-stimulatory behaviors in children with autism are usually repetitive. From a very early age, children with autism act stereotypically (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). They may:

- rock,
- twirl objects (Grayson spun wheels),
- flap their hands,
- gaze at the ceiling, lights, or mirrors (Grayson preferred gazing at his reflection), or
- engage in pica (eating nonfood items).

These behaviors, which are often misunderstood, provide sensory stimulation to the child’s confused neurological system.

Stereotypical behaviors are an extreme preference for actions that do not match the surrounding environment. Children with autism will tantrum or resist transitions if they are stopped from engaging in the self-stimulating activity.

Self-injurious behavior is related to self-stimulation. Some children with autism engage in acts that are injurious to self or others (excessive biting, head banging, scratching) or they may have an inappropriate or lack of response to injury (Greaves, Prince, & Evans, 2006). An example of lack of response is head banging or hitting oneself with no response, although most people would find this painful. Self-stimulatory and self-injurious behaviors may increase when children with autism feel stressed or anxious.

**Language**

Frequently, young children with ASD use their unique behavioral responses to communicate. Approximately 50% of children with autism never develop expressive verbal language with a communicative intent (Gleason, 2005). They do not use language to socialize or facilitate having their needs met. Although
Early Signs of Autism: How to Support Families and Navigate Referral Procedures

these children’s expressive language is deficient, receptive language is often thought to be better developed. Early language delay or absence of language is one of the most recognizable indicators of autism spectrum disorder.

Language delays can also include using language differently. Children may demonstrate the ability to make sounds or say words, but they might use their sounds and words in an odd fashion (Scheuermann & Webber, 2002). Repetitions often are rote and have the same inflection as when they were first heard. Children’s statements appear to have no communicative intent. Many children with echolalia perseverate—repeatedly saying a word or phrase when they experience heightened anxiety or excitement.

In addition to verbal language, behavioral language cues are often different as well in children with ASD. For example,

- little eye contact,
- not facing the person with whom they are speaking,
- flat facial expressions, or
- unresponsiveness to interactions with others

are all behaviors that may be seen in children with autism (Goin & Meyers, 2006). Thus communication, like other developmental skills including cognitive functioning, may appear to be delayed.

Cognitive Functioning

Many children with ASD function with development resembling that of a much younger child (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). In early childhood, cognitive functioning is related to language, social, and motor development. Thus, if a child is delayed in more than one of these areas there is a strong chance that cognitive development may be delayed as well. Approximately 75% of children with autism are categorized as having intellectual disabilities based on measured IQs (Bowler, 2006).

One characteristic of cognitive function is that children with autism may learn a skill in one setting but do not transfer it to another. They tend to have visual processing strengths and verbal comprehension weaknesses.

Screening, Assessment, and Diagnosis

Early childhood program directors and teachers are responsible for noticing atypical development and documenting specific behaviors and incidents of concern. Information collected should note the intensity and chronic nature of the behaviors. Early care and education providers communicate with families any concerns about the specific characteristics of children’s development.

Keep a current list of professional contacts.

After sharing detailed observations with families, early educators typically provide families with referrals to medical and other specialists who are qualified to screen, assess, and diagnose the child’s condition. Identify the state referral process and consistently make referrals for screening as a part of Child Find, the requirement that each state seek out and find all children suspected of needing special services to facilitate child development (IDEA, 2004).

Early childhood educators usually assist with the screening or assessment process due to the multidisciplinary nature of screenings. While parents, with their deep knowledge of their child, are a primary source of information, those diagnosing autism or any other disorders will gather information and data from a variety of individuals with knowledge of the child’s development, skills, and behavior. At a minimum, the director of the center or the teacher will be asked to complete a background survey about developmental skills and behaviors related to autism and general development.

Frequently communicate with families as they seek to find answers about their child’s development, and share new insights as they arise. Given the daily contact with families and variety of ways in which autism spectrum disorder affects children’s development and long-term prognosis, early childhood educators are uniquely qualified to continue to support families facing a difficult diagnosis for their children.

Support Families

Grayson remained in his first preschool until he was 3 years old, when he moved into a PPCD at a public school. His parents requested that a representative from the
preschool attend Grayson’s first individual education planning meeting (IEP) meeting to support them.

In the meeting, a school diagnostician made a casual comment about Grayson having autism. The parents knew Grayson had some developmental delays and some social learning issues. He had received services through ECI since he was 2. Grayson had been evaluated by several doctors and other professionals. A number of his behaviors had been identified. However, until then, his condition had never been labeled.

In one swift statement, the school diagnostician labeled Grayson with a term that the family had not previously heard used to describe their son. Terms such as autistic tendencies, pervasive developmental disorder, and speech delays had been used, but no one had told Grayson’s parents, “Your child has autism.” Grayson’s mom ran out of the meeting in tears.

Families often go through myriad feelings when coming to grips with a child’s diagnosis of a disability. They often feel disconnected and sometimes even misled by well-meaning professionals (Altiere & von Kluge, 2009). In their search for services, parents have also reported feeling a lack of support and that some professionals were unhelpful and unqualified. Some families reported cold indifference and a lack of respect on the part of the professionals in understanding the family’s experiences (Schall, 2000).

Grayson’s parents responded to a matter-of-fact presentation of their son’s disability with strong emotions. Whenever families are informed about a diagnosis, the situation should be handled by caring, informed, and empathetic professionals. Professionals can take the following steps to better support families.

1. **Determine the parents’ level of knowledge and comfort with a disability diagnosis.** Professionals should not assume that families have been fully or explicitly informed of their child’s diagnosis. The goal is to gently lead parents to realize the challenges their child faces, yet continually celebrate the child’s successes and personal strengths.

   One way to better understand the situation is to simply have a conversation with the family and find out what they have been told, and likewise, what they have heard. At times, a diagnosis may have been given to parents but they may not have truly comprehended it. Reaching acceptance is difficult and there may be occasions with very young children when parents only realize what is happening with their child on a subconscious level. Others may have difficulty accepting the diagnosis. Some parents of children with multiple disabilities, when faced with a diagnosis that included intellectual delays, “shopped” for an alternate diagnosis (Ho & Keiley, 2003).

   Frequently there are a variety of diagnoses that precede or accompany ASD, so families may focus on one aspect that seems less stigmatizing—such as Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) or Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD) for example—and deny what they perceive as the more serious ASD diagnosis. Some parents reported feeling both horrible and empowered at the time of their child’s autism diagnosis (Schall, 2000).

2. **Gently facilitate acceptance.**

   Denial or minimization is one of the most frequently reported coping strategies of mothers of children with intellectual disabilities (Ho & Keiley, 2009). Facilitating acceptance, rather than taking a deficit-based approach, is the most effective method to help parents work toward acceptance of a difficult diagnosis.

   Parents of children with ASD are at risk for periods of high levels of stress (Estes, et al., 2009; Gray, 2002). Families often feel rejected by family, friends, and strangers.
in their community. This rejection can be isolating and overwhelming (Schall, 2000).

Early care and education professionals can help alleviate some of this stress by handling communications regarding the child with great sensitivity and caring. Although pediatricians or other medical professionals make the official diagnosis, it is often the adults who see the child every day who have the best insight, beyond the family, to notice areas of concern. Listen when families are confused or frustrated. Patiently work with all children in the classroom as they learn to interact with one another.

After the diagnosis has been made, early childhood teachers often provide helpful information to families and continue the referral process, this time for early intervention (see Table 1).

**Navigating the Early Intervention System**

**Assist With Referrals**

Early educators can also assist families with information about early intervention services. Early intervention is critical to support the optimum development of children with autism (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2007). IDEA (2004) articulates general guidelines for Child Find and early childhood intervention, but procedures vary from state to state because these services are grant driven. Each state has an identified lead agency through which early intervention services are coordinated and monitored.

The procedure for referring children who have an autism spectrum disorder is the same as for any early disability. Programs are made available at county or community levels depending on population, need, and the grant agreement between the state and federal government. The process most likely will be different for infants through age 2 and for children age 3 and older.

**Children younger than age 3.** Early intervention for infants and toddlers takes many forms. Three main categories of intervention efforts include

- behavioral interventions,
- developmental interventions, and
- cognitive-behavioral interventions (Corsello, 2005).

Based on individual needs, services may include

- speech therapy (expressive oral and receptive language, swallowing, oral sensory skills),
- physical therapy (gross motor),
- occupational therapy (fine motor),
- home visits,
- counseling or social work,
- family education,
- medical evaluations for assessment needs, and
- assistive technology devices (hearing aids, communication devices) and support for their use

When children qualify for assistance, service providers implement intervention at home, early childhood programs, or any other location that will facilitate convenient assistance and maximum inclusion with other children.

General terms for services for this age range are zero to three or Part C.

For children to qualify for services they must meet at least one of the following categories, as determined by state guidelines:

1. Have an identified delay in a developmental area including cognitive, physical, social-emotional, or adaptive, such as a toddler with autism.

2. Have a physical or psychological diagnosis with a high probability of resulting in developmental delay, for example infants with Down syndrome.

3. States may choose to provide early intervention to infants and children who are at risk of developing a developmental delay. Examples are infants born addicted to drugs and toddlers whose parents have diagnosed disabilities such as mental retardation.

**Children 3 years and older.** Children 3 years and older with autism spectrum disorders who receive special education services must meet one of a variety of eligibility categories. Most states use developmental delay as the predominant eligibility category for children ages 3 to 9, although a child with characteristics of autism may also be eligible for special services under the IDEA eligibility category of autism.

As with infants and young toddlers, it is helpful for early educators to document specific examples of developmental differences including their intensity (how disruptive or severe) and chronic nature (length of time the behaviors have occurred), and then to discuss the frequency and severity of developmental issues with families.
Work closely with families to make sure they are aware of local services. Recommend that families contact the local public school district and speak to the director of special education (or other special education staff as directed by the school district). In some districts, the director of special education tracks and follows through on early childhood referrals. Other districts delegate early childhood referrals to a diagnostician, school psychologist, or speech therapist.

Viewing families from a strengths-based perspective is imperative for building strong relationships with all families, but even more critical for families with a child with special needs. Families are learning to maneuver through a new system of personnel and procedures whose existence they were probably unaware of prior to the referral.

**Prepare to Support Families and Children With ASD**

All early childhood teachers and support staff can benefit from professional development opportunities with regard to children and families with special needs, particularly autism spectrum disorders. Early educators must

- know how to observe children objectively and document behaviors
- be aware of characteristics of common disorders such as ASD
- take appropriate referral steps if there are concerns about a child’s development
- be highly skilled communicators
- develop tools to support families
- assist families with intervention services

**Assist Families With Intervention Services**

Early childhood educators may be asked to cooperate in providing services should children qualify. Teachers may participate in developing or implementing an IEP, for example. If assistive technology is required, early educators may be expected to skillfully use it in the classroom. Facilities may well be needed for therapists to work with individual children, either in an area of the classroom or another part of the building.

**References**


Individuals with Disability Education Improvement Act (IDEA) of 2004, PL 108-446, 20 U.S.C. “SS” 1400 et seq.


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Early Signs of Autism
How to Support Families and Navigate Referral Procedures

Early intervention is critical to support the development of children with autism.

Joyce E. Nuner and Amy C. Stevens Griffith

Early Signs of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)
- Socialization
  - flat facial expressions
  - lack interest in objects or people
  - unresponsive or over-responsive to excitement
  - unresponsive to interactions with others
- Language
  - early language delay or absence of language
  - use language differently
  - little eye contact, do not face the person with whom they are speaking
- Sensory Functioning
  - seek sensory input or avoid it
  - over-responsive or under-responsive to environment
- Cognitive Functioning
  - may have intellectual disabilities
  - tend to have visual processing strengths and verbal comprehension weaknesses

How to Support Families
- know characteristics of various disorders
- document children's behaviors objectively
- know how the referral system works
- communicate clearly and listen empathetically
- understand families' feelings when coming to grips with a diagnosis
- view families from a strengths-based perspective
- offer information resources

Make the Most of the Early Intervention System
- refer families to the state's lead agency for early intervention services
- collaborate with screening and assessment specialists
- implement early intervention services

Resources
- Autism Society of America
  autism-society.org
- Autism Research Institute
  autism.org
- Division for Early Childhood (DEC) of the Council for Exceptional Children
  dec-sped.org

Note: *Dimensions of Early Childhood* readers are encouraged to copy this material for early childhood students as well as teachers of young children as a professional development tool.
Learning From Each Other

Bilingual Pairs in Dual-Language Classrooms

Early education programs in the United States are experiencing an increase in the number of English learners and, consequently, an increase in dual-language programs that best serve the needs of these children (Collier & Thomas, 2009). Dual-language programs enable children to communicate orally and in written forms in both their native languages and in English (Gómez, 2000).

These models, most often implemented in Spanish and English, provide extensive time for children to develop concepts in their first and second languages. The programs typically include students who are learning to speak at least one new language and learning academic content in a second language. Thus, it is important for teachers to use strategies that facilitate linguistic and academic development.

Students in dual-language classrooms learn academic concepts by working together through cognitively challenging and interactive lessons or projects (Collier & Thomas, 2009). The goal in dual-language programs is for all children to become academically proficient in both languages.

Children’s daily classroom experiences influence their development of bilingualism and biliteracy—and impact the way they feel about themselves as successful learners. Finding the best ways to promote the acquisition of linguistic and cognitive skills for bilingual learners however, continues to challenge early childhood bilingual and ESL teachers who may be unsure about the strategies for biliteracy development and second language learning through meaningful academic content. It is crucial for early childhood teachers to understand how to best meet the needs of bilingual learners in dual-language programs if they are to provide a strong academic foundation in two languages (Gutiérrez, Zepeda, & Castro, 2010).

This article describes one effective approach that can be implemented by teachers with a range of language skills. Teachers who speak one language, or teachers of children who speak a language unfamiliar to them, are urged to find multilingual family members or teacher assistants who can assist with implementing the communication strategies outlined here. All teachers are encouraged to learn at least a few key words and phrases in children’s home languages to facilitate children’s daily learning experiences.

Strategies That Facilitate Academic Growth for Bilingual Learners

Effective early childhood teachers implement a variety of instructional strategies to promote young bilingual learners’ linguistic and cognitive development (Fields, Groth & Spangler, 2007; Espinosa, 2009). Learning academic content in two languages can be a challenge for children who come from monolingual speaking homes. Skilled teachers create opportunities for all children to practice their new languages as well as use their first language. The most effective strategies facilitate the acquisition of concepts in meaningful contexts.

Skilled teachers of young children integrate culturally relevant teaching approaches. They support children’s interactions with each other and help children connect what they know about the world around them to the world of school (Alanís, 2007). Students in classrooms where teachers ask them to work cooperatively in a socioculturally supportive environment do better academically than students in classes taught more traditionally (Collier & Thomas, 2009).
Socio-constructivism theory—based on Vygotsky’s (1978) premise that children’s mental, linguistic, and social development is supported through social interactions with others who are more competent—views learning from this cultural perspective as socially mediated as well as socially motivated. Although Vygotsky’s theory focused on teacher-child interactions, child-child interactions are just as important for children to exchange ideas and learn from others’ points of view (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Karns, 2001). Teaching strategies based on socio-constructivism theory can facilitate the learning process for children and teachers.

**Bilingual Pairs Encourage Interaction**

In order for children to develop their native language and to acquire a second language, they need to hear language in rich, meaningful contexts that help them connect what they are learning with their experiences. They also need opportunities to practice their language production in both languages. Cooperative learning with bilingual pairs is one way to increase children’s social and linguistic interaction. Placing children in bilingual pairs allows them to use their language skills as they develop academic concepts (Coleman & Goldenburg, 2009).

When using the bilingual pairs strategy, teachers partner students with mixed linguistic and academic levels. For example, a teacher might select one child who is strong in English with a partner child who is strong in Spanish. Teachers are encouraged to take into account children’s academic levels as well, so that partners can facilitate each other’s learning. Bilingual pairings should be flexible as students gain linguistic or academic proficiency. Throughout the year, teachers rearrange pairs as needed to maintain the matching characteristics.

Pairs of students typically complete a single project or hands-on activity as they work together. Children serve as language models and supports for one another. Bilingual pairing also reinforces the native speaker’s knowledge of the language.

**Some Advantages of Bilingual Pairs**

- Scaffolded concepts are learned in a culturally relevant context
- Children work together on a single project
- Children reinforce each other’s knowledge of their languages
- The strategy creates a community of learners
- Children express and exchange ideas as they build communication skills
- Children develop close relationships with each other
- Children are actively involved in their learning
- Children are more willing to take risks
- Children have more opportunities to feel successful

Another important outcome of the bilingual pairs strategy is that it is a natural way to create a community of learners in which children feel safe and connected to those around them. Consistent with culturally relevant pedagogy, the use of partners facilitates the building of a learning community that supports children’s expression and exchange of ideas as they build communication skills (Alanís, 2007). When children work together, they develop close relationships with each other and learn to help each other socially and cognitively (Gonzalez, 2005; Riojas-Cortez & Flores, 2009).

Children are more willing to take risks as learners when they feel safe in their academic environment (Church, 2004). Children with “low
levels of anxiety are more successful second language learners” (Szecsi & Giambo, 2004/2005, p. 104). Bil- lingual pairs provide an opportunity for children to engage in meaningful conversations in a comfortable environment. Children who are allowed to confirm their understand- ings with a partner have greater opportunities to feel successful and validated in their learning process (Coleman & Goldenburg, 2009).

Children’s learning is scaffolded through comprehensible input, increased verbal interaction, and active involvement of the learner (Alanís, 2000). As a result, the use of bilingual pairs becomes a learning tool for teachers and students, much like manipulatives or visuals, as children practice their language skills and solidify their conceptual development.

**Pairs typically complete a single project.**

**Children in Bilingual Pairs Participate More Fully**

Pairs are the ideal group size for cooperative language learning because they ensure opportunities for more participation, in contrast with the level of participation that typically occurs in whole-group instruction when children spend a lot of time waiting for a turn.

For example, many early childhood classrooms include a circle time to focus on children’s language and literacy development. Teachers who use circle time effectively encourage children to engage in meaningful language through playful interactions.

On the other hand, many teachers monopolize circle time by making their own presentations. Some use IRE patterns of questioning:

1. **Initiate a question,**
2. allow children to **Respond** by raising their hands, and then
3. **Evaluate that response.**

These two large-group teaching approaches greatly reduce children’s conversations and responses to the topic, so most children are passively listening (Machado, 2010). Furthermore, with the IRE pattern, teachers and the group generally hear responses from only two or three children. Children who know the answer are the ones who quickly raise their hand. But what about the children who did not respond? Were they given an opportunity or time to respond? What can teachers do to make sure that everyone can contribute to the discussion?

In pairs, children can participate with about equal amounts of time when the activities are designed to facilitate active discussion. The three pairing strategies described here enable children to express themselves in meaningful and comfortable contexts. They can be used with monolingual or bilingual learners. Each strategy grants children the opportunity to bring in their own perspectives and ideas to the discussion as they engage in academic conversations. Each strategy is also based on the notion that English learners bring a rich collection of language skills and ways of communicating to the early childhood classroom.
Discussion: Turn and Talk

The bilingual kindergarten learning experience described in Table 1 took place at the beginning of the school year. The activities were conducted in Spanish in a dual-language program with about equal numbers of native Spanish and native English speakers. The kindergarten teacher, Mrs. Rodriguez, was still getting to know her students and wanted to build on children’s knowledge, so she focused on their families.

With the Turn and Talk strategy, all children practice their language skills in the language of their choice. In this example, they talked about their families—a meaningful and relevant conversation for children. Mrs. Rodriguez learned more about children’s families and experiences, crucial information for future curriculum planning (Riojas-Cortez & Flores, 2009; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & González, 1992).

As children talked with their partners, Mrs. Rodriguez informally observed how children answered the question and their styles of interacting. These observations will be used to guide lesson planning and the choice of teaching strategies to encourage all children to speak.

When using the Turn and Talk strategy, it is essential to pose open-ended questions that promote discussion and reflection. Carefully plan the questions ahead of time. It is also important to allow children to speak to each other without interruption. Base the amount of time for discussion on children’s ages and skills. Kindergarten children generally need only 3 to 5 minutes to engage in these conversations. After children finish speaking with each other, the teacher then asks several partners to report to the group to stimulate whole-group discussion.

### Table 1. Turn and Talk With Kindergardeners

Mrs. Rodriguez gathered the children on the carpet in front of her and said, “Hoy vamos a hablar de nuestras familias.” (Today we will be talking about our families). She asked children to Turn and Talk as she gave them this prompt in Spanish, “Dile a tu vecino algo acerca de tu familia. Por ejemplo, ¿Quién son los miembros de tu familia?” (Turn to your neighbor and tell them about your family. Who is in your family?)

Children physically turned their bodies to face the child sitting next to them and began to talk about their families. Most children smiled as they spoke to each other. All of them seemed to be very excited about talking. Children chose whether to speak in English or Spanish. Mrs. Rodriguez listened to ensure that all children had an opportunity to share. She limited her input so that children were free to discuss on their own.

After children had time to talk with their partners, Mrs. Rodriguez asked a few of them to share with the class. Diego had been speaking to Estella. “Diego, dime algo acerca de la familia de Estella.” (Diego, tell me about Estella’s family). By asking Diego to tell the group about Estella’s family, she could observe Diego’s listening comprehension as well as his language development. Estella then told the class about Diego’s family.

Mrs. Rodriguez asked several more children to tell about their partners’ families.

### Table 2. Second Graders Think-Pair-Share

Students in a second-grade dual-language Spanish/English classroom were learning about states of matter as part of the science curriculum. The teacher, Mr. Flores, had already partnered students based on linguistic and academic ability. Students were seated with their partners in pods of four with partners facing each other.

Mr. Flores began his science lesson by stating, “I’d like you to think about our science discussion yesterday. What were the different types of matter that we talked about? Don’t say anything. Just think about it.”

After a minute or so, he asked children to Pair with their partner and Share what they were thinking about. A few children had bewildered looks on their faces but the majority began talking with each other about liquids and solids. Some children chose to speak in Spanish even though the lesson was in English. Mr. Flores provided some prompting for partners who were struggling with the concept.

After a few minutes, the teacher asked partners to write down examples of liquids and solids to share with the class. Children quickly began negotiating examples to share. Mr. Flores then called on partners to stand and share their responses in English. Students who were unsure of the science vocabulary in English relied on their English-speaking partners to help them with pronunciation.

This experience enabled all students to practice their science vocabularies as they explained the different states of matter to each other. Classmates could assess each other’s responses and compare them with their own. Children were usually quick to point out any incorrect answers.

Mr. Flores used their responses to further question the children in order to develop the discussion and increase learning opportunities. Students then participated in a demonstration of how solids become liquids.
**Process: Think-Pair-Share**

Large-group activities are also an excellent time to use the strategy called Think-Pair-Share, which was developed by Lyman (1981). With this strategy, teachers ask children to Think about a question or idea before they begin to Share thoughts with a partner. One example of this strategy is described in Table 2.

The Think-Pair-Share strategy enabled children to review their earlier understandings and clarify their ideas with a peer before moving on to new material. Think-Pair-Share supports collaboration and learning continuity, as questions can focus on experiences and ideas about the current learning activity (Darragh, 2010). The strategy also allowed children to organize their thoughts by providing sufficient wait time for them to process their answers, often in their second language.

In the next example, found in Table 3, a first-grade dual-language teacher focused on the concept of using whole numbers to describe fractional parts.

This Think-Pair-Share strategy usually eliminates children’s uncertainty and fear that they may answer incorrectly in front of their peers. Otherwise, they might remain silent.

Although Think-Pair-Share can be used with all learners, it is especially effective with bilingual learners. In the early stages of second language acquisition, students typically translate the question to their native language, think of the answer, and then translate the answer back to the language expected. This process takes time. Bilingual children need wait time to process their thoughts. In this example, Think-Pair-Share

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**Table 3. First Graders Formulate Fractions**

In the middle of a small-group Spanish math lesson, Ms. Medina asked children to describe part of a set in which three out of the eight crayons were red.

She used the Think–Pair–Share strategy to ask pairs of children to reflect on the quantitative reasoning before sharing their answers with the group. Students had a choice of language although the lesson was conducted in Spanish.

Ms. Medina gave children time to formulate their answers and provide a clear response. She accepted answers in English or Spanish.

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**Table 4. Kindergarteners Explore the Life Cycle of Frogs**

Children were preparing a graphic of the frog life cycle with their partners. Before they began drawing, Mrs. Torres asked them to first discuss the life cycle in groups of two partners, in English.

Parker: Frogs start out as tadpoles with a tail.
Carolina: I know. I’ve seen them at the zoo.
Luis interjected: Sí, yo también los vi. Estaban en el agua. Entonces crecen… (Yes, I also saw them. They were in the water. Then they grow…)
Carolina: Yeah, they grow and become frogs.
Raquel: They lose their tail and get legs!

Children then began to work with their partners to make their drawings. Mrs. Torres walked around to each pair, observing their drawings.

After the children finished drawing, Mrs. Torres asked them to summarize their learning by telling their partners what they learned. She encouraged their reflections with the prompt “Today I learned….”

Mrs. Torres again walked around and listened to what children said to informally assess their understanding. She then asked a few students to share their understandings with the class as a closure to the activity.

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**Table 5. Recommendations for Pairing Children**

- Establish a classroom climate of respect and support.
- Choose pairs based on similar linguistic, academic, and social abilities.
- Change partners frequently to keep learning fresh and foster friendships.
- Prompt children’s discussions with open-ended questions (Why…? How…?), and phrases or stems (We discovered that….
- Create a system to keep track of pairing and re-pairing of students.
- Role play and practice partnering activities so children gain a better understanding of partner talk skills (I think…, What did you find?, How could we…?).
provided opportunities for children to succeed as they discussed a new mathematical concept.

**Open-ended questions promote discussion and reflection.**

Just as with the Turn and Talk strategy, when using Think-Pair-Share it is important that teachers ask questions that encourage thinking rather than questions with one right answer. The idea is to develop language skills through discussion. One-word responses will not provide that opportunity. On the other hand, questions that are too general or too difficult for children to answer are also ineffective. Plan questions ahead of time to increase the learning potential of the conversation and promote reflection and critical thinking (Goldenberg, 2008).

**Reflect: Clarify/Verify**

Active learning takes place when children discuss academic concepts with their partners. During whole-group instruction, teachers often model new skills and concepts for students. As teachers do this, they ask many questions to check children’s understanding. Like the Turn and Talk and Think-Pair-Share strategies, Clarify/Verify enables children to express their ideas related to the concept or topic at the end of a lesson in a comfortable environment. Each student contributes to the partner’s understanding with questions, strategies, and explanations (Turner & Krechevsky, 2003).

The exchange described in Table 4 took place in a dual-language Spanish/English kindergarten classroom and illustrates the children’s thinking processes.

In this example, Mrs. Torres encouraged children to reflect on their knowledge by explaining their understanding of the concept to their peers. Student-student discussions prompt children to clarify concepts, use academic vocabulary, and foster critical thinking.

Providing opportunities for students to process and verbalize what they are learning is an effective way to support active engagement in learning. This strategy also enables teachers to determine to what extent students are internalizing the information and to provide immediate feedback when it is most needed.

All three strategies, • Turn and Talk, • Think-Pair-Share, and • Clarify/Verify create classroom situations where all children can use their linguistic repertoires to extend their knowledge in a collaborative setting. These strategies provide children with the freedom to explore new ideas and practice their academic language production in safe and academically challenging environments (Paté, 2009). Such environments support young children by allowing them to express their ideas, feelings, and opinions.

**Recommendations for Success**

Teachers who are planning to implement the bilingual pairs approach in a specific learning experience may wonder: "Where in this lesson will children be asked to talk with each other?" The answer is before, during, and at the end of each session!

Successful collaborative interactions in early childhood classrooms...
require careful planning. Focus on what children are expected to learn and how to effectively pair them so they will gain the most from their interactions. Consider the recommendations in Table 5 when pairing children with different linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

In order for children to develop their native and second language skills, they need to experience comprehensible input and output (Krashen, 1981). Young learners must understand what is said. They learn best when they hear language in rich and meaningful contexts that help them connect what they are learning with their experiences.

**Children practice language in a safe, academically challenging environment.**

Collaborative settings offer children opportunities to create new meaning from previously gained knowledge (Webb, Nemer, & Zuniga, 2002). They can organize their thoughts in a friendly environment. Such settings provide all learners many opportunities to acquire new formal and informal language, develop social skills, and improve communication abilities.

Early childhood teachers support children’s efforts to interact with each other and connect what they know about the world around them to new ideas (Alanís, 2007). Collaborative pairing strategies, which are built on socio-constructivism theory, facilitate this process. The use of strategies such as bilingual pairs acknowledges that young children are capable of communicating in meaningful ways and that all children benefit from interacting with each other as part of their learning experiences.

**References**


**About the Author**

**Iliana Alanís, Ph.D.,** is an Assistant Professor of Early Childhood Education at the University of Texas at San Antonio. She has worked with dual-language teachers at various stages of program implementation for more than 12 years. Her research focuses on the additive effectiveness of dual language instruction for language-minority children.
Put These Ideas Into Practice!

Learning From Each Other
Bilingual Pairs in Dual-Language Classrooms

What are bilingual pairs? With this strategy, teachers partner students who have similar linguistic and academic levels. For example, a teacher might select one child who is strong in English with a partner child who is strong in Spanish. Rearrange pairs as needed to maintain the matching characteristics.

Iliana Alanís

Recommendations to implement and supervise bilingual pairs
- Model the process with a child
- Ask children to role-play being partners
- Provide specific directions
- Ask students to complete a single project together
- Provide useful questions, phrases, or stems for children to use with their partners
  - What do you think?
  - How did you solve the problem?
  - It’s your turn.
  - In my opinion, …
- Monitor children’s talk to assess the appropriateness of the match
- Frequently reassign partners to foster new friendships

Skills children learn and practice with bilingual partners
- Problem-solving strategies
- Academic vocabulary
- Social vocabulary and skills
- Sharing and turn taking
- Summary and reflection

Suggestions for partnering
- Adjust partner assignments based on similarities in language growth and concept acquisition
- Design moveable charts to track partners with Velcro®, magnets, clothes pins, or pockets
- Seat partners next to each other, face-to-face or knee-to-knee

Partnering activities for pairs of young children
- Focus activity to introduce a learning experience
- Brainstorm ideas
- KWL or concept-mapping chart
- Review concepts
- Check comprehension
- Summarize children’s understandings

Note: Dimensions of Early Childhood readers are encouraged to copy this material for early childhood students as well as teachers of young children as a professional development tool.
Purposeful Play Leads to School Readiness

What can adults—teachers, families, and the community—do to help young children succeed in kindergarten? Explore the connections between purposeful play and school readiness in this timely, practical discussion.

Jaesook L. Gilbert, Helene Arbouet Harte, and Carol Patrick

Initiatives such as the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (No Child Left Behind [NCLB], 2002) reflect this country’s recent emphasis on literacy and educational accountability. Policymakers have a heightened interest in educating children earlier and fostering brain growth, in part due to the increased awareness of research on brain development and the importance of the early years on learning.

As a result, teachers and families often feel pressured to help children be ready for school, but may not be clear on what to do or how to do it. This article assists families, teachers, and community partners by explaining the connections between purposeful play—including interactions, relationships, and learning during early childhood years—and school readiness.

What Is School Readiness?

School readiness is more than academics. It also includes children’s physical, social, and emotional progress.

In 1994, the “Goals 2000: Educate America Act” was signed into law (Goals 2000: Educate America Act, 1994). In its first goal, the act specified that “All children in the United States will start school ready to learn” (Kagan, Moore, & Bredekamp, 1995). The National Education Goals Panel (1997) report further clarified school readiness as readiness in five dimensions:

- physical well-being and motor development,
- social and emotional development,
- approaches to learning,
- language development, and
- cognition and general knowledge.

There continues to be, however, some debate concerning the specific characteristics indicating readiness and how they are measured (Ackerman & Barnett, 2005, Saluja, Scott-Little, & Clifford, 2000). For example, the state of Maryland uses Work Sampling indicators to measure readiness (Maryland State Department of Education, 2008) while Florida and Wyoming have developed their own readiness indicators (Wyoming Department of Education, 2003; Florida Department of Education, 2008).

The only criterion for kindergarten entry across the United States is age eligibility even if the cut-off for age eligibility is different from state to state (Ackerman & Barnett, 2005). Over time, the cut-off dates have shifted to coincide with the start of the school year in September, with the majority of states requiring that children be age 5 by October 16. The change in cut-off dates may be related to school readiness. In the past school districts enrolled children who did not turn 5 until December or January (Ackerman & Barnett, 2005).

The National Research Council and the Institute of Medicine’s (2000) Committee on Integrating the Science of Early Childhood Development conducted a comprehensive literature review search and found that a variety of entities including families, community partners, and educators contribute to children’s development and school readiness.

Similarly, the National School Readiness Indicators Initiative study, which involved a partnership among 17 states, developed a “Ready Child Equation” (Rhode Island KIDS COUNT, 2005). This equation also reflects a comprehensive perspective by explaining the role and responsibilities for families, services, schools, and communities in getting children ready for school.
From an early childhood perspective, kindergarten readiness is best conceived of as the interaction among various related contexts and supports rather than as discrete skills (Clark & Zygmunt-Fillwalk, 2008). Social, attitudinal, and affective learning such as independence, self-motivation, creativity, empathy, resilience, assertiveness, and positive self-esteem are critical in children’s potential for long-term learning and future schooling (Bertram & Pascal, 2002). According to Goleman (1996),

school success is not predicted by a child’s fund of facts or a precious ability to read so much as by emotional social measure; being self-assured and interested; knowing what kind of behaviour is expected and how to rein in impulse to misbehave; being able to wait, to follow directions, and to turn to adults and peers for help; expressing needs whilst getting along with other children. (p. 193)

Leaders in the field have concluded that factors associated with school success include math skills, vocabulary development, social-emotional skills, and eagerness to learn (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009).

**Readiness Skills Grow Through Purposeful Play**

Engaging in purposeful, intentional play with adults provides opportunities for children to implement all of these skills within the context of their lives. No one definition for play has been agreed on by researchers (Saracho & Spodek, 2006).

In general, play can be defined as unstructured peer interaction (Pelligrini, 2001), but it can also be defined on a functional or structural level. Play is the fundamental means by which children gather and process information, learn new skills, and practice old ones (Ginsburg, 2007).

Play also has been defined as having five attributes
- intrinsically motivating,
- freely chosen,
- pleasurable,
- non-literal, and
- actively engaging (Rubin, Fein, & Vandenberg, 1983).

Play becomes purposeful when children’s potential for learning is enhanced while these attributes of play are maintained. These attributes can be heightened by people and/or the addition of objects of inquiry. For example, children engage in collaborative interactions as they negotiate resources, share ideas, and have conversations (Epstein, 2007), as shown in this interaction.

Henry and Lucas are playing in the preschool block area. Lucas puts a long rectangular block on top of their structure and it falls down. This happens two more times.

Miss Sandy asks, “What could you do differently to keep your structure from falling down?” (She models rich language with words such as structure and asks an open-ended question to help children think about changing their actions.)

As they rebuild, she uses parallel talk, describing what they have done differently. “It looks like you put the long, heavy rectangular blocks on the side instead of on top. Your structure is still standing.”

Purposeful play enables children to develop social–emotional skills that are delineated in some state standards as problem solving and...
cooperation (Drew, Christie, Johnson, Meckley, & Nell, 2008). Children develop problem-solving skills as well as learn to help others as they attempt to meet their own needs, as shown by this example.

Four-year-old Peter and 3-year-old Sara are in the pretend play area. Peter is the daddy and Sara is the mom. They decide to use two dolls to be their children. They agree that they would each feed one of their children, but there is only one high chair. They discuss their dilemma and cannot decide who gets to use the high chair.

Miss Marsha hears them, so she asks, “How else can you feed a baby without a high chair?”

Peter thinks for a moment, smiles, and says, “Sometimes my mom feeds my baby brother holding him in her lap.” He looks at Sara and tells her excitedly, “I’ll feed my baby in my lap like my mommy feeds Jake.”

Knowledgeable adults who intentionally lead children’s learning facilitate purposeful play, as evident in both of these examples.

**Foster Children’s Purposeful Play**

During early childhood, the first priority in working with all children is for adults to meet children’s basic needs and to provide opportunities for children to be actively engaged with the world around them. This process enables children to construct information about nature and how things work, the people around them, and themselves. Children are curious and naturally want to explore. Children reach out to people, objects, and materials because of their intrinsic motivation to learn and interact with the world around them (Piaget, 1952).

Adults perceive children’s initiation of learning and engagement in the process with the world around them as play because these behaviors reflect the typical dimensions of play: spontaneity, pleasure, and intrinsic motivation. Babies repeatedly engage in actions, such as tasting their feet or waving their hands, because of the simple pleasure the motion brings, not because of any external compensation or praise. As young children continue to play with materials, objects, and people, they often receive messages about or reactions to their initiations—encouraging or discouraging. Depending on the feedback children receive, they learn to try again or give up.

Purposeful play provides opportunities for inquiry-based learning, during which children

- explore answers to their questions through hands-on interaction with materials,
- build their questioning skills, and
- enhance their understanding of key academic concepts (Drew, et al., 2008).

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**Bridging the Achievement Gap**

Research shows that in the United States, an achievement gap—in which children from low-income families and children who are Latino and African American tend to lag behind their peers in academic performance—begins in early childhood (DiBello & Neuharth-Pritchett, 2008; KewalRamani, Gilbertson, Fox, & Provasnik, 2007; Lee & Burkham, 2002).

Factors that may place children at risk for starting school without the necessary skills are

- having parents who did not complete high school
- living in single-parent homes
- having parents who speak a language other than English at home, and/or

Children with one or more of these risk factors are more likely to be more aggressive, lack social skills, and have yet to develop a positive approach to learning (Rhode Island KIDS COUNT, 2005).

An Early Childhood Longitudinal Study followed the kindergarten class of 1998–99 (Denton & West, 2002; West, Denton, & Reaney, 2001). Results indicated that the achievement gap for children with risk factors at the beginning of kindergarten persisted through kindergarten and first grade.

Brain development research further emphasizes the impact of children’s experiences during their first 5 years on their future development and learning (Gopnik, Meitzoff, & Kuhl, 1999; Hawley, 2000; Shore, 1997).

The revised National Association for the Education of Young Children Developmentally Appropriate Practice position statement emphasizes that intentional and purposeful teaching can reduce this achievement gap (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; NAEYC, 2009). Wise adults use their knowledge of individual children within the context of their families and cultures when planning learning experiences for and interacting with children.

Therefore, all adults (families, teachers, and community members) in children’s lives need to work together to provide positive experiences, opportunities for purposeful play, and rich learning environments so that all children, regardless of risk factors, can develop the skills for school success, including social-emotional skills and positive approaches to learning.
The amount and kinds of access children have to the world and the variety of experiences around them depends on the adults who care for them, especially when children are less mobile. Even as children’s capabilities and mobility grow, how adults respond and what kinds of experiences children are provided with help determine the levels of children’s problem solving, decision making, and learning. The quality of play, not just the quantity, affects children’s development and eventually their readiness for school.

**Intentionally Shape Children’s Play**

Adults have many opportunities to shape the quality of children’s play so that it is intentional, beginning with infancy.

**Provide ample learning materials.** All children, especially infants and toddlers, benefit from having many different, safe things to play with and inspect. Many objects, typically found around home and the community, offer opportunities for children’s discovery and learning. For example, a set of metal or unbreakable plastic mixing bowls can become tools for children to figure out concepts such as big and small when they try to nest or stack the bowls.

Children typically make comparisons and sort items. Adults can enhance their play by slightly varying the items and/or the environment. If adults place similar metal or soft plastic cups in the bath tub and sand box, these cups can become boats, scoops, or whatever objects children choose. Children can experiment with weight and make comparisons related to volume. When children bang the cups together, they learn about sound awareness and production, which is one component of language and literacy (Epstein, 2007).

**Engage in conversations.** In addition to varying materials and the environment, the verbal interactions that adults have with children help facilitate learning.

When speaking with infants, well-informed adults use what has been called *motherese*—exaggerated intonation, slower pace, short phrases, and a higher-pitched voice (Parke, 1996). Adults who use this style of speaking that facilitates language development

- enunciate more clearly,
- emphasize one or two words in a sentence, and
- parrot sounds infants make.

It is also helpful to use parallel talk—describing the play of infants and toddlers—to help connect
actions and objects to children’s developing language (Rosenkoetter & Barton, 2002). When introducing language, strive to use new words that describe a familiar action. For example, an adult might say “You’re pressing the modeling dough. Press, press, press the dough” as the child experiments with the compound.

Be sure to pause during conversations to enable children to respond with their own sounds and words. Respond to children’s utterances by repeating and expanding on what they say.

Depending on children’s experiences, simplify meanings by supplementing familiar words with more complicated ones and labeling objects with their names as well as a familiar category (e.g., with a toddler, one might say both bird and parrot). Focus on naming objects, sounds, and events in the child’s immediate environment.

Ask open-ended questions (Why…? How…? What could happen next?), rather than yes/no questions, to stretch children’s thinking. Encourage children to find answers to their questions by experimenting or looking in books, for example, rather than jumping in with a response. Sing songs and read books with rhymes, rhythm, and repetition. Children who play with many forms of language develop more mature language skills.

Offer messy activities. Most young children revel in explorations where they use two or more of their five senses. Finger painting enables children to improve their fine motor skills as they squish the soft, slippery paint between their fingers and smooth it on a tray, paper, or other surface. As children pat their hands on finger paint, they hear delightful squishy sounds. The paint colors get mixed together when they move their hands back and forth or round and round. This process delights their eyes and leads them to wonder: “What happened?” “What is this new color?” or “How did that happen?”

Messy activities also provide wonderful opportunities for adults to bring in language while children are emotionally and physically making sense of the medium. Adults can colorfully describe what they all see is happening (e.g., mixing colors), helping children to assimilate new information as well as accommodate this new experience into their knowledge base.

Engage children in their learning. As children grow, adults become guides for children to construct knowledge in increasingly greater depth. Adults observe children’s actions and challenge their play by extending the activity, interaction, or experiment.

Adults facilitate preschool children’s learning by posing follow-up or probing questions about the phenomenon children are observing. For example, ask “What do you think will happen if we add red and yellow food color to our dough?” After the children predict possible results, state “Let’s add the two colors and see what happens.”

Respond with descriptive statements such as “Wow, it did turn green!” or “Hmm, I wonder why it turned green instead of orange like we thought it might.” Continue asking children questions such as “What do you think happened?” to get them to explain their thinking. Their responses enable adults to further extend children’s knowledge and plan future explorations.

Supplementing familiar materials with unfamiliar items will lead preschool children to think about similarities and differences. Children will try to make sense of this new information or knowledge. Adults can also increase preschool children’s command of language by introducing new vocabulary or concepts and adding new words during any hands-on activity.

For young children, the key to learning and eventual school readiness is their ability to engage with and learn about and from the world around them. This means having the opportunity to explore a variety of objects, relationships, and situations with plenty of time, freedom of choices, and guidance to make the most of each experience.

Knowledgeable adults facilitate purposeful play.

Informed adults enrich the children’s familiar surroundings when they

- create rich learning environments,
- use a variety of appropriate instructional strategies, and
- build effective learning experiences across content areas by recognizing, planning for, and taking advantage of teachable moments (Epstein, 2007).

In order to create teachable moments filled with richer play, adults observe to see what is captivating the children’s imaginations and interests, and then provide suitable resources: group trips, books, conversations, and materials.

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Richer play provides opportunities for verbal interactions that focus on children’s interests. Adults prompt these interactions by asking questions or creating situations that encourage children to respond with words, art, or movement, for example. Teacher-initiated learning opportunities promote children’s problem solving abilities because an adult’s responses intentionally help children scaffold their learning (Epstein, 2007).

**Foster self-regulation.** Part of being ready for school is learning how to get along with and interact with others. Development of these early positive relationships depends upon skills such as impulse control, perspective taking, and problem solving. Guiding children to use more mature social-emotional skills not only helps to prevent the emergence of challenging behavior, but also positively influences children’s academic achievement (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2007).

Social-emotional health is another important part of school readiness that is influenced by children’s relationships with adults. Warm, responsive care leading to secure attachment is a primary and critical element for children’s development. Children must learn about the nature of emotions—how they arise, are expressed, and are regulated in everyday experiences (Gloeckler & Niemeyer, 2005).

Adults foster children’s learning during the early childhood years by being genuinely available to support their growth. Young children who have secure attachment relationships with their caregivers have less elevation in stress hormones when a potentially threatening situation occurs, and they calm down after an upsetting event more quickly than their age mates with insecure attachments (Gunner, Brodersen, Nachmias, Buss, & Rigatuso, 1996).

Children, especially infants, feel better prepared to manage most circumstances when they trust that adults will meet their emotional and physical needs, including love and security. Secure emotional attachments with at least one adult help children feel safe enough to try new things and motivate them to explore.

Prosocial behaviors such as respect, regard, honor, and values are essential to be modeled for young children from birth. Children learn these affective skills through close, sensitive contact with adults. Adults model for children how to relate to other human beings. They set the example through responsive care, which also communicates to children that their needs are important and will be responded to in an appropriate and timely way (Berk, 2002).

Adults also model how to react to conflicts, frustrating situations, and difficulties. Guide children to develop coping skills with strategies such as these:

- provide a phrase children can use to solve disagreements, such as “What can we do to solve this?”,
- suggest alternative approaches to the situation,
- ask children to describe the incident,
- listen carefully to children’s feelings,
- ask clarifying questions, and/or
- support children to invent and choose their own solutions.

When adults respond to children’s displays of emotions by identifying their feelings (“You are crying. Let’s snuggle for a bit and then you can tell me why you are sad.”), children learn to appropriately express and deal with their emotions. They acquire words that will help them regulate their lives, resulting in an increased sense of self-worth and competency.
Looking Toward Kindergarten

When the early foundations of learning are stable enough to carry them through school and into adulthood, children are genuinely prepared to enter kindergarten (Wilens, 2003). Families, caregivers, and educators can promote school success by providing high-quality early learning experiences for children through purposeful play in homes, programs, and communities. Drilling children on skills may result in a temporary learning that is likely to result in a temporary content learning, but children are not in control of their own play and therefore do not have the opportunity to make sense of their experiences.

Purposeful play provides a context for learning so that it is meaningful to children. That is the kind of learning that is likely to result in long-term understanding and concept development. When children play with a purpose, skills such as learning the alphabet and counting naturally develop through the relationships children establish with each other, adults, and the learning environment.

As children engage in purposeful play, they gain competency in social, affective, attitudinal, and behavioral skills along with subject content knowledge. Children are far more likely to succeed in kindergarten when they have had opportunities to begin developing

- social and emotional skills (such as confidence, independence, motivation, curiosity, persistence, cooperation, self-control, and empathy),
- language,
- problem-solving abilities,
- creative thinking,
- basic subject content, and
- general knowledge about their world.

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Purposeful Play Leads to School Readiness


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**Jaesook L. Gilbert, Ph.D.,** is an Associate Professor, Department of Teacher Education, Northern Kentucky University, Highland Heights. As a member of the Northern Kentucky Kindergarten Readiness Committee, Gilbert developed the Northern Kentucky kindergarten readiness definition and is currently collaborating with the Northern Kentucky Education Council, United Way Northern Kentucky Success By 6, Community Early Childhood Councils, and Dr. Harte, the second author, in effort to measure and facilitate kindergarten readiness.

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**T H A N K Y O U , R E V I E W E R S**

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Early childhood professionals who are interested in becoming SECA volunteer manuscript reviewers are invited to complete a Reviewer Application at SouthernEarlyChildhood.org.
Purposeful Play Leads to School Readiness

Families, teachers, and community members are responsible for providing positive learning experiences that lead to school success.

Jaesook L. Gilbert
Helene Arbouet Harte
and Carol Patrick

Foster children’s learning by providing opportunities for them to
• safely explore a variety of objects and ideas
• interact with diverse children and adults
• get messy
• experiment with all five senses
• watch and listen before they try new experiences

Ways to promote children’s purposeful play
• observe children to inform appropriate planning
• ask “What if…?” questions to encourage inquiry
• describe events and emotions to focus understanding
• introduce new words in meaningful context
• elaborate on children’s conversations to expand vocabularies

Strategies to guide children’s development of self-regulation
• value children’s cultures and languages
• meet children’s individual needs
• choose learning materials that reflect diverse cultures and individual attributes
• respect children’s learning styles and rate of development
• encourage children to appropriately express their ideas and feelings
• listen to what children say
• respond with respect

Remember….

Children are curious and naturally want to explore the world around them. They are always ready to learn.

Resources for activities and ideas
• Local libraries, children’s department
• www.bornlearning.org

Note: Dimensions of Early Childhood readers are encouraged to copy this material for early childhood students as well as teachers of young children as a professional development tool.
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Children of 2020: Creating a Better Tomorrow

Edited by Valora Washington and JD Andrews.
Washington DC: Council for Professional Recognition, co-published by the National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2010. 172 pp., $19.00 ($15.20, NAEYC members).

Washington, an advocate for young children, is co-author or co-editor of more than 50 publications. She is the CEO Designate for the Council for Professional Recognition and president of the CAYL Institute in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Andrews was active in the civil rights movement and took part in the planning of the 1963 March on Washington, DC. He helped establish the Council for Professional Recognition in 1985, and currently serves as its chairman. He is a visionary and a leader.

What happens when an advocate such as Washington and a visionary such as Andrews team up? They edit a forward-thinking, thought-provoking book that makes readers want to get out and march for the rights of young children. This sequel to Children of 2010 is a “breakthrough as significant to the 21st century as putting a person on the moon was for the 20th century” (p. 4). The authors of the 22 articles in this book are at the top of the field in early childhood and related areas.

Children of 2020: Creating a Better Tomorrow is divided into four acts: Vision, Knowledge, Strategies, and Denouement. The first three acts begin with a commentary from the editors and then are followed by six to eight articles. An Improv Workshop closes each of the first three acts.

Act Four is written as a commentary and has thought-provoking ideas readers can use in their own lives.

Act I: Vision—Imagining the World for the Children of 2020 challenges readers to create their own vision statements for the children of 2020 and provides strategies to apply this vision.

Act II: Knowledge—Information to Guide Future Practices asks readers to translate knowledge into intelligent action.

Act III: Strategies—Facilitating Outcomes for the Children of 2020 challenges readers to put their intelligent action plans into work.

Act IV: Denouement—Taking Personal Responsibility for the Children of 2020 is a motivational chapter that reminds readers of the great progress already made and the exciting possibilities yet to come by 2020.

This book challenges everyone in early care and education to seek a greater vision for children and families, expand the knowledge base, adapt new strategies, and become motivated to make a difference. “The overall content is relevant to parents, personnel in allied professions such as health and social services, civic leaders, and business people” (p. 4).

It is a terrific resource for advocacy groups and service providers who want to meet the needs of children and families.

Stacy Aldridge
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My Child Has Autism: What Parents Need to Know

By Clarissa Willis.

Willis’ book is written in non-technical language that is easily understood by families and practitioners. It provides examples that are applicable to home, school, and early childhood settings. Although Willis does not adhere to a single philosophy for intervention, she relies on basic direct instruction in her descriptions of how families can work most effectively with their children.

Willis begins with a description of autism, its characteristics, and some underlying principles to guide parents. These critical principles are succinctly explained: put the child first, each child is unique, look for information from reliable sources, and do not expect a magic cure. The various disorders on the autism spectrum are explained, including pervasive developmental disorder, Asperger’s Syndrome, Rett’s Syndrome, and Childhood Disintegrative Disorder.
Common treatments for autism are briefly described, including structured behavioral intervention from a specialist trained in applied behavior analysis (ABA), early intervention, sensory integration therapy, speech/language therapy, and special education. There also is a section in the first chapter on “What Researchers and Other Professionals Say About Children With Autism.”

Unfortunately, there is no mention of the long record of effectiveness of ABA, or of the seminal studies of Lovaas published in 1987. The most serious shortcoming of this book is the lack of attention devoted to ABA, because this intervention has the longest research-based record of effectiveness. There is, however, mention of some practices that lack scientific research support such as the use of weighted vests and the association of motor behaviors such as hand flapping with stomach problems.

The second chapter is devoted to the autistic child’s obsession with routines, and provides practical steps that parents can take to deal with challenging behavior, including aggression. Willis addresses the issue of why the behavior occurs, and the events and circumstances that trigger problem behaviors. She gives families step-by-step ways to teach the child to reject an activity, as well as ways to teach tolerance of changes in routine. Steps for redirecting the child before problem behaviors occur also are provided.

Perhaps the strongest chapter is on communication using language, signs, and symbols. Because the author has 30 years of experience as a speech/language pathologist, teacher, and early interventionist, she has developed expertise in this area. She explains the emerging stages of communication, and offers the reader ways to teach communication at each stage of development. She also addresses the issue of alternative communication, such as symbols or sign language, and stresses the importance of meaningful communication. The author describes how families can use sign language and picture communication symbols to teach basic requesting to the child.

Although sensory integration problems are a hallmark of autism, there is much controversy about how adults should respond to sensory issues. The chapter on this topic contains excellent information on the nature of sensory integration problems in autism, although the reader is urged to be cautious in using some of the techniques described, such as weighted vests and a “cocoon.”

The final chapters of the book discuss how to help the child become independent by learning self-help skills, ways to take the child into the community including school, and helping the child to play independently and get along with others. Some of the skills addressed include toileting, eating, dressing, eating out, and going to the grocery store. Additionally, there are instructions for using social skills scripts and developing social stories. These chapters are well written and the information should be useful to both parents and teachers.

Overall, My Child Has Autism: What Parents Need to Know provides succinct and practical information on critical and common issues that families face when learning that their child has autism. While the methods recommended for dealing with sensory issues lack scientific support, the other features of the book are sound and grounded in years of research supporting intervention. Parents, grandparents, family friends, and teachers would all benefit from reading this book.

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Memorials In Honor of

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by Dr. Pam Schiller

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