

Early Care and Learning

One third of Colorado's children start school *unready* to learn. Most children who get off to a poor start, stay behind throughout their school years (Children's Campaign, 2003). This is especially true for children in low-income families. Although quality child care programs are highly correlated with improved school readiness and 68% of Colorado's young children are enrolled in child care, there is little Colorado data available on the adequacy, quality, and affordability of these early care programs.

Much of the evidence-based information in this portion of the assessment was provided by the Boulder County Early Childhood Council and was gathered from numerous sources. These included the RAND Study, well-regarded Early Childhood Education organizations such as National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) and information specific to Colorado.

Characteristics of Quality Early Care and Education Services

While high-quality child care plays a significant role in helping children to be school ready, it is also known that poor quality care can be harmful to children (Bruner, 2003). The following are key characteristics associated with quality care cited by multiple sources:

- Well educated staff specifically trained in the child development area and related fields
- Consistency of staff over time, often promoted by adequate salaries and benefits, reasonable workloads, and pleasant and supportive working conditions
- Low child-staff ratios and small group sizes
- Supportive and regular supervision of staff
- Ongoing training opportunities to support professionals in a rapidly developing and changing field, and time and resources to allow them to reflect on and improve their teaching practice
- Comprehensive educational and social services available or by referral, with multidisciplinary coordination
- Sufficient extent and program intensity (intensity is described in several ways including number of contact hours, work with parents, and extension into the school-age years)
- Involvement of parents
- Systematic program planning, clear goal setting, monitoring and evaluation

A recent policy paper released by the National Institute for Early Education Research recommended "minimum requirements for publicly funded preschool programs should include: teachers with a bachelor's degree and specialized training in early childhood education, class sizes no larger than 20, and staff-child ratios no larger than 1:10." The following actions were described in multiple studies as essential and effective caregiver interactions with infants and young children:

- Encourage exploration
- Mentor in basic skills
- Celebrate developmental advances
- Rehearse and extend new skills
- Protect from inappropriate disapproval, teasing and punishment
- Communicate richly and responsively

Guide and limit behavior

Evidence-Based Practices Associated with Quality Programs for all Children

The following are proven practices associated with quality child care programs cited by multiple sources:

Periodic Assessment: Since infancy and early childhood are times of such rapid growth and development, and a child's development can progress faster or slower from day to day or week to week, assessments and screenings should be conducted at regular intervals rather than at only one point in time.

Interventions focused on the whole child: Recognizing that school readiness is multidimensional, evidence-based interventions focus on intellectual, social, emotional and physical growth and well-being.

Effective transitions: Research indicates that children who experience effective transitions (particularly from Early Childhood programs to kindergarten) are less likely to struggle academically and socially in school. Professional consensus indicates several characteristics associated with effective transitions:

Program continuity

Ongoing communication and cooperation between teachers and administrators at the different programs

Preparation of children for the transition

Parent involvement in the transition

Children Living in Poverty

Children living in poverty are at greater risk for health problems, poor school performance, behavior problems, and disabilities. Research suggests that early intervention programs for children living in poverty are effective when tailored to the individual needs of children and families and services should be offered in non-stigmatizing normative environments. In addition, they should be continued into elementary school for children at risk of delay due to poverty.

Children with Special Needs

It is estimated that at least one-third of children in the United States with biological disabilities are also economically disadvantaged. Studies show that these lower income families are less likely to receive timely and adequate services for their children, than are their higher income counterparts. Thus, studies conclude these low income families need better access to services, as well as services that fit their specific circumstances.

Disabilities can disturb a child's ability to read cues from an adult and/or to provide cues to an adult. Successful interventions recognized that the core issue in parent-child interaction for children with disabilities is readability of cues. Research suggests that children with disabilities should be included with typically developing peers in educational and care settings, and personnel staffing these sites should receive adequate training and support.

The program for infants and toddlers with special needs (Part C of IDEA, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) is a federal program that assists states in operating a system of early intervention supports and services for infants and toddlers with special needs, birth to three years, and their families. In Colorado the Part C initiative is called Early Childhood Connections. As the lead agency, the Colorado Department of Education is charged with implementing Early Childhood Connections (ECC), the statewide, comprehensive, coordinated system of supports and services for infants and toddlers with developmental delays and their families. As articulated in Part C of IDEA, one of the primary purposes of early intervention is to enhance the capacity of families to support their children's well-being, development, learning, and full participation in their communities. It is the belief and policy of Early Childhood Connections that: supports and services are most effective when they are provided in families' everyday routines, activities, and places. Where and when supports and services are provided are essential elements of quality. Equally important to quality are the elements of what and how services are delivered. Services provided in everyday routines, activities, and places must also be developmentally appropriate and relevant to families' lives. This position is derived from many sources, including what families tell us about their experiences, research findings, advances in practice, and legislative policy.