

SLD Guidelines – key concepts for preschool aged children

III. Special Populations - Preschool

- A. Preschool/young children have distinct developmental patterns that distinguish them from learners older than age eight. For young learners, all developmental domains are intimately connected. Development in any one domain (physical, social, emotional, cognitive and language), influences and is influenced by development in all other domains. Typically, development of young children occurs simultaneously in all domains but unequally, there are inconsistencies and discontinuities in their learning patterns.

The child's experiences and interactions with their environment (physical) and the people (social) in it are the context for development and learning and have immediate as well as delayed effects. The importance of the effects of the social environment and experiences of young children cannot be understated as it relates to learning. Young children are just beginning to show their preferences for the modes of knowing and learning and it is often difficult to distinguish preferences from experiential effects. For young children, the learning process often requires many repetitions across multiple contexts before knowledge is integrated and consistently demonstrated. Contextualized learning is key for the young child.

Young children do not “know how” to “take a test” and do not often react optimally in situations that require sitting at a table and responding on command to a structured, decontextualized task contrived by an adult. Because of the interconnected nature of the developmental domains, the complex nature of assessing very young children accurately, and the difficulty identifying the exact impact of maturity, experience and opportunity, specific identification of disability, as is done with older children, is almost impossible to achieve with fidelity with younger children. It is often very difficult to discern with young children what the relationship is between their experience or lack of experience at home and in group or school settings, the quality of those experiences and the effect on their development and performance in group settings.

B. Definitions

In Colorado, children under age five are not identified as having SLD. Under ECEA regulations, children three through five years of age are determined to be a “preschool child with a disability...by reason of

one or more of the following conditions... be unable to receive reasonable educational benefit from regular education: long term physical impairment or illness, significant limited intellectual capacity, significant identifiable emotional disorder or identifiable perceptual or communicative disorders or speech disorders.” IDEA has provisions for this definition of “preschool child with a disability” up to age nine.

C. Considerations of possible indicators of later difficulty with academic success

Research has shown that there are some early predictors that could indicate a young child may be at risk of potential learning difficulties in later academic areas, particularly literacy development. These indicators must be considered in the context of each individual child and their experiences. Children’s learning patterns and integration of skills and knowledge is quite variable in the preschool years. For many young children, the most significant indicator of future success or difficulty is receptive and expressive vocabulary skills. For children with significantly decreased vocabulary skills, the research is clear that they are at risk for later academic difficulties. It is well documented that multiple experiences that establish comprehension and meaning of vocabulary form the foundation of literacy skills. Emerging research is indicating that the size of a child’s vocabulary may relate to a child’s skills in phonemic awareness and how their brain stores the phonemes as well as the vocabulary meaning. Also of importance in developing later academic skills is the social and emotional context and experiences of young children. Young children with very limited or negative social or emotional experiences in the early years may evidence deficits in pre-literacy skill development.

Literacy also requires specialized language skills and those are attained through a variety of experiences and opportunities. The presence of and exposure to all types of print materials and home or caregiver activities with print media is key for young children. The positive and emotionally supportive experiences of adult-child book reading and extended conversations rich in vocabulary are essential to developing the skills necessary for later success with reading and academics. Older preschool children who do not easily demonstrate print awareness skills after having the exposure and opportunities to experience and use print materials may be at risk for later reading difficulties.

Older preschoolers who have difficulty recognizing and manipulating the sounds of oral language may also be at risk for later difficulties

learning to read. Children who do not “play” with sounds and words, who are not able to play games where they change sounds at word beginnings or make up “silly” words after multiple preschool literacy experiences, may have later difficulty with phonological sensitivity.

Stages of spelling development and their relation to other emergent literacy knowledge have been well documented including in the preschool years. Homes and preschool programs with print materials accessible and integrated throughout are key to providing opportunities for children to develop facility with letter recognition and use for communication. Researchers have shown that supporting young children’s invented spelling promotes their phonemic awareness, that children’s invented spellings are a means of assessing their phonemic awareness, as invented spelling and word reading abilities are closely related. If older preschool children are having difficulties using letters to convey meaning through invented spelling or spelling, this may be a risk factor to consider.

The ability to establish successful relationships with adult(s) and peer(s) as well as the acquisition of developmentally appropriate social skills are known to impact language and literacy development. Self-regulation skills (emotional and behavioral regulation of focus and attention) are key elements of success in school settings. These skills develop on a continuum over time during the preschool years. Older preschool children exhibiting difficulty with these skills could be at risk for later academic difficulties.

World knowledge, a range of cognitive skills gained through experiences and opportunities, is also known to have a direct connection to later literacy. Much of this knowledge develops during the preschool years. Children who have had rich home experiences and/or high quality preschool experiences but still are experiencing difficulties or delays in these cognitive skill areas may be at significant risk for later academic challenges.

D. Resources

National Association for the Education of Young Children –
“Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood
Programs” <http://www.naeyc.org/accreditation/standardscriteria>

Council for Exceptional Children/Division for Early Childhood –
“Recommended Practices in Early Intervention/Early Childhood
Special Education”
<http://www.dec-sped.org/recommendedpractices.html>

Colorado Department of Education – “Building Blocks to Colorado’s Content Standards – Reading and Writing”

<http://preview.cde.state.co.us/early/downloads/BuildingBlocks.pdf>

<http://www.researchtopractice.info> - evidence based practice website including early literacy development

<http://earlyliteracydevelopment.org/index.php> - Evidence based practices website specific to literacy

<http://www.fippcase.org> - *CASE* staff conduct applied research studies, analyze extant databases, and develop and implement strategies to promote practitioners' and parents' adoption and use of practices informed by research findings.

<http://www.ce-credit.com/articles/riskfactorsacademic.pdf> - impact of social experiences on later academics

http://www.jcpr.org/wpfiles/currie_early_childhood.pdf - review of longitudinal preschool affects

<http://www.fpg.unc.edu/~randr/> - 2006 review of research related to early childhood and the “Response to Intervention” approach

<http://www.nap.edu/books/0309069882/html> - “*From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development (2000)*” Shonkoff et al

Handbook of Early Literacy Research, Vol. I 2001, Vol. II 2006, Dickinson and Neuman

Meaningful Differences in the Everyday Experience of Young American Children

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Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children. Snow, C. E., M. S. Burns, and P. Griffin (Eds.). (1998). Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

Beers, J.W., & Henderson, E.H. (1977). A study of developing orthographic concepts among first grade children. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 11, 133-148.

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Richgels, D.J. (1995). Invented spelling ability and printed word learning in kindergarten. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 30, 96-109.

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