Technical Assistance Paper   No. 6

The Foundations for School Readiness:

Fostering Developmental Competence
in the Earliest Years

Prepared by

Early Head Start National Resource Center @
ZERO TO THREE

TA Paper No. 6

The Foundations for School Readiness:

Fostering Developmental Competence in the Earliest Years

This document was developed by the staff of the Early Head Start National Resource Center @ ZERO TO THREE in collaboration with the Head Start Bureau. The contents of the paper are not intended to be an interpretation of policy.

TN CAREs, Early Head Start, *Weakley Co, TN*

On the Cover
CESA #11 Early Head Start, *Turtle Lake, WI*

6/3/03

The Foundations for School Readiness:

Fostering Developmental Competence in the Earliest Years

Early childhood programs recognize the importance of preparing children for success in school and later in life. Head Start has long been a leader in this effort and in defining the goal of social competence. Considering recent media attention on the importance of the early years of life, policymakers, researchers, parents, and child advocates have an increased interest in what it takes to fully prepare children to succeed in school. In addition, the rising number of working parents has increased the demand for high-quality child care for very young children. Comprehensive early childhood services such as Migrant and Seasonal Head Start and Early Head Start are available to children from birth, raising new questions about what school readiness means for programs serving infants, toddlers, and expectant families.

New research has revealed that the social and emotional development of young children and, more specifically, the nature of early relationships plays a critical role in fostering cognitive development. Both the parent-child relationship and the relationships that children develop with other significant caregivers, for example, in child care settings have an effect on child development (National Research Council & Institute of Medicine, 2000). In fact, the emotional and social characteristics are what provide children with the skills to learn and the motivation to want to learn (*ZERO TO THREE, 1992*).

In this paper, we explore the scientific knowledge base concerning the remarkable developmental tasks that occur in the first 5 years of life. We identify the capacities that equip children with the skills they need to negotiate the relationships, responsibilities, and challenges they will face throughout their lives. We illustrate how early childhood programs, beginning with support to expectant families during the prenatal period and through the first 5 years of life, can play a pivotal role in this process. Indeed, comprehensive early childhood programs such as Head Start and Early Head Start have the potential to dramatically influence the future of children most vulnerable to school failure. In this paper, we explore school readiness to illustrate how early development influences later learning. However, the characteristics we hope to inspire in the children with whom we work are ones that not only equip them for success in school but also prepare them to become competent, resilient, effective human beings in all areas of their lives.

page
1

Children's Home Society of Washington, *Auburn, WA*

6/3/03

WHAT DOES SCHOOL READINESS MEAN FOR PROGRAMS SERVING INFANTS AND TODDLERS?

From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development

The National Research Council and Institute of Medicine convened a committee of national experts to evaluate and integrate the science of early childhood development. The result of this effort is published in the report From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development (National Research Council & Institute of Medicine, 2000). The information in this 550-page document analyzes the most current research on brain development and the latest findings from the social sciences. The authors

synthesize what is known about early childhood development and draw conclusions for policymakers, practitioners, researchers, and others invested in the healthy growth and development of children.

The authors of the report (National Research Council & Institute of Medicine, 2000) emphasize three critical developmental tasks that characterize the importance of the first 5 years of life

1. Acquiring self-regulation — Self regulation is the process of "negotiating the transition from external to self-regulation, including learning to regulate one's emotions, behaviors and attention. This captures the emergence of self-control and independence and can provide an analogy for the movement toward competent functioning that characterizes development as a whole" (p. 92).

Consider the remarkable transformation that occurs in all areas of development during the first 5 years of life. A newborn is completely dependent on his or her caregivers to meet every physical and emotional need. Over time and in the context of supportive relationships, young children become increasingly competent in all areas of development. Typical preschoolers have developed many of the skills for feeding, bathing, and dressing themselves; have some understanding of societal and familial norms, values, and morals; and can share their own unique opinions, preferences, and interests.
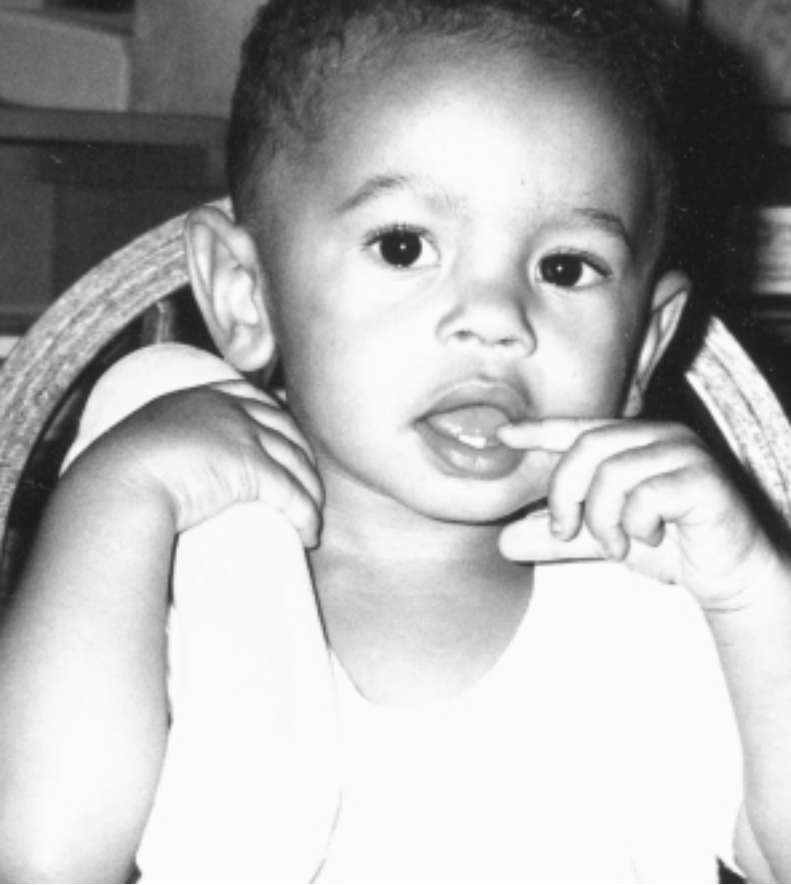
2. Communicating and learning — Communication and learning refers to "acquiring the capabilities that undergird communication and learning. This includes the early development of language, reasoning, and problem solving"(p. 92).

The ability to communicate effectively begins in the earliest moments of life as newborns experience having their needs met through the sensitive response of attentive caregivers. Parents learn

The Ounce of Prevention Fund,
Chicago, IL

In CAREs Early Head Start, *Weakley, CO*

through experience and with support how to successfully read their child's cues and begin the back-and-forth "dance" of communication that sets the stage for language and learning. This process evolves in the preschool years into increasingly sophisticated skills such as the emerging ability to reason, think logically, and problem solve.

3. Getting along with peers — Developing positive peer relationships involves "learning to relate well to other children and forming friendships. This highlights the emerging capacity to trust, to love and nurture, and to resolve conflict constructively" (p. 92).

Later in this paper, we illustrate how relationships are the vehicle through which learning takes place. Clearly, the parent-child relationship is a child's first opportunity to experience trust, love, and nurture, and this relationship forms the basis for learning to relate well to others. Thus, programs that serve infants, toddlers, and their families focus on strengthening parent-child relationships throughout program activities and services.

Heart Start: The Emotional Foundations for School Readiness

Before the publication of From Neurons to Neighborhoods, ZERO TO THREE: National Center for Infants, Toddlers, and Families published a series of monographs that similarly pointed to the social and emotional development of infants and toddlers as the precursors to success in school. The authors identified seven characteristics of children who are best prepared to thrive in the school environment (ZERO TO THREE, 1992):

1. Confidence — A sense of control and mastery of one's body, behavior, and world; the child's sense that he or she is more likely than not to succeed at what he or she undertakes and that adults will be helpful.

2. Curiosity — The sense that finding out about things is positive and leads to pleasure.

3. Intentionality — The wish and capacity to have an effect and to act on that desire with persistence, a characteristic that is clearly related to a sense of competence and of being effective.

4. Self-Control — The ability to modulate and control one's own actions in age-appropriate ways; a sense of inner control.

5. Relatedness — The ability to engage with others based on the sense of being understood by others and understanding others.

6. Capacity to Communicate — The wish and ability to exchange ideas, feelings, and concepts with others, a characteristic that is related to a sense of trust in others and a sense of pleasure in engaging with others, including adults.

7. Cooperativeness — The ability in a group activity to balance one's own needs with those of others.

page
3
· · · · · · · · · · · ·

Characteristics such as these enable children to respond to direction, pay attention, communicate effectively with peers and adults, cope with stress, and feel motivated to learn. Children who are lacking these qualities face much greater challenges and typically experience both behavioral and academic problems. These children are at a greater risk to disrupt the classroom environment, become ostracized by their peers, fall behind in academic skills, and eventually experience greater behavioral and learning problems that lead to academic failure and school drop-out *(Peth-Pierce, 2000)*.

Support is strong for the idea that school readiness is best considered in the context of fostering children's overall developmental competence so they can manage the demands and responsibilities of school and life. Developmental competence refers to optimal functioning in all areas of development and is expressed as curiosity and the motivation to learn; the resilience to cope with stress; and the ability to solve problems, communicate effectively, and develop close, satisfying relationships with peers and adults. This developmental competence is the result of positive, nurturing early experiences with sensitive, responsive caregivers and is equally important to the acquisition of specific academic skills. These nurturing experiences are what teach children to manage one's emotions and behavior, effectively communicate and learn, and sustain positive relationships with others *(National Research Council & Institutes of Medicine, 2000)*.

FROM RESEARCH TO PRACTICE: IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS

The experiences of children and families in your program influence how they will approach experiences later in life. Comprehensive birth-to-five programs offer a tremendous opportunity to foster the competence necessary not only for school success but also in all areas of development. For staff members to

effectively support the three developmental tasks discussed above—acquiring self-regulation, communicating and learning, and getting along with peers—they need to understand both child development and the critical link between social and emotional development and early learning.

In the section that follows, we identify four key concepts that describe the link between social and emotional development and early learning, and we explore how parents and significant caregivers help infants and toddlers regulate their emotions and behavior, communicate and learn, and develop healthy relationships with others. These four concepts follow:

- Cognitive and social-emotional development are interrelated.
- Relationships facilitate learning.
- Curriculum is delivered through relationships.
- Staff members can best support children by supporting parents.

Cognitive and Social-Emotional Development Are Interrelated

For all children, but especially those in the earliest years of life, each area of development—physical, cognitive, social, and emotional—is related to and influences the others. For example, a 6-month-old baby will express his delight with a smile and a full body wriggle. During infancy and toddlerhood, it is impossible to separate one developmental domain from any other. In fact, because of the infant's complete dependency on his or her caregivers, all areas of infant development unfold within the context of the child's relationships with others. Through these most important relationships, a child develops not only his or her self-concept but also the

characteristics noted above—confidence, curiosity, motivation, cooperation, self-control, and relatedness. This dynamic explains why we focus on relationships as the central component of early childhood experiences that support developmental competence and school readiness

As children mature, their strong sense of attachment to significant people in their lives nurtures the motivation to interact with the world around them. When an infant is reaching overhead for a toy swinging from the mobile and the adult says "That's right, you can get it," the baby is learning that his or her activity matters to someone. When a crawling infant pulls up to stand on an unsteady surface and the caregiver extends a supportive hand and says "No, no, that's too wobbly," the baby is learning that adults will keep him or her safe. When a toddler takes her first wobbly steps to the applause and delight of her parents, the child is learning that others share in the joy of her accomplishments. In each of these examples, the relationship is what guides the learning process and makes the difference in how the child develops a sense of self, what he or she can do, and the effect he or she has on others. This awareness ultimately builds the social and emotional characteristics that have been identified as the precursors for readiness to learn.

Grantee and delegate agencies must support the social and emotional development of infants and toddlers by promoting an environment that:

Encourages the development of self-awareness, autonomy, and self-expression; and
Supports the emerging communication skills of infants and toddlers by providing daily opportunities for each child to interact with others and to express himself or herself freely.

Head Start Program Performance Standard 1304.21(b)(2)(i)

Hamilton Center, *IN*

page
5

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Learn more about how infant development unfolds by observing infants and toddlers during everyday routines and play. Use the two examples below to increase your understanding of the connections between each area of development.

● Pay close attention to your interactions with a particular child during a feeding routine. Reflect on the different ways the child was experiencing the feeding. What motor skills was he practicing? Perhaps he was reaching for the spoon or using his small motor skills to pick up a bite of food between his finger and thumb. What language learning took place? Did the child coo and babble, imitate sounds, and hear words associated with eating? What cognitive skills did he practice? Perhaps he was engaged in a favorite game of throwing his food and utensils over the edge of the high chair for you to retrieve again and again (this popular activity demonstrates cause-and-effect learning and the emerging concept of object permanence, or how things continue to exist even when out of sight). And what were the social and emotional messages that were communicated during this feeding? How did the child signal that he wanted more food or had eaten enough? From your actions, the child learns that eating is pleasurable, his hunger will be satisfied, people care about him, and many other lessons, depending on the tone of the interaction.

● Pair up with another staff member *(or have parents pair up with each other during a socialization)* to observe each other in a free play situation with a child. Each caregiver will take a turn playing and then observing. With a sheet of paper that lists each developmental domain on the left side *(see appendix A for an example)*, the observer should write down what the child is learning or experiencing in each area of development during the play. For example, consider a caregiver helping a toddler negotiate the playground equipment. In the area of motor development, the child is using her large muscles to climb, pull her body up, balance, and jump. In the area of language development, her vocabulary is expanding as she and the caregiver label the new experiences she is having and by how the caregiver talks to her during her play. In the area of cognitive development, she is learning concepts such as up, down, through, over, and under. Socially and emotionally, she is learning that her caregiver supports her as she tries new things, negotiates conflict with others, keeps her safe from harm, and brings joy to her play. She is learning to have confidence in herself, to be curious, to trust adults, and to get along with her peers.

Relationships Facilitate Learning

Early studies of institutionalized infants provide well-documented evidence of the physical, social, and cognitive deterioration that occurs in infants who experience a lack of intimate emotional relationships with significant caregivers (Spitz, 1945). More recent studies of children adopted from orphanages around the world demonstrate how these children, who did not receive stimulation or consistent relationships with caregivers, dramatically improved their developmental functioning when placed in a nurturing and loving environment. For example, a child who is withdrawn and lethargic will begin to brighten and show interest in the surrounding world when he or she is with attentive, loving, focused caregivers. The most recent research on early brain

Murray Early Head Start, *Murray, KY*

6/3/03

development highlights the "pruning," or the "use it or lose it," process that occurs in the connections among brain cells. This process strengthens the connections among frequently used cells and weakens, and eventually eliminates, the connections among brain cells that are not used. This "pruning" of the brain occurs during normal, everyday activities and experiences, and it literally shapes the structures of the brain *(National Research Council & Institute of Medicine, 2000).*

Daily caretaking routines such as holding, rocking, bathing, feeding, dressing, and talking to infants all help create new connections in the brain. Expensive toys, flash cards, or other gadgets are not necessary to get a jump start on cognitive development or to "make a smarter baby." Children play creatively and learn from the most ordinary of items—by crawling through cardboard boxes, sorting and banging with plastic bowls and lids, or playing peek-a-boo with mommy's scarf. Parents and early childhood programs need materials that capture the child's imagination and interest, but they do not need to purchase special items that are marketed to boost "brain power." *(See the Resources section of this paper for publications that can give you ideas for materials, activities, and play experiences for infants and toddlers.)*

Relationships guide learning in a number of ways. For example, adult caretakers are responsible for the child's environment and the amount of sensory stimulation in that environment. One of the first developmental tasks of the newborn is to regulate his or her states of arousal from deep sleep to drowsy awake to alert to fussing or full-blown crying. In each of these states, the infant is more or less able to respond and interact with his or her environment. The infant is most open to social interaction and exploration when in a quiet, alert state.

Parents and other caretakers play an important role in helping infants regulate their states of arousal by tending to their needs: changing a wet diaper, feeding a hungry baby, rocking a tired baby to sleep, keeping sounds and visual stimulation at a comfortable level. Significant adults are the guides for learning who and what is "safe." For example, a 9-month-old baby will look at a parent or a childcare teacher when a new person comes into the

Murray Early Head Start, *Murray, KY*

room to check whether it is okay to interact. Or a crawling baby will look at her father when approaching what looks like an area too steep to navigate.

During this kind of responsive caregiving is when infants begin to develop a sense of trust in the people who care for them and form the bonds of attachment that hold the parents and other caregivers in a special place in that child's life. In a secure relationship, a child learns "I matter," "Someone understands me," "My needs will be met," forming the basis for self-esteem as well as the expectation that people are good and the world is safe. This confidence and security ultimately builds the self-regulation that is necessary for young children to become successful learners and it promotes competence in all areas of development.

6/3/03

Implications for Practice

The relationships that you build with the children in your program enhance or inhibit their learning. How do you build an effective relationship with a child? What happens when you have a child in your care that you just do not "click" with? How do you, the caregiver, take care of yourself so you have the energy to care for the children?

● Relationships take time and attention. Recognize that, like adults, children come to your program with a history of relationships that will influence how they approach a new relationship. Think about the characteristics of important relationships in your own life and the qualities that make them special—trust, acceptance, feeling understood, having your needs met. These are the same qualities that you want to bring to your relationships with children.

● Typically, we have difficulty acknowledging that we do not always hit it off with all of the children in our care. Children affect us differently, and we need to recognize when a child in our care "pushes our buttons." Think about the children that you feel particularly close to and those who often leave you feeling frustrated. Although these feelings of closeness and frustration are normal, it is your responsibility to manage them so they do not interfere with the care of the children. Talking openly with a supervisor in a safe and supportive setting about your relationships with the children in your care provides the opportunity to get the support you need to respond to challenging children with sensitivity. The children who challenge us as caregivers are also the ones who provide us an opportunity to increase our self-awareness and understanding of how our own experiences influence what we bring to the caregiving role.

● Who you are as a person, your own temperament, past experiences, family and cultural values, and current life circumstances shape how you respond to the children and families in your program. Working

with young children and families is challenging, rewarding, and emotionally hard work. As a caregiver, it is vitally important that you pay attention to your stress level and how you take care of your own needs. Stress relief means different things to different people. Explore what helps you—exercise, time with friends, time alone, a good book, a hot bath, listening to music, going out dancing—and recognize when you need to nurture yourself so you have the emotional energy to nurture the families and children with whom you work.

CESA #11 Early Head Start, *Turtle Lake, WI*

Curriculum Is Delivered Through Relationships

The idea of a curriculum for programs serving infants and toddlers has raised many questions in the early care and education field about what it means to support the development and learning of very young children. The Head Start Program Performance Standards (1996) define curriculum as a written plan that includes "the goals for children's development and learning; the experiences through which they will achieve these goals; what staff members and parents do to help children achieve these goals; and the materials needed to support the implementation of the curriculum" [(45 CFR 1304.3(a)(5)].

Murray Early Head Start, *Murray, KY*

Learning Through Play

What do we mean when we say that play is children's work? What are infants and toddlers really learning in their play that forms the foundational skills for later work in school? The table below provides some examples of typical infant and toddler play experiences, their relationship to academic skill areas, and the unique role of social and emotional development as a bridge between play and learning.

In a comprehensive approach to curriculum, learning goals address all the developmental domains—motor, sensory, language, cognitive, and social and emotional skills. Furthermore, the concepts of learning and skill development are different for infants and toddlers than for older children. Rote teaching of discrete skills is developmentally inappropriate. Infants and toddlers learn through play, exploration, and interaction with objects and people in the context of meaningful relationships with trusted adults. See the box titled "Learning Through Play: for examples of the amazing amount of learning that happens through play.

The parents and the EHS staff collaborative to develop learning goals, identify the experiences they want children to have in the program, and do what is necessary to create these learning opportunities. The ongoing developmental assessment of children provides the information that is used to individualize the curriculum by identifying a child's unique skills, interests, resources, needs, and progress. Some of the strategies for

page
9

PLAY EXPERIENCES	SKILL AREAS	WHAT CHILDREN MAY BE LEARNING	
		Cognitive	Social-Emotional
Playing pat-a-cake	Language	Imitation	I feel understood when you respond to my gestures. We have fun together. I like to imitate you.
Manipulating and mouthing books; being read to	Literacy	Vocabulary, memory	I like being close when we read together. It feels good to snuggle with you and hear my favorite story.
Group play at the water table with different-sized containers	Science	Concepts of weight and volume	I learn how to take turns and share.
Building with blocks	Math	Counting, sorting, and classification skills	I feel so proud when you clap for me as I build my block tower.

ongoing assessment might include;

(a) recording children's behavior to identify current functioning and emerging skills;

(b) communicating with parents and other caregivers about behavior in the home and other settings;

(c) identifying different ways children learn and expanding the experiences to incorporate different learning styles; and

(d) modifying the materials, experiences, or environment to encourage new skills.

In addition, through the relationships with children, caregivers are able to individualize learning goals and use the informal "teachable moments" that provide rich, responsive, and relevant learning experiences in unplanned and, often, unexpected ways. These are the learning experiences that usually have the greatest effect. Skilled caregivers spontaneously use teachable moments to address developmental skills in all areas of development. For example, a caregiver is reinforcing cognitive skills *(color identification, discrimination skills)* when the child with whom she is finger painting notices that his red shirt matches the red paint and she makes a game out of naming all the other red things in the room that the child can find. Similarly, the caregiver reinforces social and emotional skills (conflict negotiation, emotional regulation) when he or she helps negotiate a fight between two toddlers over who had the fire truck first, explains how the children will play with it together or take turns, and identifies and validates the feelings—frustration, anger, fear— that may accompany this typical altercation.

page
10

Child Development and Education Approach for Infants and Toddlers Grantee and delegate agencies' program of services for infants and toddlers must encourage:

(i) The development of secure relationships in out-of-home care settings for infants and toddlers by having a limited number of consistent teachers over an extended period of time. Teachers must demonstrate an understanding of the child's family culture and, whenever possible, speak the child's language.
(ii) Trust and emotional security so that each child can explore the environment according to his or her developmental level; and
(iii) Opportunities for each child to explore a variety of sensory and motor experiences with support and stimulation from teachers and family members.

**Head Start Program Performance Standard
1304.21 (b)(1)(i-iii)**

Save the Children, Early Head Start, *Atlanta, GA*

6/3/03

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Children's thinking and learning is guided by responsive caregiving. Understanding child development is an important tool for responding effectively to the children with whom you work and for supporting families who are learning these skills.

● Learn about the cognitive milestones that take place in the early years—the importance of concepts such as imitation, object permanence, and pretend play—and the progression of learning from simple to more sophisticated skills that children demonstrate in their play.

● Use this knowledge to individualize the curriculum. Knowing the stages of development will allow you to anticipate what developmental task comes next and to provide appropriate experiences. Your goal is to challenge each child in ways that elicit

emerging skills by accurately reading his or her cues and responding with the appropriate support (for example, helping a child learning to crawl by putting a favorite toy just a little out of reach right next to you and giving him a hug or a verbal "yes" when he gets it).

● Think about how everyday experiences at home or in group care involve cognitive concepts and social and emotional skills. Recognize how both cognitive and social and emotional skills guide the curriculum. For example, the rituals for arrival and departure incorporate the cognitive skill of object permanence and help build social and emotional skills like resiliency, emotional regulation, and communication. Infants and toddlers at different developmental levels will require different strategies to cope with their parent leaving them with the caregiver. You can help parents prepare for the social and emotional changes—such as crying, clinging, and separation anxiety—which often occur when infants develop this new cognitive understanding later in the first year of life.

● As you think about curriculum development, remember that goals for learning involve all the developmental domains—cognitive, motor, sensory, language, social, and emotional. When these domains are integrated and work together, they promote healthy developmental functioning.

West Medford Early Head Start, *Medford, OR*

page
11
● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ●

Staff Members Can Best Support Children by Supporting Their Parents

Ultimately, the relationships that children have with their parents are the most important relationships in the children's lives and the ones that have the greatest influence on children's development. Children from low-income families are at an increased risk for disturbances in their early relationships because of the stress factors associated with poverty. Low-income families experience higher rates of health problems, family and community violence, homelessness, and depression. Parents living in poverty are often consumed by their immediate needs for

food, safe housing, health care, and other concerns that must be met before they can focus on other areas of their lives. The EHS program can be instrumental in providing the supports and services that families need to improve their life circumstances and in developing environments where parents are empowered to be their children's first and most important teachers.

Parents are role models for their children in many areas, including social and emotional skills. Their own ability to cope, express emotions, communicate, persist in tasks, cooperate, compromise, negotiate conflict, and so forth can promote or impede the development of healthy social and emotional functioning in their children. Parents who have safe, supportive relationships with staff members can use those relationships as models for how to create a nurturing environment for their children. Just as children need support to cope, express emotions, communicate, persist in tasks, and negotiate conflict, so do adults. A parent who is stressed in the morning when he is dropping off a toddler feels better when the teacher notices and asks how the dad is feeling. The experience of being seen and cared for helps us care for others.

Partnerships with families have been described as the foundation for Head Start success. Relationships with families are characterized by mutual respect, trust, acceptance, objectivity, flexibility, personalized attention, and cultural awareness *(U. S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1998)*. The family partnership process begins at the time of enrollment, evolves as families' needs and goals change, and continues through the children's transition out of the Head Start program into other community settings.

One of the challenges that EHS staff members face, especially in the home-based program option, is the delicate balance between supporting parent needs while maintaining a focus on the child development goals of the EHS program. An example of this balancing act is described in the Information Memorandum Child Development Services During Home Visits and Socializations in the Early Head Start Home-Based Program Option (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2000):

Grantee and delegate agencies must engage in a process of collaborative partnership-building with parents to establish mutual trust and to identify family goals, strengths, and necessary services and other supports. This process must beinitiated as early after enrollment as possible, and it must take into consideration each family's readiness and willingness to participate in the process. As part of this ongoing partnership, grantee and delegate agencies must offer parents opportunities to develop and implement individualized family partnership agreements that describe family goals, responsibilities, timetables, and strategies for achieving these goals as well as progress in achieving them....

Head Start Program Performance Standard 1304.40 (a) (1) (2)

Each home visit should focus on the parent as the child's most important relationship and first teacher, and through the parent, focus on the needs of the child. Child development experiences, which focus on the relationship and interaction between the parent and child, should occur during each home visit. There are times when a parent is so distracted by personal needs that it is difficult to establish the focus on the child. It is important at these times to ensure that the parent gets the support he or she needs so that he or she can then be available to meet their child's needs. A home visitor in this circumstance might guide the focus back to the child by first listening to the parent's concerns, identifying resources, and then helping the parents understand how the family circumstances affect the child. The home visitor should ensure that the child development goals of the Early Head Start program are

being addressed at the same time that the needs of the parents are supported. (ACYF-IM-HS-00-22, 2000, p. 4)

Although the particular challenges and strategies for relationship building between parents and EHS staff members are different in the various program models, all EHS programs share the goal of strengthening the bond between parent and child to achieve the best child development outcomes.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Building partnerships with families is integral to fostering the skills that promote school readiness. Involving parents as early and as fully as possible in their child's education will empower them to remain their child's best advocates throughout his or her years in school. Both home visits and center-based classrooms provide opportunities to observe and

Children's Home Society of Washington
Auburn, WA

reflect on the relationship between parent and child.

● Look for the strengths in the infant-parent relationship and point them out to parents. Parents often do not recognize how important and special they are to their child. For example, when mom or dad is reunited with their child, notice out loud, "Look how Mary smiles when you enter the room … and she's watching every move you make. She sure is happy to see you."

● Notice and appreciate how parents take care of their children. Simple statements affirm the effort the parent is making to care for his or her child. For example, "What a pretty dress mommy put on you today" or "Your daddy brought your nice warm coat today. You'll be comfy when we go outside later."

● Help parents read their child's cues by wondering aloud what the child's gestures and vocalizations might mean. For example, "I noticed that Daniel always covers his eyes with his hand when he enters the child care room. What do you think that is about?" This kind of conversation opens the door to talk about how Daniel is managing his transition from home to child care, how to best work with his particular temperament, and what strategies the caregivers and parents can develop together to meet Daniel's needs.

● Use both informal moments and structured parent gatherings (such as socialization experiences for the Home-Based Program Option) to teach parents about the connection between social and emotional development and the mastery of cognitive skills in infancy and toddlerhood. Help parents recognize that the process of learning is equally important as mastering a particular milestone such as identifying letters, shapes, or numbers. Children will naturally learn about these and other literacy and numeracy concepts as their caregivers encourage and support the exploration of their environment. For example, infants and toddlers do not need structured teaching lessons to learn the alphabet. Rather, they will learn preliteracy skills in a setting where they have access to books, are

read to regularly, see the adults in their lives enjoy reading, and experience a language-rich environment that includes talking, singing, and storytelling. Help parents understand that, although promoting literacy to a 6-month-old may look like the child is simply mouthing or banging a book, in fact, the infant is learning that manipulating books is a fun, rewarding, positive experience. These experiences are especially powerful when they occur in the context of the child's relationship with the parent—being snuggled in the parent's lap, enjoying each other's company, and sharing joyful or tender moments together. Through these experiences, infants will naturally begin to appreciate the importance of words and letters and will enter preschool, and eventually kindergarten, as eager learners who are ready for more sophisticated academic concepts.

SUMMING UP

In this paper, we have explored the concept of school readiness and the overall developmental competence of very young children as they relate to preparation for transitions and challenges along the journey to adulthood. We presented four concepts, supported by the Head Start Program Performance Standards (1996), to guide your program in the effort to foster developmental competence in very young children:

(1) cognitive and social-emotional development are interrelated and cannot be separated;
(2) relationships facilitate learning, and the adult serves to focus and regulate the child's cognitive experiences;
(3) curriculum is delivered through relationships, and how the curriculum is delivered is equally important to the learning objectives; and
(4) staff members who support parents as their child's first and most important teacher provide the best chance for children to reach their greatest developmental potential.

However, no single program or initiative on its own can accomplish the goal of fostering competence in the earliest years. The authors of From Neurons to Neighborhoods *(National Research Council & Institute of Medicine, 2000)* emphasize the importance of social and emotional functioning for overall developmental competence and make three specific recommendations to support the early learning and social-emotional development of young children:

1. Resources equal to those devoted to the development of literacy and numerical skills should be available to develop "effective strategies for fostering:
(a) the development of curiosity, self direction, and persistence in learning situations;
(b) the ability to cooperate, demonstrate caring, and resolve conflict with peers; and
(c) the capacity to experience the enhanced motivation associated with feeling competent and loved" *(p. 387).*
2. School readiness initiatives must pay equal attention to how well they improve the performance of those who participate and how effectively they decrease any gaps in skills that are typically observed at the time of school entry among children of different backgrounds
3. Substantial new investments are necessary to address the mental health needs of young children. Resources should be devoted to the full continuum of prevention, screening and early detection, and intervention for mental health problems.

The foundations for school readiness are clearly set in the earliest years of life, and through significant relationships, babies and young children acquire the skills that are necessary for competence in all areas of development and later success in school. When they receive the nurturing, responsive, loving care that inspires their initiative, curiosity, and hunger to learn—along with the trust, security, and self-confidence required to buffer the struggle of new challenges—children develop the skills to be fully equipped for success in school and in life.

DEVELOPMENTAL SKILLS	CHILD/CAREGIVER INTERACTIONS	WHAT CHILDREN MAY BE LEARNING
Large Motor Skills		
Small Motor Skills		
Communication/ Language Skills		
Cognitive Skills		
Social Skills		
Emotional Skills		
Other		

REFERENCES

National Research Council, & Institute of Medicine. (2000). **From neurons to neighborhoods: The science of early childhood development.** (*J. P. Shonkoff & D. A. Phillips, Eds.*). Committee on Integrating the Science of Early Childhood Development. Board on Children, Youth, and Families, Commission on Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education. *Washington, DC: National Academy Press.*

Peth-Pierce, R. (2000). **A good beginning: Sending America's children to school with the social and emotional competence they need to succeed (The Child Mental Health Foundations and Agencies Network (FAN) Monograph).** *Bethesda, MD:* The National Institute of Mental Health, Office of Communications and Public Liaison.

Spitz, R. (1945). **Hospitalism: An inquiry into the genesis of psychiatric conditions in early childhood. Psychoanalytic Study of the Child, 1, 53–74.**

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (1996). **Head Start program performance standards. Washington, DC: Head Start Bureau.**

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (1998). **Family partnerships: A continuous process. Training guides for the Head Start learning community.** *Washington, DC: Head Start Bureau.*

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2000). **Child Development Services During Home Visits and Socializations in the Early Head Start Home-Based Program Option, ACYF-IM-HS-00-22.** *Washington, DC: Head Start Bureau.*

ZERO TO THREE. (1992). **Heart Start: The emotional foundations of school readiness.** *Washington, DC: Author.*

RESOURCES FOR LEARNING THROUGH PLAY

Bronson, M. B. (1995). **The right stuff for children birth to 8: Selecting play materials to support development.** *Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children.*

Honig, A. S., & Brophy, H. E. (1996). **Talking with your baby: Family as the first school.** *Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press.*

Karnes, M. B. (1982). **You and your small wonder: Activities for parents and babies, Book 1.** *Circle Pines, MN: American Guidance Service.*

Karnes, M. B. (1982). **You and your small wonder: Activities for parents and toddlers, Book 2.** *Circle Pines, MN: American Guidance Service.*

Miller, K. (1984). **Things to do with toddlers and twos.** *Chelsea, MA: Teleshare Publishing.*

Miller, K. (1989). **The outside play and learning book: Activities for young children.** *Beltsville, MD: Gryphon House.*

Miller, K. (1990). **More things to do with toddlers and twos.** *Chelsea, MA: Teleshare Publishing.*

Sega3l, M. (1985). **Your child at play.** *New York, NY: Newmarket Press.*

Additional Resources

Center on Families, Communities, Schools and Children's Learning. (1994, October). **School readiness: Parents and professionals speak on social and emotional needs of young children. Available on the World Wide Web:** *http://readyweb.crc.uiuc.edu/library/1994/cfam-sr/cfam-sr.html*

Child Trends. (2000, August). **School readiness: Helping communities get children ready for school and schools ready for children.** *Washington, DC: Author.*

Hawley, T. (1998). **Ready to succeed: The lasting effects of early relationships.** *Washington, DC: Ounce of Prevention Fund and ZERO TO THREE.*

Lerner, C., & Dombro, A. (2000). **Learning and growing together: Understanding and supporting your child's development.** *Washington, DC: ZERO TO THREE.*

National Association for the Education of Young Children. (1995). **NAEYC Position statement on school readiness. Available on the World Wide Web:** *http://www.naeyc.org/resources/position_statements/psredy98.htm*

National Education Goals Panel. (1997). **Getting a good start in school. Available on the World Wide Web:** *http://www.negp.gov/Reports/good-sta.htm*

Parlakian, R. (2001). **Look, listen, and learn: Reflective supervision and relationship-based work.** *Washington, DC: ZERO TO THREE.*

Parlakian, R. (2001). **The power of questions: Building quality relationships with families.** *Washington, DC: ZERO TO THREE.*

Powers, S., & Lerner, C. (2000). **Learning and growing together tip sheets: Ideas for professionals in programs that serve young children and their families.** *Washington, DC: ZERO TO THREE.*

ZERO TO THREE. (2001). **Learning and growing together with families video package.** *Washington, DC: Author.*

Early Head Start of the Lehigh Valley,
Bethlehem,, PA
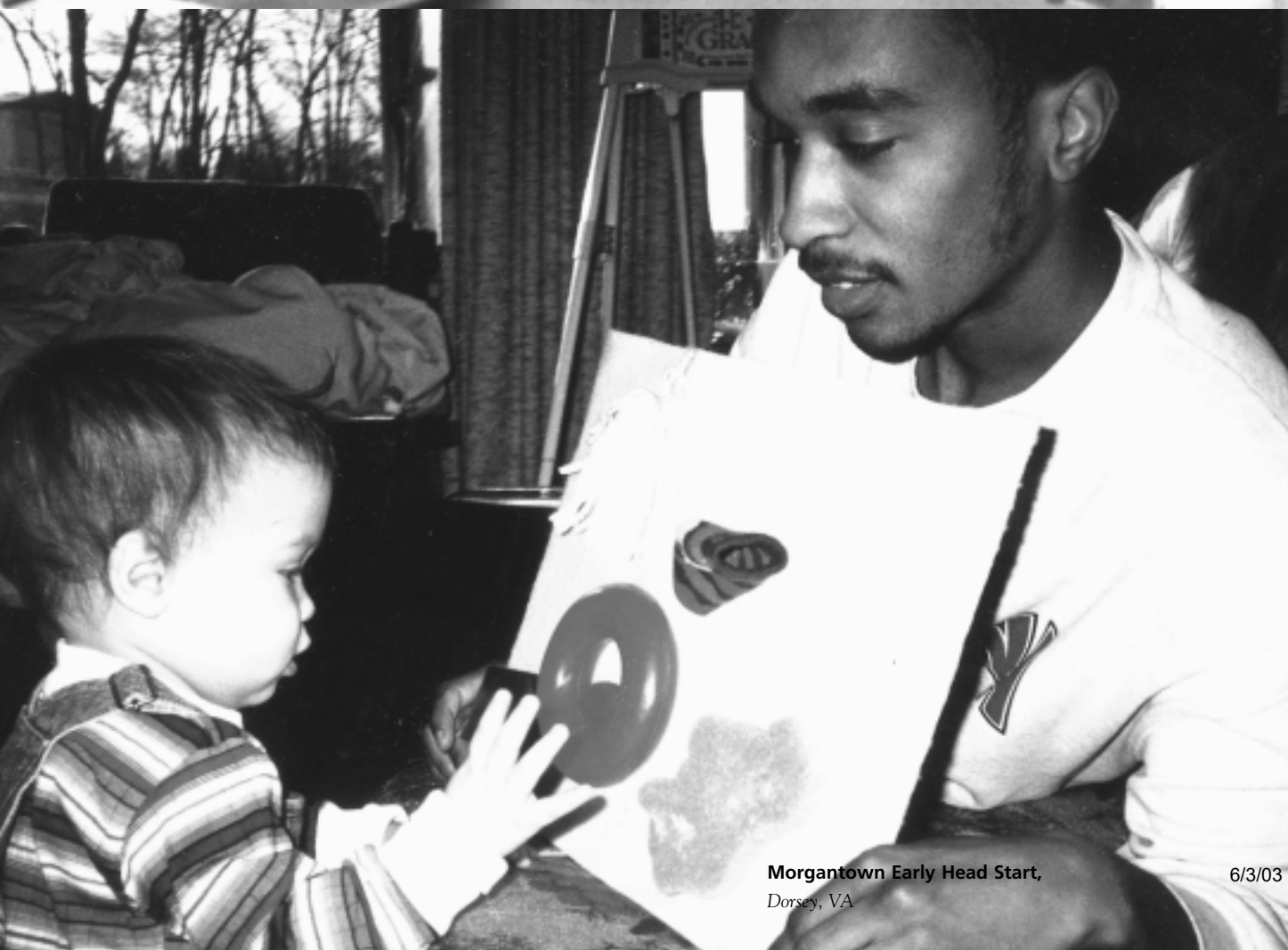
Morgantown Early Head Start,
Dorsey, VA

6/3/03

EARLY HEAD START
NATIONAL RESOURCE CENTER ZERO TO THREE