

Increasing Children's Learning Opportunities in the Context of Family and Community Life

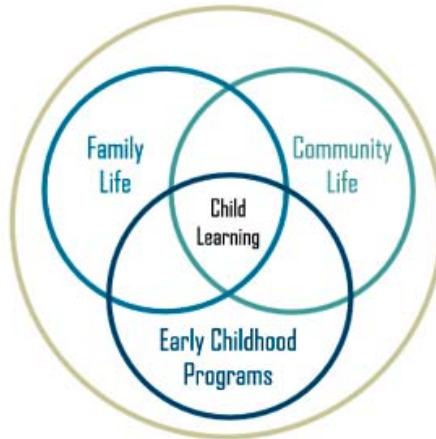
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The Children's Learning Opportunities Early Childhood Research Institute is a 5-year initiative funded by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs. Institute staff are identifying, developing, and evaluating ways of using family and community life as sources of learning opportunities for infants, toddlers, and preschoolers with or at-risk for delays in their development. Institute staff are especially interested in identifying everyday experiences that provide children learning opportunities strengthening child capabilities and promoting new competencies.

SOURCES OF CHILDREN'S LEARNING

The Figure shows the way we think about sources of children's learning opportunities. About everything a child experiences happens as part of family life, community life, and participation in early childhood programs.

The value and importance of learning in different early childhood programs has been well documented. Our main focus, therefore, is children's learning that happens as part of daily living, family rituals,



Three Major Sources of
Children's Learning Opportunities

family and community celebrations, special occasions and events, and just about anything and everything else that a child experiences intentionally or incidentally as part of family and community life.

Family life includes a mix of people and places. These people and places provide a child a variety of learning opportunities like eating during meal times, splashing water during bath time, listening to adults share stories, and learning greeting skills at family get-togethers. Community life also includes a mix of people and places that provide children many different kinds of learning opportunities. These include the people and things experienced on neighborhood walks, playing at a park or in the woods, children's festivals and fairs, nature centers and farms, and so forth.

RESEARCH STUDIES

Institute staff are conducting different kinds of studies to learn about sources of children's learning activities, and the kinds of practices associated with child, parent, and family benefits. This report highlights the kind of studies we are doing.

National Surveys

Two national surveys of nearly 3300 parents were conducted in 48 states, Puerto Rico, and Yap in Micronesia. One survey looked at family life as sources of children's learning opportunities, and the other looked at community life as sources of learning opportunities for children. The surveys were completed by parents and other caregivers of children in early intervention programs, early childhood special education programs, Early Head Start and Head Start, and other early childhood programs (Even Start, Parents as Teachers, etc.).

Findings from both surveys show that family life is made up of 11 different categories of learning opportunities, and that community life is also made up of 11 different categories of learning activities. Family life providing children learning opportunities includes such things as parenting routines (e.g., child's bedtime), child routines (e.g., brushing teeth), literary activities (e.g., telling child stories), parent/child play (e.g., lap games), and socialization activities (e.g., family gatherings). Community life providing children learning opportunities includes such things as family routines (e.g., doing errands), play activities (e.g., playgrounds), recreation and sports activities (e.g., swimming), and art and entertainment activities (e.g., children's theater).

Descriptive Studies

To learn about the make-up of family and community life of young children, we conducted in-depth descriptive studies of more than 200 families of children with disabilities or delays, children at-risk for socioeconomic reasons, and children not-at-risk for any reason. The children and families were from AK, CA, CT, HI, NC, NM, and WI. The participants were diverse in terms of their cultural, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds;

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place of residence (urban, rural, suburban); and child age and developmental status. Research staff visited the families up to 12 times over a 6-month period to interview the parents about their family and community lives, observe the children in different family and community learning activities, and to gather information about the variety of learning experiences, opportunities, events, and so forth that happened for the children.

Findings show that children participate in many different social and physical settings as part of their family and community lives. These different settings in turn provide many different kinds of learning opportunities. Children, on average, participate in some 150 different kinds of social and physical settings as part of family and community life. These settings in turn provide more than 200 different kinds of learning opportunities.

Intervention Studies

Institute staff conducted intervention studies with nearly 75 children with disabilities or delays and their families to evaluate four procedures for using family and community life as sources of children's learning opportunities. The studies were done in CA, CT, HI, NC, NM, and WI with families from diverse cultural, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds. The four procedures included: (1) a schedule for reminding parents to involve their children in learning activities, (2) a matrix for focusing on the behaviors a child would do in different learning activities, (3) parent responsiveness to desired child behavior as a teaching method, and (4) family and community activities as learning opportunities on a child's IFSP or IEP. Findings so far indicate that parents prefer interventions that are easy to do, fit into their daily lives, and emphasize children doing and learning things that help them be part of family and community life.

Comparative Studies

These studies will compare two different ways of using family and com-

munity life as sources of children's learning opportunities. One way will increase child participation in naturally occurring learning situations without identifying specific behaviors a child will practice or learn. The second way will start with behaviors a parent wants his/her child to practice or learn, and then identify the family and community activities for helping the child do the behaviors. Both ways will use parent responsiveness to child behavior as a way of getting the children to do desired behaviors in the learning situations.

The need for the comparative studies happened when we observed that how children became involved in learning activities mattered in terms of the kinds of learning opportunities experienced by the children. Going from specific behaviors to learning activities seems to limit learning opportunities. Going from learning opportunities to behaviors seems to open up more different possibilities for learning.

Practice Studies

The last studies we will conduct will look at ways early interventionists, early childhood educators, and therapists can increase children's learning opportunities using activities happening as part of family and community life as a form of early intervention and early childhood education. These studies will identify the early intervention and early childhood practices best suited for expanding the definition of early childhood intervention to include family and community-based learning opportunities for helping children acquire important everyday knowledge and skills.

RESEARCH TO PRACTICE

A primary focus of our Institute research has been the everyday, real-world experiences providing young children learning opportunities promoting their

abilities. We expect our findings will be useful for many different intervention purposes. First, the many different kinds of activities happening as part of family and community life will provide a way for mapping children's learning opportunities (National surveys). Second, knowing which activities are best for learning will help identify the kinds of activities we should be using for promoting child learning (Descriptive studies). Third, knowing which interventions work best using everyday experiences as learning opportunities will help interventionists know what strategies they should use (Intervention studies). Fourth, finding out how best to involve children in everyday learning opportunities should be helpful for knowing how to incorporate learning activities into family and community life (Comparative studies). Fifth, using family and community life as sources of children's learning opportunities should increase the number of experiences promoting child knowledge and skills (Practice studies). Future *Children's Learning Opportunities Reports* will include research to practice sections with specific ideas practitioners and parents can use for helping children learn important skills as part of everyday family and community life.

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