School Ready:
Helping Families to Plan, Practice, and Prepare for School

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ABSTRACT

This article presents an innovative organizational design with the action oriented goal to get families involved in their children’s literacy development prior to the start of formal schooling. A child’s journey to become school ready is a responsibility shared by many. Asserting that community service builds greater good, involvement in a school-community events, as presented in this article, embraces the relationship between teachers, Foundations, and university students enrolled in a teacher education program and professors to connect with children, families, and other professionals. Within this organizational design, various activities have been created for the entire family, helping to plan, practice, and prepare children for school. Supporting the value of detailed planning and successful implementation, this event allows parents to gain information about school readying success, and engage their children in literacy activities. This develops the relationship between home, school, university, and community enhancing the well-being of society.

KEYWORDS

Organizational Design, Parent Involvement, Literacy, School Readiness, School-Community Partnerships, Teacher Preparation

INTRODUCTION

In 1989, following his presidential inauguration, George H.W. Bush held the National Education Summit in order to improve elementary and secondary schools. As a result of this summit, Bush, along with all 50 state governors, wrote the National Education Goals. In Section 102 of this document, the Congress established school readiness as the first goal: “By the year 2000, all children in America will start school ready to learn” (Kagan, 1995, p. 1). The objectives included: Access to developmentally appropriate preschool programs of high quality and which prepare children for school; training and supporting every parent to be the first teacher of children; awareness of the importance of nutrition, health care, and physical activity. Collectively, the National Education Goals led to GOALS 2000: Educate America Act, which was signed into law on March 31, 1994. The National Education Goals Panel (1992) emphasized that parents play a key role in their child’s well-being and subsequent education, as they are the first teacher their child encounters. Two decades hence, there continues to be a demand for parents to share in the responsibility of educating children and become active participants in providing their children with learning experiences during the preschool years. A focus on the family and finding ways to start early are important elements to be considered in early education (Mervis, 2011).
In order to improve children’s academic achievements, parents need to closely examine the years before school entry, as they are the first and most important teachers of their children (McConnell & Kubina, 2016). Experiences children have during this time are crucial because early development of the brain is interdependent with learning, and initial experiences can have lasting consequences (Ramey & Ramey, 2004). These preschool years should be saturated with effective learning opportunities. Since the signing of GOALS 2000: Educate America Act (1994), continued conscientious and purposeful attention has been given to helping children to be school-ready; this has been a national goal for decades. Regardless of current literacy knowledge, a child can benefit from appropriate and sound parental support (Aram & Besser-Biron, 2016).

GETTING READY FOR SCHOOL

In early childhood policy and practice, one of the most pressing issues is ensuring that all children are ready for successful school experiences. It is crucial to consider society’s definition of school readiness from the age of children to each child’s independent abilities. The definition of school readiness should take into consideration that not all children develop at the same time or in the same way; also, it should include different areas of expectations: Cognitive, physical, social, and emotional competence. School readiness is a collective effort that involves more than just the children. It encompasses the families, early environments, schools, communities, and the children. The development of a child’s skills is strongly influenced and defined by the interactions prior to coming to school (Clarke & Kurtz-Costes, 1997; Maxwell & Clifford, 2004). Parental behaviors that have been identified as important predictors of children’s cognitive and academic growth include shared reading, reading to children, accessibility to books, taking trips to the library, and providing academically oriented activities (Christian, Morrison, & Bryant, 1998; Neuman, 1996). When children are engaged in active discussions with stories, their vocabulary growth, understanding, and recall of stories, language production, and knowledge of print conventions are enhanced. These skills correlate to a child’s reading abilities and subsequent success in school.

School readiness requires access to opportunities. It is imperative that families with young children have access to resources that will help foster the nurturing relationships and experiences that support school readiness. An example of this resource is a high quality early education program. These programs provide the foundation which is needed for school readiness, and should be available to all young children. Equally, early intervention efforts need to be in place for children who may be at risk for later school failure. Intervention efforts should not simply address isolated skills, but rather be comprehensive in nature. It is essential that every child be provided with a firm foundation before entering school. It is when children, families, communities, and early education programs come together that children will experience school success (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2009).

Several types of essential experiences during a child’s early learning years ensure normal brain and behavioral development, and school readiness (Ramey & Ramey, 2004). These experiences include: Exploration encouragement; basic skills mentoring; developmental advances; celebrations, rehearsal, and extension of new skills; protection from inappropriate disapproval, teasing, and punishment; communicating richly and responsively; and guiding/limiting behavior. These experiences are created through the interactions between the child and the parent. These opportunities are available to every child, regardless of the family’s socioeconomic status, because they do not require money or the latest toys and technology. These opportunities involve time, skill, and an active commitment from parents to their child(ren). It has been noted that when initial approaches to learning are positive, larger gains are likely to occur in literacy skills as well as other academic areas during the early years of formal schooling (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016).

Getting families involved is an important element of a child’s literacy development; therefore, they need information and training on the role they play in their child’s literacy learning (International
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