Tip Sheets for Teachers: Practices to Promote School Readiness

Individual Work in Preschool

One of the activities in preschool that can most benefit a child's academic readiness for kindergarten entry is that of individual work. It is a time when teachers can provide individualized instruction for a child who needs additional support, assess a child's progress, or guide a child to work toward independence by applying and practicing skills learned earlier.

Let’s be perfectly clear!

We are NOT talking about worksheets! There are many ways to prepare prekindergarten children to work independently without sitting them down at a table with worksheets.

What can you do?

∙ Plan individual work activities that have a variety of products. Use manipulatives, art projects, independent reading….all of these can help children gain the skills they need.

∙ Expand the number of times during the day that children are expected to engage in activities that are teacher planned, with clear tasks and products for children to complete. This is in contrast to the type of individual work that children may complete early in the year at the art center.

∙ Expand the amount of time children are expected to stay at each activity.

∙ Gradually increase the complexity of the tasks so that children have practice following multiple step directions that entail more complicated ideas.

∙ Gradually decrease the amount of guidance you provide so that children are working more independently.

∙ Expand the number of activities that include literacy and writing, since this is a big focus in kindergarten.

What do children need to be able to do?

Children need to be able to independently follow directions to complete a task with the materials provided. They need to be able to remain at this task for up to fifteen minutes, several times a day.
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We know that high quality early education represents one of the best investments that society can make for promoting successful educational outcomes for all children, but particularly for children who are at risk (Heckman & Masterov, 2007). Early education, it is done well, can significantly erase or minimize the achievement gaps that exist for many of our children (Barnett, 2011; Camilli, Vargas, Ryan, & Barnett, 2010; Pianta, Barnett, Burchinal, & Thornburg, 2009). The evidence is so overwhelming, that 39 of this country’s 50 states have elected to provide public-funded prekindergarten for its preschoolers (Barnett, Carolan, Fitzgerald, & Squires, 2011). The most recent report published by the National Institute for Early Education Research, The State of Preschool 2011, estimates that these 39 states provided prekindergarten services for 28% of all 4-year olds in this country. Unfortunately, Indiana is not of those states. In the absence of funding and state leadership, Indiana preschoolers have to rely on a patchwork system of services that falls short of the needed capacity to serve children who need these services most (Indiana Education Roundtable, 2012).

In 2012, we initiated a study to investigate how well existing early education programs in Indiana were doing. We were interested in seeing how our classrooms performed in relation to other states. We wanted to see how well our practices aligned with current research evidence documenting effective early education, and we were curious to see how the different programs in our state compared with one another. We sent out invitations to all Head Start programs, licensed child care centers and public school preschools in the state. Video-recorded observations were completed in 81 classrooms that were geographically and socio-economically representative: 28 licensed child care centers; 27 Head Start classrooms, and; 26 public school classrooms. We recorded only in-class, morning activities; and analyzed each observation using two tools; the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) (Pianta, LaParo, & Hamre, 2008), and the Emerging Academic Snapshot (EAS) (Ritchie, Howes, Kraft-Sayre, & Weiser, 2002).

The CLASS focuses on three broad domains of effective teacher-child interactions that characterize children’s classroom experiences: Emotional Support, Organizational Support, and Instructional Support. Emotional Support captures how teachers help children develop positive relationships, enjoyment in learning, comfort in the classroom, and appropriate levels of independence. Classroom Organization focuses on how well teachers manage the classroom to maximize learning and keep children engaged. The Instructional Support domain involves how teachers promote children’s thinking and problem solving, use feedback to deepen understanding, and help children develop more complex language skills. The Emerging Academic Snapshot measures the types and frequency of activities and instruction to which children are exposed. The types of activities recorded include common preschool activities such as free choice time, whole group time, basic routines, small group instruction, individual work time, and meal/snack times. It further looks at children’s exposure to various curricular areas, including aesthetics (art, music, dance), literacy/language, math, science, and social studies. Some teacher actions (instruction) are also included.

We hope that the information we gained from this study benefits both policy makers and classroom practitioners. For policy makers, our goal is to establish a comparative baseline of program quality from which clear directions and decisions can be made to enhance preschool services in Indiana. For practitioners, our hope is that the insights we made about the presence (and absence) of evidence-based early education practices can inform their decisions concerning classroom schedules, curricula, and teaching practices.

This series of tip sheets looks at some of the findings of our research in a quick, one-page format. More information, including a breakdown of the data and more detailed discussion can be found on the Early Childhood Center website.