Small group time is one of the activities in preschool that can most benefit a child's academic readiness for kindergarten. It is an opportunity for teachers to spend focused instructional time with small groups of students who need additional support in specific skill areas. Because preschoolers spend one-third of their time in free choice activities, it is an ideal time for teachers to pull together some small groups.

Small groups, by definition, allow teachers to create flexible groups based on children's needs and similar skill levels. This intentional grouping of children limits the diversity of need so that the teacher can focus her teaching to discrete, specific skills.

Small groups can be used to pre-teach concepts that may be needed for children to participate fully in upcoming whole-group activities, or as a time to reinforce ideas and skills with which the children may be struggling. Small group time is also ideal for teachers to assess where children are in their learning process.

Do not read paper and pencil tasks into this!

The key elements of small group instruction are:
- Flexible groups based on need
- Direct instruction
- Focused on discrete concepts or skills

This can be done in many fun and creative ways.

Not an either/or proposition

Free choice time is important for the development of creativity, collaboration, imagination, and persistence, just to name a few essential skills. However, research is suggesting that many children, particularly those who are at risk for school failure, need more focused, intentional instructional time, particularly language, literacy and math skills.
Tip Sheets for Teachers: Practices to Promote School Readiness

Using Small Groups in Preschool

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.

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