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Vikki K. Collins

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Vikki K. Collins

Millions of American families with preschool children utilize child care settings each day. Since the number of mothers in the work force has increased drastically in the last two decades (O'Neill & O'Connell, 2001), it is estimated that almost 12 million children younger than age 5 spend part of their days in the care of people other than their parents (U. S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2002). Child care settings include day care homes and day care centers. In Muscogee County, Georgia, there are 99 state-registered day care homes and 62 state-licensed day care centers. In the eight-county area of west Georgia including the counties of Chattahoochee, Clay, Harris, Marion, Muscogee, Quitman, Stewart and Talbot, there is an estimated registered and licensed child care capacity for 7033 children (Child Care Resource & Referral Agency of West Georgia at Columbus, 2005). The experiences that young children receive in child care settings can serve as building blocks for literacy and as bridges to academic success in elementary school.

Early literacy development is encouraged by a literacy-rich environment which incorporates actual materials into functional, meaningful activities for children (Neuman, Copple, & Bredekamp, 2000). In child care settings, books, toys, writing materials, tapes, CD-ROMs, and literacy props (menus, magazines, musical instruments, etc.) should be carefully selected and made available to children. Many opportunities to explore and to manipulate these real materials promote literacy development. By labeling the objects and people in the child care setting, by sharing stories and books, by allowing for questions and answers, and by making decisions and choices in play activities, children become increasingly interested in print and in the literate behaviors of reading and writing (Isbell & Exelby, 2001).

Young children develop literacy skills by interacting with capable peers and adults. In the social construction of knowledge (Vygotsky, 1978), children build understandings through interactions with other persons. Initial ideas may be reviewed, rejected, or refined based on the comments, appearances, or stories of peers and adults (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997). Through interactions in child care settings, children explore social and physical environments, share ideas, and learn to cooperate as they work and play with others. These experiences lead to self expression and to the desire to learn to read and write (Isaacs, 1999).

Supportive teachers in child care settings promote the literacy development of young children. By creating stimulating, engaging environments, teachers support literacy development through play and peer interactions (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997). A responsive teacher furnishes a positive climate that helps to build emotional security. With feelings of security and support, children are able to pursue their activities and to incorporate literate behaviors for communication (Isbell & Exelby, 2001). The child care teacher is… “there to listen, respond, and add a dab of glue to the important words that burst forth” (p. 223) (Paley, 1999).

Child care settings that promote literacy development have been associated with the subsequent academic success of children in elementary school. The results of the Abecedarian Project and the Chicago Child-Parent Centers Longitudinal Study indicated that academic achievement in reading was higher from the primary grades through young adulthood. Enhanced language/literacy development seemed instrumental in raising cognitive test scores; and children’s classroom, social, and thinking skills were improved. Long-term effects included significantly higher high school graduation and secondary enrollment rates (Early Childhood Care and Education, n.d.; Reynolds, n.d.). Child care settings which foster literacy development appear to improve children’s acquisition of language abilities and vocabulary, of cognitive skills, and of attention and short-term memory. These abilities enhance academic success in elementary school (Parents Action, 2005).

Child care settings are essential for millions of American families, and thousands of children in the west Georgia region attend day care homes and day care centers. Child care settings that incorporate literacy-rich environments, that promote peer and adult interactions, and that include supportive, responsive teachers foster literacy development in young children. Together with the building blocks of literacy, child care settings can serve as bridges to academic success in elementary school.
Resources


Dr. Collins is Assistant Professor of Early Childhood Education at Columbus State University. Her research interests include literacy development, effective preschool programs, and components of an integrated early childhood curriculum.