

Improving Children’s Early Literacy in Child Care Settings in Ways that Work for Providers

By Barb Nicol

Supporting child care providers (home and center) in their efforts to boost children’s early literacy is more likely to be successful when that support comes in a form that “works” for the provider, and fits with what that provider both needs and wants.

To find out just what those needs and wants are, I interviewed nearly 30 people who work with children or with child care providers. My interviews centered around three main questions:

- What do child care providers need and want to improve their ability to boost children’s early literacy skills?
- Do providers find value in promoting early literacy skills? (i.e., do they care?)
- What will help them continue to use what they learned? What will get in the way? (i.e., is it sustainable?)

Based on these conversations with a range of child care providers and others in the child care system, the following eight themes arose:

1. **Home settings are unique.** While there are common characteristics of home and center settings, there are unique aspects of home child care settings that affect the ways in which those providers are or are not able to support early literacy development. Special consideration is needed to effectively serve home providers.
2. **Practical realities matter.** More attention should be paid to the practical realities of child care, and the resulting limits or opportunities it presents. For example:
 - Young children’s attention spans and desire to be “moving” limits the amount of time that can be spent on a specific activity
 - There is little or no planning or prep time for providers
 - Working with children 1:1 or in extended small groups can be impossible
 - Families receiving MFIP subsidies may not bring their children to child care regularly or at consistent times, as transportation and required job searches can be a barrier
3. **Behavior trumps literacy.** Children’s behavior is an ongoing challenge for child care providers. Methods that link early literacy development and behavior support would be of great benefit to provider (a “two-fer”). In addition, some children arrive without having had any type of child care experience, and need extra support simply becoming accustomed to child care routines prior to being able to really engage in any early literacy activities.
4. **Provide a roadmap.** Providers greatly appreciate being given a specific framework (lesson plans, curriculum), within which to operate. Even though they will tailor it to meet their situation, not having to invent it from scratch helps tremendously. Lack of planning time makes it challenging to find ways to incorporate all they learned in a meaningful and consistent way, and a roadmap of some type helps overcome this barrier.

5. **Culture is critical.** A culture that supports the importance of early literacy is central to success. If the director really “gets it”, he or she will provide resources and time to support early literacy. It will become part of the center’s (or home’s) culture, in terms of hiring, expectations, motivation and leadership. Treating providers as professionals and teachers matters as well; people often rise to what’s expected of them.
6. **Connections count.** Most providers love new ideas – both from within their centers (home providers are very isolated in this regard) and from other centers. Finding ways to support sharing, networking, reflection and planning would help support sustainability of early literacy efforts.
7. **Make it real and make it fun.** Training that is hands-on and classroom or home specific is the most meaningful, as providers can see what they’re learning in action, with their kids. While theory and research are important as context for why early literacy efforts matter, providers are more likely to continue something they’ve experienced firsthand. And if the kids are having fun and enjoying what they’re doing, the days go more quickly and more smoothly – and everyone is happy.
8. **Value and variability.** Providers who participate in early literacy training do so because they recognize its value and importance for their children. However, the background, skill levels and knowledge of providers varies tremendously, thereby impacting their ability to incorporate and sustain the efforts in a comprehensive and consistent manner. Also, those who don’t take advantage of training opportunities may be challenging to impact in a meaningful way (they won’t come and they may not care).

The first theme above addresses the point that home child care settings are unique. For anyone who wants to work with or assist home child care providers, it is important to note the characteristics unique to family child care, which include:

- Space is shared between home and child care, making it hard to create ‘centers’, hang things on walls, do things on a regular schedule, etc. (they live and work in the same space, as does their family) – and children take a heavy toll on the living space
- Usually working with very mixed ages – and thus developmental ranges - all at once
- More likely to be isolated and alone – no one to share or network with
- Providers’ own children are often part of the mix – and “home rules” and “child care rules” may be different
- Often seen as less professional and thus less respected than other child care providers
- They are all parts of the business – manager, administrator, marketer, accountant, teacher, parent, cleaner
- More likely to develop closer, more personal relationships with the families and children they care for
- May need encouragement and help to utilize other public resources (libraries, universities, schools)

Conclusion

Child care providers who choose to engage in early literacy training understand and value the importance of this training to help boost their children knowledge and skills.

However, the providers need time, new practical ideas, tools and support to consistently

implement what they learn. Practical realities of both center and home settings need to be taken into account for efforts to be successful over time.

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