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Promoting Young Children's School Readiness: What Parents Can Do

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Introduction

This section involves promotion of school readiness in young children. When children begin school with the cognitive, behavioural and social-emotional skills needed to benefit from the learning experiences provided, they are more likely to experience long-term success. Research on early childhood education and development has identified a number of practices that promote school readiness in young children. We will review a number of these, with a particular emphasis on strategies that can be utilized by parents and other caregivers.

Subject

School readiness refers to a constellation of skills and behaviours that children have developed by the time of school entry, which allow them to adjust well to school and to maximally profit from the learning experiences they encounter.[1] While earlier thinking about school readiness focused on pre-academic skills such as counting and letter recognition, more recent conceptualizations emphasize the importance of social-emotional competencies as well, such as

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the ability to follow instructions, inhibit impulses, and focus attention.[1] While the cognitive and social-emotional aspects of readiness are interrelated, they also make independent contributions both to children's initial adjustment to school and to their long-term academic and behavioural success.

Problems

Deficits in school readiness can create long-term difficulties for children. Those who enter school behind their peers in terms of basic cognitive and social-emotional skills are at risk for a number of negative outcomes, including low achievement, peer problems, low attachment and investment in school, and school dropout.[2] Unfortunately, many children, particularly those from low-income families, arrive at school with low levels of both cognitive and behavioural readiness. This "achievement gap" between disadvantaged children and those from more advantaged homes does not disappear with schooling; in fact, it tends to widen over time as children get older.[3]

Research Context

Because poor school readiness often sets the stage for chronic difficulties with school adjustment, interventions designed to boost school readiness generally focus on children under the age of 5. These include strategies that target children's skills directly by promoting language development, emergent literacy, and early math skills, as well as programs to support peer competence and to promote attention control, motivation, and engagement in learning. Some of these interventions target children directly and take place either in preschool settings (such as Head Start), or they target school readiness indirectly by targeting various aspects of parenting. Parent-focused programs often take place in the context of home visitation programs (such as the Nurse-Family Partnership program or the Early Start Program). While many interventions are designed to remediate the deficits of at-risk children, others are universal, targeting all children (such as the preschool PATHS program).

Key Research Questions

A number of questions have emerged from research on children's school readiness and from intervention studies targeting readiness. These include:

- Which components of school readiness are most critical for long-term school adjustment and academic success?

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- Which interventions affect these components, and how well do they work?
- Which children benefit the most from school readiness interventions?
- Are school-based or parent-focused interventions more effective in promoting school readiness, or do these approaches complement one another?

Recent Research Results

A number of interventions have been evaluated and found to be effective at promoting children's school readiness. While many of these involve center-based programs such as Head Start, for the purposes of this chapter, we will focus on those programs that involve parents.

Research has identified a powerful role for warm, sensitive parent-child relationships in the promotion of children's development. It appears that patterns developed in infancy and toddlerhood influence school readiness through their effects on children's developing cognitive and self-regulation skills.[4] In the preschool years, sensitive, responsive parenting has been linked to the development of executive function and attention control, both of which are important for school readiness.[5,6] Alternatively, harsh, inconsistent, or coercive parenting strategies are associated with lower levels of both cognitive and behavioural readiness,[4,7] possibly because this impairs the development of emotion regulation and impulse control.[1] This seems to be particularly true for children from low-income families, where warm, supportive parenting can buffer children against the negative effects of economic disadvantage.[8]

In the cognitive domain, Dialogic reading refers to a form of parent-child book reading during which parents engage children in conversations about the story, make a point of presenting new vocabulary words, and ask complex questions. Whitehurst and colleagues[9,10] trained parents to utilize these techniques when reading to their preschoolers. When parents were able to do this consistently (defined as 15 minutes per day, three or more times per week for 8 weeks), children from both low- and middle-income families showed significant improvement in their language skills. Additionally, children who were below average on tests of expressive and receptive language showed significant improvements in their early literacy skills as a result of dialogic reading at home.[11] Similarly, research has shown that when parents are trained to tutor their kindergarten children in early academic skills (e.g., letter identification, phonemic awareness), children make meaningful progress.[12,13]

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In addition to dialogic reading, parents can promote children's school readiness by providing educational toys and literacy materials such as books and writing supplies. The presence of toys and learning materials in the home is positively related to children's subsequent cognitive and language development.[7]

Although parent-child conversation has not been directly linked to school readiness outcomes, it is linked to advances in children's vocabulary and syntactic skills.[14] In turn, these are significant predictors of later literacy skills; vocabulary during the preschool years is linked to children's reading comprehension skills in third grade.[15] Therefore, conversational interactions between parents and young children may facilitate school readiness by contributing to children's linguistic competence.[16] Conversely, research has demonstrated that high rates of prohibitions and restricted language (e.g., commands) are linked to low levels of both cognitive and behavioural readiness.[17,18]

Research Gaps

While parent-focused interventions to promote school readiness often lead to improvements in parenting and may also include positive effects on child development generally, specific links to school readiness are usually lacking. Programs that target parents of infants and toddlers frequently lack sufficient longitudinal follow-up to document clear readiness outcomes. When links to school readiness are made, however, they are often fairly modest, and effects may be found only for certain subgroups. For example, the Nurse-Family Partnership program, a well-researched home visitation program that targets low-income, first-time mothers, found that only particular subgroups of children demonstrated school readiness benefits from this intervention.[19] Further research is needed to determine which interventions are most appropriate and helpful for particular children and families.

Conclusions

Research on school readiness indicates that a number of parenting behaviours relate to children's developmental and behavioural competence, and more modest evidence links these improvements to school readiness outcomes. Warm, responsive parent-child relationships are powerful buffers against the toxic effects of poverty and the risks posed by dispositional characteristics such as premature birth. Parent-child interactions that involve joint play and book reading, complex conversations, and interactions with cognitively challenging toys and other pre-

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literacy materials appear to facilitate language development, self-regulation, attention control, and engagement in learning. These factors in turn set the stage for school readiness. Children's school adjustment can also be facilitated when positive home-school partnerships exist, and when parents can complement classroom learning with positive home learning experiences. Parenting practices involving harsh discipline, inconsistent or coercive parent-child interactions, and a lack of rich verbal input can contribute to readiness deficits in children. Parent-focused school readiness interventions can promote parenting changes that lead to improvements in children's development and behaviour, but research has not always linked these directly to improvements in school readiness.

Implications for Parents, Services and Policy

The accumulated research evidence suggests several key ways in which parents can promote their young children's school readiness. First, research suggests that parents should strive to engage in warm, supportive, and responsive interactions with their young children, because these foster the cognitive and self-regulatory skills that underlie much of school readiness. Similarly, parents should try to avoid coercive interactions characterized by prohibitions and anger displays, as these are associated with school readiness deficits. Second, parents of young children should strive to engage them in rich conversations that include novel vocabulary and other linguistic challenges. Improvements in these behaviours by parents have resulted in improvements in children's language skills, cooperativeness, and joint attention.[16] Third, parents can provide a cognitively stimulating home environment by making toys, books, and other literacy materials available to children, and by supporting their use through scaffolding and rich conversational exchanges. Finally, because research suggests that a positive home-school relationship is linked to children's readiness, parents are encouraged to forge positive partnerships with teachers so that learning activities at home can complement those encountered at school.

The research is clear that children from low-income families are particularly at risk for low readiness and the long-term negative consequences associated with the "achievement gap", and that positive parenting may be particularly critical for these children. However, it may be very difficult for low-income parents to provide children with the experiences needed for school success. These parents often experience high levels of stress, depression, and family disorganization, and they may struggle themselves with low literacy and negative school experiences. Low-income families often lack the material resources needed to provide toys,

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books, and enrichment experiences that facilitate cognitive and social-emotional development. Therefore, a challenge for educators and policy makers is to provide parents of vulnerable children with the skills and resources necessary to foster and support school readiness.

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