

Interim Report on Key Findings Phase One Early Words Evaluation

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**submitted by
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A. Project Description

Early Words is a training and mentoring initiative designed to improve children's early language development and literacy skills by enhancing the quality of services provided by child care providers in Multnomah County. Research has clearly shown that children who are placed in higher-quality day care settings, and in particular, in environments in which early literacy and language development are emphasized, have more positive developmental outcomes. This report highlights the results from the evaluation of the first round of training and mentoring provided by the Oregon Center for Career Development in Childhood Care and Education and the Multnomah County Library. A second round of data collection is currently ongoing. The second round is focused on: (1) observations of provider practices prior to the training; and (2) assessing child early literacy who are receiving care in higher vs. lower quality environments.

B. Evaluation Methods

Data were collected in three ways¹:

1. Interviews with trainers and mentors providing the program.
2. Mail surveys of child care providers (program participants).
3. Observations of child care providers (program participants).

C. Key Findings

C1. Who Participated in Early Words?

Participants included a range of providers in terms of expertise, training, type of care (center vs. family day care). While the majority of providers were white/Caucasian, a significant number of minority providers were also represented (about 35% of participants, including Hispanic, African-American, Asian, and Bi/Multi-racial). Slightly over one-third of the providers served children speaking English as a second language. About 60% of providers also served low-

¹ It should be noted that because of the timing of the evaluation, it was impossible to obtain pretest data on program participants, and thus, these results are based only on information gathered after participating in the program. Thus, it is more difficult to determine whether changes were, in fact, due to the program itself. The evaluation is currently working to obtain pre-test data from another sample of providers to allow a better determination of the kinds of changes that the program may be causing.

income children. One of the goals of Early Words was to engage providers serving low-income and minority children, and it appears that good progress was made in reaching this goal.

C2. What Were Providers Beliefs and Attitudes about Literacy and Language Practices After Early Words?

One of the first steps towards changing provider practices is to change their beliefs and attitudes about the importance of early language development and what it takes to create an environment that supports language and literacy. The evaluation found that, after participating in Early Words:

- **Over 75% of participating providers agreed that the following literacy-enhancing activities were “very important”:** reading to children every day; modeling reading and writing; helping children learn alphabet letters; allowing children daily free access to books and writing materials; having diverse cultures represented in books and writing materials; talking to children about daily routines; asking children about stories while reading; and sounding out words for children.

Thus, it appears that participants in Early Words are showing beliefs and attitudes that reflect the importance of key literacy-related behaviors.

C3. What Were the Quality of the Literacy and Language Environments Among Providers?

Another goal of Early Words was to help providers to learn about concrete changes they could make to their child care settings to best support children’s early language and literacy development. The evaluation found that after participating in Early Words:

Providers self-reported making concrete changes to their environments, specifically:

- Over 75% of providers reported creating or expanding a “book nook”
- Over 60% of providers reported creating or expanding a children’s “listening center”
- Allowing children to have more free access to books and materials
- Allowing children to have more daily access to writing/age-appropriate marking materials

Trained observers who went to participating providers’ child care sites found that:

(1) Over 70% of providers had the following literacy-related materials and displays:

- Books displayed where children could access them
- Displays highlighting alphabet letters, of which 38% were high quality
- A “book nook,” or special place for reading, and of these, 52% were rated as high in quality
- Children’s names as part of visual displays, of which 36% were high quality
- Books and materials that reflected multiple cultures and ethnic groups

(2) Between 50-70% of providers had the following literacy related materials and displays in place:

- More than 5 books per child available
- High quality children's literature
- Materials and books in other languages (if serving children speaking English as a second language)

(3) Less than 50% of providers had the following literacy-related materials and displays in place:

- Displays of posters, stuffed animals, or other materials related to particular books or book themes, although of those who did, 69-75% were high quality
- Book making or book repair materials available
- Alphabet strips, words important to the children's name, or other copying/tracing materials available
- Labels for objects around the room (e.g., a door labeled "door")
- Story retelling centers or materials (flannel boards, puppets, etc)
- Age-appropriate paper and writing or marking materials available to children

C4. What Kinds of Literacy and Language Enhancing Behaviors Were Providers Using?

Early Words also provided training to help providers learn about positive ways that they could interact with children to support language and literacy.

Trained observers found that:

- 78% of providers had a daily schedule that included reading
- 75% of providers encouraged children to write or make pre-writing marks on paper
- 55% of providers engaged in "some" or "a lot" of language-supportive activities (singing, talking to children about daily activities, extending children's words or phrases)
- 52.5 % of providers used storybook reading routines and extenders (puppets, etc)
- 37.5% of providers engaged in "some" or "a lot" of interactions supporting alphabetic awareness (pointing out letters, reading and pointing at letters for children)

Providers themselves reported that since Early Words:

- Over half reported that they had better "reading out loud" skills
- About one-third of providers reported engaging in "a lot more" language-supportive activities
- About one-third of providers reported engaging in "a lot more" modeling of writing, labeling of objects
- About one-third reported working "a lot more" with children on alphabet letters

D. What Have We Learned So Far? Summary and Recommendations

Overall, trained observers rated the quality of the literacy and language environments for children among participating providers, and found:

- 28% had low quality language and literacy environments
- 40% had medium quality language and literacy environments
- 32% had high quality language and literacy environments

In general, providers operating in center-based child care settings tended to have higher quality environments, compared to family day care providers.

These initial findings suggest that there is still significant room for improvement in the quality of the language and literacy environments among providers, even those who participated in Early Words. Positive attitudinal changes were reported, and thus it appears that providers have adopted positive beliefs about the importance of early language and literacy development. Further, it appears that providers have begun to make some concrete changes to their environments, especially related to engaging in book reading, providing books and reading materials, and engaging in language-supportive interactions with children.

However, more improvements, at least for some providers, are still needed. Such improvements may require additional focused mentoring that can help providers identify specific ways to improve the quality of their language and literacy environments. Additional training may also be helpful to further reinforce basic concepts; to offer child care providers additional ideas, information, and resources promoting language and literacy development; and, problem solving strategies for managing materials and creating time to implement information from the training.