

Onondaga Citizens League meeting notes—June 12, 2013

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Early Childhood Education/School Readiness Study Committee Meeting held at ProLiteracy, 104 Marcellus St., Syracuse

Study Co-chairs: Paul Predmore and Laurie Black

Presenters: Desalyn De-Souza, SUNY Empire State College; and Nancy Jenner Gabriel, Onondaga Community College.

OCL: Sandra Barrett and Becky Sernett

Summary: Today's meeting provided insight into early childhood (birth to age 3) development, particularly in regards to the importance of the child's relationship(s) with his or her caregiver(s).

Upcoming Meetings: All meetings will be held from 11:30 a.m. to 1 p.m. at ProLiteracy, 104 Marcellus Street, Syracuse. The next meeting dates are as follows, with information on which subcommittees will be giving presentations:

- Tuesday, June 25—Local Data and Funding
- Wednesday, July 10—Family Supports
- Tuesday, July 23—Delivery Systems

Subcommittees:

Committee members are invited to participate on one (or more) of the subcommittees listed below. Subcommittee topics can be considered the main themes that have emerged so far in the Early Childhood Education discussions, and these themes need further research, development and refinement. Subcommittees meet separately from the larger committee to discuss these topics, gather research/resources and eventually present what they've learned to the main committee. To sign up for a subcommittee, contact Sandra Barrett at 315-443-4846 or ssbarret@uc.syr.edu.

- **Local Data and Funding:** 0-5 population and poverty census data; child care supply and need; local statistics on school readiness, literacy, absenteeism, graduation rates, etc.; public investments in child care in Onondaga County.
- **Family Supports:** current parenting programs and other family support programs; summer and after-school programs.
- **Delivery System:** quality and effectiveness indicators; networks and partnerships; priorities.
- **Model Programs and Practices:** summary of national research findings on early childhood education and learning; examples of effective programs from other communities; examples of local best practices (Chemung County may be a good place to start).

Today's Topic: Early Childhood Development – Accompanying PPT is linked to the study website under Presentations.

Desalyn De-Souza, assistant professor at SUNY Empire State College, began the presentation by showing video of an example of the “Still Face” experiment, which studies an infant’s social and emotional development. (The video can be watched online at www.youtube.com/watch?v=apzXGEbZht0.)

In this experiment, a mother and her one-year-old daughter play and interact with one another for a little while, and then the mother presents a “still face” to the child, not reacting to the baby’s attempts at engagement. In the scene the committee was shown, the baby becomes frustrated and upset by her unresponsive mother until the mother returns to her normal, engaging behavior. The experiment was developed by Edward Tronick, director of the child development unit at Boston’s Children’s Hospital. Tronick was one of the early researchers to show how a caregiver’s emotions and behavior can profoundly affect a child.

“For young children,” De-Souza said, “development occurs in the context of relationships.” These relationships include children’s daily “micro exchanges” with their caregivers, who should be defined as “any person who is in a relationship with this child.”

There are four key goals for children to develop by age 3:

1. “State regulation” (a way of self-soothing and self-control);
2. Relationship of trust with his or her caregiver so that he or she can separate from the caregiver to explore his/her world;
3. A sense of self (autonomy and independence); and
4. An understanding of social rules and empathy.

“Why would some of these experiences be important for school readiness?” De-Souza asked. The most successful kids in the classroom are those who can do these four things, she said. Social-emotional development is “key” for young children, she said.

A lot of the learning occurs during the “mismatch and repair” of the relationship bond between child and caregiver. For example, De-Souza said, we are in harmony with our kids for only a small percentage of our day. Most of the time, the child is learning how to repair this relationship with the caregiver, and it is through this process of “reparation” that learning occurs. When the baby in the “Still Face” video couldn’t get her mother to respond, she reached out, smiled, laughed, and squealed, and when these usual attempts at repairing the relationship with her mother didn’t work, she grew upset and cried.

In mismatch and repair, there is what is known as the “good, bad and ugly.” The good is when child and caregiver are matched in harmony. The bad is when there’s a mismatch and the child then has to learn how to repair, and the ugly is when the repair fails (or there is no repair).

The Importance of Play

“We can teach a whole college course on play,” De-Souza said. Play is an important

part of the relationship between child and caregiver, and caregivers need to teach their children how to play. Children play with their hands, make sounds, use their mouths, and explore their world by touch—this all is important to their development. “It’s not [about] the toy,” she said. “That’s just the tool that they use to engage in the relationship.”

Gestures pave the way for early sentences, she said. Consider this: A child points to a cookie on the counter. The adult says, “Do you want to eat a cookie?” This will then lead the child to string a few words together, so that with the pointing, he or she will eventually say, “Eat cookie.” And then this will become a complete sentence.

“If there is no model for language,” De-Souza said, “children will use gestures to fill this void. But if they do have a model, the gestures help to advance the language that is present.

“There are entire degree programs that study this,” she said.

Vocabulary and Early Literacy

Next, Nancy Jenner Gabriel, professor of Human Services and Teacher Education at Onondaga Community College, discussed vocabulary and early literacy. She quoted results of research conducted in 2003 by Betty Hart and Todd Risely that found: “By age 3, children from well-to-do families have a working vocabulary of 1,116 words, compared to 749 words for children in working-class families and 525 words for children on welfare.” This is known as the “30 million word gap.”

“If you haven’t heard the words,” she said. “you can’t speak or understand the words.” And the number of words a child knows is a good indicator of reading comprehension.

And this learning occurs during the relationship the child has with a caregiver and the experiences she or he has during the day. “Quality childhood experiences make a difference,” Gabriel said.

Early childhood is typically defined as the period from birth to age 8 (or third grade). In New York State, teachers can become certified in early childhood education by taking one online course, and Gabriel calls this troubling. There’s a “huge” amount of information (even entire college degrees) in childhood development, she said, and how can a teacher become certified in it after one class? One area the committee could examine and recommend might be professional development for people working with kids.

In terms of their understanding of language and the world, young children are very literal, can still have difficulty distinguishing between fantasy and reality, and have little to no concept of time. “History for a five year old is what happened yesterday,” she said.

Children are also tactile and physical in their learning. “If it hasn’t been in the hand,” she said, “it can’t go into the brain.”

Educational programs can typically be broken into two categories: Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP) and Direct Instruction (DI). In a DAP classroom, learning is more playful and interactive. In a DI classroom, a teacher is lecturing or demonstrating, and the children are passive. “Kids are active learners,”

she said.

Executive Functioning Skills

“Minds are built, not born,” Gabriel said. Executive functioning skills—which include self-regulation, working memory, and mental flexibility—are like the “air traffic control system in the brain.” They help children function and learn a lot of information during a day filled with distractions.

A preschool curriculum called “Tools of the Mind,” which has children plan their play for the day and adjust it as needed, is an example of a program that encourages executive functioning skill development. “Tools of the Mind” may be something that the committee would want to further investigate, Gabriel said.

What does all of this tell us? “That Attention to relationships and knowledge of child development must drive what we do in the early childhood environment.”

Adult Component

Adults are a key component to a child’s successful development, but some adults don’t have the skills to help their children or they suffer from “toxic stress.” Children who are that the greatest risk are those who experience a “burden” of risk factors, such abuse, poverty and drug abuse.

The committee was shown the video “Building Adult Capabilities to Improve Child Outcomes: A Theory of Change”—online at www.youtube.com/watch?v=urU-a_FsS5Y—which discussed how communities “need to do more active skill building” in the adult caregivers. Until the investment is made to help adults, the video argued, communities would not see a “bigger impact” in its children’s development.

One question the committee could examine, De-Souza said, is, “What is the toxic stress in the community and how can you change this?” Then, the community would need to develop policy to further support this change. Other questions to consider: “What are the challenges in this community? What outcomes do we need to improve?” And, she said, the committee could pose these questions to the subcommittees at future meetings.

Small Group Discussion

Next, the committee broke into small groups to discuss the presentation and its local application. The following ideas and questions were then discussed in the larger group:

- Teachers see children start to struggle by age 7 if they don’t have the foundation of the developmental goals discussed today; we need to focus more on birth to age 3.
- How do we break the cycle of generational deficits?
- What should we have in our community to help support the adults?
- How do we ensure that programs developed to support the child also involve the adults?
- Are there model programs? What are they? What have they done and how can we apply them here?

- How do you get parents motivated to become more involved?
- Providers need to build relationships with parents.
- Need more quality pre-K programs led by adults who understand these critical childhood developmental goals
- Not enough emphasis on parent education
- There's a misunderstanding of how kids learn ("push down" of academic learning); many kids no longer have recess at school and many kindergartens lack sensory learning play stations
- Do we know what the factors are that discourage parents from becoming involved? ("access issues"—lack of transportation, cultural differences, cost)
- Quality infant care is difficult to find locally

Touchpoints

Presenters and committee members also discussed Touchpoints, which was developed by pediatrician T. Berry Brazelton. Touchpoints is a "map" of behavioral and emotional developments for children from birth to age 3. It is also a philosophy that guides providers and caregivers to treat the parent as the "expert," the most important person in that child's life, and to help him or her do what's needed for the child at any specific stage.

The Onondaga County Health Department has been trained in the Touchpoint philosophy, and Linda Karmen, the department's deputy commissioner, said the philosophy helps strengthen the adult-to-adult relationships. It becomes a "continuous approach to help parents work through" the specific challenges that come with each developmental stage. "When you have a Touchpoints community," Karmen said, "all of the stakeholders are all trained in the same philosophy." At Children's Hospital in Boston, for example, every adult that a parent might come into contact with is given Touchpoints training, even the janitors.

Touchpoints is strong locally in the Health Department and at Catholic Charities, but Karmen said it has been difficult to sustain at child-care facilities because of the high staff turnover rate.

It may be another program for the committee to investigate to see how it can be further applied to our community.

Next Study Meeting

The next committee meeting will be at 11:30 a.m. at ProLiteracy on Tuesday, June 25.