

Myths and Realities of Early Care and Development

Samuel J. Meisels

Erikson Institute

©Samuel J. Meisels

The Myth of the First Three Years of Life

**The first three years are
no more important to a
child's development than
any other time in life.**

“The Myth of the First Three Years”

According to John Bruer, the “Myth” is that (1) the brain learns best and is unusually plastic only during the early years of neuronal development, and (2) the experiences we have during those years are particularly powerful and have long-term, irreversible consequences.

Early Life Experiences and Early Development

What happens during the first months and years of life matters a lot, not because this period of development provides an indelible blueprint for adult well-being, but because it sets either a sturdy or fragile stage for what follows.

Neurons to Neighborhoods, p. 5

The Engine of Change in the First Three Years

*Sensitive parenting--not
educational toys or Mozart
CDs--provides the
essential catalysts for
early intellectual growth.*

--Ross Thompson (2001)

The Myth of the Preeminence of Cognition

**Cognitive development is
the single most important
area of development and
should be emphasized
above all other domains.**

The Domains of Early Childhood Pedagogy

Cognitive, social-emotional, and physical development are complementary, mutually supportive areas of growth all requiring active attention in the preschool years. . . All are therefore related to early learning and later academic achievement. . .

Eager to Learn, p. 307

Social and Cognitive Advance in Early Childhood

The elements of early intervention programs that enhance social and emotional development are just as important as the components that enhance linguistic and cognitive competence.

Neurons to Neighborhoods, p. 398

Heart Start

Characteristics of Children Who Are Ready To Learn



- Confidence
- Curiosity
- Intentionality
- Self-control
- Relatedness
- Capacity to communicate
- Cooperativeness

The Myth of a Magic Bullet for Teaching Reading

**Phonics is the best way to
teach young children to
read.**

Literacy and Life - 1

“The most basic educational skill is reading. The most basic obligation of any school is to teach reading.”

George W. Bush, 2001

Literacy and Life - 2

“Understanding the importance of literacy is critical to our nation’s educational, economic, and social health.”

Kurt Landgraf, President, ETS

Literacy and Life - 3

“The number of jail cells that we need in the future is determined by the number of kids who aren’t reading at the end of third grade.”

Cheryl James-Ward, Principal, Long Beach, CA

What is Phonics Instruction?

- Matching letters to sounds
- Alphabet and letter recognition
- Conventions of print
- Learning rhyming words & word families
- Vocabulary instruction
- Mastering the “alphabetic principle”: that there are systematic and predictable relationships between written letters and spoken words

A “Meaning-Based” Literacy Perspective

- Assumes that young children can be engaged in language and literacy learning before they are able to read and write conventionally**
- Reading, writing, and listening and speaking are part of the daily activities of the classroom where teachers read books to children, engage them in play with letters and sounds, and encourage them to participate in literacy-rich learning centers, among other activities**

Emphasizing *All* of the Processes of Learning to Read

- **Systematic phonics instruction by itself does not help students acquire all the processes they need to become successful readers.**
- **Phonics needs to be combined with other essential instructional components to create a complete and balanced reading program.**
- ***By emphasizing all of the processes that contribute to growth in reading, teachers will have the best chance of making every child a reader.***

Ehri, Nunes, Stahl, & Willows, 2002

Effects of Multiple Teaching Methods on Learning to Read - 1

- **The most effective way to teach children to read is to combine the components of phonics and whole language.**
- **Although phonics is an essential part of beginning reading instruction, it must be taught in conjunction with meaningful reading and writing activities and comprehension instruction.**

Effects of Multiple Teaching Methods on Learning to Read - 2

- Children display greater motivation to learn and more optimal approaches to learning in phonics/whole language combined curricula.
- Poor children may be at double jeopardy if they are enrolled in didactic classrooms because they do not receive extensive language and literacy experiences at home or at school.

Early Childhood Longitudinal Study (Yange Xue, 2002)

The “Middle Road”: A Balanced Approach

- There is significant research evidence that phonics and whole language can coexist and complement each other.
- A balanced approach combines skills instruction with literature and language-rich activities.
- *Preventing Reading Difficulties* points out that there is no identical mix of instructional materials and strategies that will work for every child. Effective teachers “craft a special mix of instructional ingredients for every child they work with.” (p. 2)

The Myth of Measuring Readiness

Readiness can be assessed in terms of a common set of indicators and achievements that can be expected of all children at the start of school.

Readiness: A “Mischievous Half-Truth”

The idea of readiness is a mischievous half truth . . . largely because it turns out that one teaches readiness or provides opportunities for its nurture, one does not simply wait for it.

Jerome Bruner, 1966

Problems with School Readiness Tests

- **Early development is episodic and uneven**
- **Social knowledge components are typically culturally-biased**
- **Validity of the tests is poor**
- **Test items often imply teaching**
- **Content is inconsistent with teachers' views of school success**
- **The concept of "readiness" is relative**

Predicting Children's Competence from Readiness Assessments

- On average, only 25% of variance in early academic/cognitive performance is predicted from preschool or kindergarten cognitive status.
- Only 10% or less of the variance in K–2 social/behavioral measures is predicted by social/behavioral assessments at preschool or kindergarten.
- *Instability or change may be the rule rather than the exception during this period.*

Readiness Tests and Readiness for School

The use of readiness tests . . . is implicitly based on the premise that children are not able to take advantage of school until they are “ready,” and that biological maturation and experience outside of school prepares them better than experience in a school context. The evidence supports neither of these assumptions.

Deborah Stipek, 2001

The Hippocratic Oath Applied to Assessment

When test or assessment information is used for placement, school readiness, or other high-stakes decisions, it behooves educators to pay attention to the consequences and to make sure that they are educationally beneficial.

First, do no harm.

Eager to Learn, p. 235

*Making Assessments of
“Readiness” Meaningful*

**Meaningful assessment
of young children’s
readiness to learn calls
for a comprehensive
view of learning and
development.**

Our Challenge


**To transform assessment
information into meaningful
intervention and instruction**

Fusing Assessment and Instruction

By linking assessment and teaching or intervention, more information is available to answer our questions about children's learning, and the questions become part of a process of continuous refinement and application.

Benefits of an Observational Assessment System

1. Focuses on what children know and can do
2. Engages teachers/caregivers in the assessment process
3. Demonstrates progress over time
4. Adaptable for diverse students
5. Understandable to parents
6. Instructional in orientation; *not* high stakes



**The best way to
evaluate a child's
performance is to
study performance,
not something else.**

The Ounce Scale™

**Samuel J. Meisels, Amy Laura Dombro, Dorothea B. Marsden,
Donna R. Weston, and Abigail M. Jewkes**

- 1. Contextually-sensitive**
- 2. Functionally-appropriate**
- 3. Parent-child focused**
- 4. Relationship-enhancing**
- 5. Observationally-based**
- 6. Relevant to program-planning**

The Ounce Scale

Basic Characteristics

1. A relationship-building tool
2. Enhances parent and provider knowledge, control, and empowerment
3. Helps differentiate and expand parents' and providers' perceptions of their children

The Ounce Scale

Basic Characteristics (cont.)

- 4. Focuses on functional accomplishments, not splinter skills, milestones, or ratings**
- 5. Structures interactions that support the baby's growth**
- 6. Blends assessment and intervention**
- 7. Fosters positive relationships between families and providers**



**Understanding the child
within context is key to
understanding the child**

Well Begun is Half Done

The importance of early childhood for the intellectual, social, and emotional growth of human beings is probably . . . one of the most revolutionary discoveries of modern times. . . . where emotional and mental growth are concerned, well begun is indeed half done.

Jerome Bruner, 1980