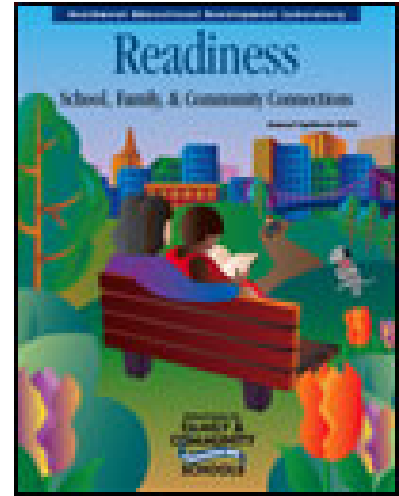


Exploring Children's Abilities as they Transition to Kindergarten: An Overview of SEDL's Latest Research Synthesis on Readiness

Lacy Wood, of SEDL's National Center for Family and Community Connections with Schools gave an overview of the Center's latest research synthesis: *Readiness: School, Family, and Community Connections*. Lacy's presentation focused on the seven key findings brought forth from the research, recommendations to help practitioners put the research findings to practical use, and recommendations for additional research to address the topic of readiness.



As part of SEDL's [Regional Educational Laboratory \(REL\)](#), the National Center for Family and Community Connections with Schools bridges research and practice to remove barriers to student achievement. The Center links people with research-based information and resources that they can use to effectively connect schools, families, and communities. It emphasizes connections that directly impact student achievement in reading and mathematics, as well as connections that contribute to the students' overall success in school and in life. The Center reviews emerging findings and research to develop an online database, annual conferences and annual reports to help advance procedural knowledge and provides training and networking across the REL system to link research findings to practice. The *Readiness* synthesis is the fourth in a series of reports to help local school, community

A Look at the Research on Readiness

The term readiness as it relates to schools, families, and communities is a broad and multifaceted concept with a variety of definitions and approaches. Yet, studies on the topic are very narrow. Bound by the scope of what has been studied empirically, the Readiness synthesis focuses predominately on children's readiness, rather than ready schools. This research synthesis explored three major questions related to children's readiness and family, school, and community connections:

- What is known about differences in children's skills and performance at kindergarten entry and the contextual factors associated with those differences?
- What is known about early childhood or preschool interventions that include family or community components?
- What is known about children's transition to kindergarten, including transition beliefs and practices and patterns of family-school interactions?

About the Key Findings:

Forty-eight studies were identified from research since 1998. From the array of information found in these studies the research findings from this synthesis on readiness can be broken down into the three following areas:

What is known about differences in children's skills and performance at kindergarten entry and the contextual factors associated with those differences?

1. Young children enter kindergarten with a range of cognitive and social skills that appear to make a difference in their achievement during the kindergarten year. This seems to be of long-term importance; children who get off to a good start in kindergarten tend to maintain that advantage as they progress through school.
2. Young children's home environment—including both family background factors and interactions between children and other family members—is strongly associated with their relative skills and abilities upon entry to kindergarten. Other significant correlations exist, as well, including participation in early child care and education.

What is known about early childhood or preschool interventions that include family or community components?

3. Early child care and education programs that include family components can boost children's educational success, both short-term and long-term. However, the impact of specific features of such programs, including family components, remain largely untested and unknown. In addition, significant issues of cost, quality, and context complicate this finding.
4. Specific strategies for helping parents support their young children's emerging literacy and numeracy skills can produce gains among children from both low- and middle-income families. However, the research base is limited to only a handful of strategies.

What is known about children's transition to kindergarten, including transition beliefs and practices and patterns of family-school interactions?

5. Families and teachers tend to have somewhat different perceptions about what matters most in children's readiness for kindergarten. The impact of these different perceptions, if any, on children's readiness and their kindergarten achievement has not been documented.
6. Although families of all types of backgrounds are often involved in their children's preschool educational or child care programs, their involvement tends to decline when the children enter kindergarten. Both the types and frequency of family-school contact tend to change from preschool to kindergarten.
7. Although a growing body of research describes schools' transition practices, little to no research assesses the effectiveness of specific school supports for children's transition to kindergarten. Descriptions of transition practices and barriers indicate that the most individualized, relationship-building activities tend to be the least used and that differences in transition practices are associated with school characteristics.

Recommendations for Strengthening Local Policy and Practice

1: Provide children with early educational experiences.

Perhaps the strongest conclusion that can be drawn from this research base is that early education for children—including programs for children in poverty who are most seriously at risk for school failure—*can* make a difference when those children reach kindergarten and beyond. Yet, a significant minority of children still lack ready access to early education.

2: Help families provide learning resources and experiences for their young children.

Parent-training strategies that are targeted specifically to strengthen young children's pre-academic skills have shown good promise in terms of both early literacy and early mathematics skills.

3: Work to ensure fidelity in implementing model interventions.

Ensuring that model strategies are actually implemented as intended is a key, but often overlooked, factor in the effectiveness of interventions.

4: Build kindergarten teachers' awareness of the long-term impacts of differences in children's pre-academic skills when they enter school.

Studies suggest that many kindergarten teachers tend to downplay the importance of children's pre-academic skills at kindergarten entry, emphasizing instead social-emotional traits and capabilities. However, children's earliest school performance, including their early kindergarten performance, generally sets a pattern for their future success or lack of it.

5: Encourage families to maintain their contact and involvement as their children move from child care or preschool environments to kindergarten.

No matter what their backgrounds are or how involved they are in their children's preschool or early care settings, parents' at-school involvement diminishes when their children start kindergarten. The consistency of this pattern suggests that schools must take the initiative to alter families' perceptions of the roles and levels of involvement expected of them.

6: Provide a variety of supports to help ease children's transition to kindergarten.

Schools can take specific steps to increase teachers' use of in-depth transition activities, including providing training, providing supplemental funds for teachers' transition-related activities during the summer, and providing teachers with class lists as early as possible before the start of school. Particularly in urban schools and schools with substantial populations of low-income and racial or ethnic minority students, school administrators need to emphasize transition activities as a priority and to provide the necessary supports for kindergarten teachers.

Recommendations for Strengthening the Research Base

Much more research is needed to provide a useful knowledge base that can help guide schools, families, and communities as they decide how best to invest in supporting children's readiness. Well-designed randomized controlled trials are needed

- to replicate and assess the need for updating existing models, with larger and more varied student and family populations, in more varied school and community contexts, and with resources that reflect those available to most school systems;
- to isolate and assess the relative influence and effectiveness of specific model components, particularly family involvement and support components, and to explore the complex interactions among factors that may influence the effectiveness of readiness support strategies;
- to assess program effectiveness among specific child and family subpopulations, in particular exploring the extent to which multiple family risk factors may affect families' and children's capacity to participate in and benefit from program services; and
- to assess the long-term effects of model interventions in light of variations in participating children's later school contexts and quality.

In addition, there is a need to design, implement, and assess new model interventions that

- incorporate in-depth transition strategies,
- address the concept of *ready schools*,
- address and accommodate the great variations in young children's developmental trajectories, and
- include resources and strategies to address the persistent and pervasive risks associated with extreme poverty.

In designing and conducting intervention studies, researchers need to attend to several issues that have handicapped many previous efforts, including

- striking a balance between large-scale demonstration studies (which all too often suffer from inconsistent implementation and attrition) and sample populations that are too small to allow useful analysis of subgroups or to generalize beyond the limited populations studied;
- developing and applying clear, consistent, and adequately complex definitions of readiness, of families, and of family involvement; and

- using assessment measures that are appropriate for young children, particularly in terms of the substantial variations in children's developmental pace, and that effectively measure critical readiness skills and activities.

For more information on this research synthesis or to download a copy visit: www.sedl/connections.

(Source: Readiness, School, Family, & Community Connections, Southwest Educational Development Laboratory website, Lacy Wood Readiness: School Family, and Community Connections presentation slides September 2005)