

Component Two: IEP Connections

“They are able, because they think they are able.”

- Virgil

“My teacher thought I was smarter than I was, so I was.”

- a six-year-old child

Early literacy and language skills begin in infancy and continue to develop throughout the preschool years and beyond. As discussed in Component One, children’s emerging literacy and later literacy success depends largely on their acquisition of oral language skills, development of phonological awareness skills, and numerous exposures and experiences with print during their preschool years.

Current research suggests that children at risk of developing reading disabilities can be identified before experiencing reading failure (Catts, 1997). Children who exhibit difficulty learning how to talk are at significant risk for having problems learning to read. Preschool children who are identified as having disabilities face a significant risk of difficulty in acquiring literacy skills. Various studies report that up to 80% of preschool age children with language disorders later display some degree of reading impairment (Adams, 1990; Jenkins & Bowen, 1994; Watson et al., 1994).

Early Intervention

Research has established that early intervention can have a significantly positive effect on children’s development. Bishop and Adams (1990) reported that children who overcame their early language difficulties before five years of age were not at risk of developing literacy problems. Those who still had some evidence of language impairment

after 5½ years of age were likely to experience difficulties learning to read and spell. Phonological awareness is often one skill area that is lacking in these children.

As defined in Component One, phonological awareness is the understanding that spoken words are made with individual sounds. A lack of phonological awareness is a limitation for young children that may play a major role in future literacy development. Children who enter elementary school with a beginning understanding of the phonological structure of language, or who develop this awareness as a result of early instruction, tend to progress smoothly in learning to read and write (Treiman & Cassar, 1997). Young children, including those with developmental delays, can learn phonological awareness skills (Hodson, 1994).

Early intervention holds a promise of helping reduce reading failure and the negative consequences of that failure (Catts, 1997). Simply, early intervention makes the difference for many young children with disabilities or who are at risk of reading or spelling failure.

Risk Factors, Characteristics, and Early Language Indicators for Literacy Difficulties

Risk factors of literacy difficulties include, but are not limited to: lack of parent/child language interaction, lack of motivation, poverty, and developmental disabilities and delays (Paulson et al, 2001). Students with disabilities are more likely to drop out of school than students without disabilities of similar socioeconomic, racial, linguistic, and cultural background (Council for Exceptional Children, 1994). For students identified as speech impaired, the drop out rate was 32.5%; for students with learning disabilities, 36.1%. These high drop out rates were correlated with failure in basic academic subjects, high absenteeism, and a lack of social bonds with classmates and

teachers. Poor reading and written languages skills emerged as primary causes of failure in academic subjects (Vincent, 1996).

Early, consistent, and systematic experience with literacy activities will increase a child's readiness to participate in the general classroom and decrease a child's likelihood of school failure and dropout. Ample evidence from child development and early childhood education points to the benefit of these activities for children, particularly when there is a simultaneous focus on the involvement of their family and community (Vincent, 1996).

Children who are likely to have difficulty learning to read and write when formal instruction begins in the elementary grades are often those who display any or all of the following characteristics:

- They begin school without a strong foundation in the oral language structure.
- They have an inability to attend to the sound structure of spoken and written words.
- They have limited experiences with print, which hinders their understanding of the purpose and function of reading and writing (Catts, 1997; Jenkins & Bowen, 1994; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998; Stackhouse & Snowling, 1996).
- Among the poorest readers in later years are children with underdeveloped phonological awareness in preschool and kindergarten (Ball, 1993).

Research has identified several early language characteristics that are indicators for possible difficulties in developing literacy (Snowling & Stackhouse, 1996). The causal relationship has not been firmly established. However, many young children who had language difficulties and also experienced difficulties with literacy development displayed the following characteristics:

2½ years. When children at two and a half years of age in the early stages of language development use short, simple sentences and their word production is not very accurate, they are displaying some difficulty figuring out the structure of language. Their speech is often characterized by the use of mainly single word utterances, a small number of speech sounds (typically /b, m, d/), and a limited number of vocabulary words.

3 years. At three years of age, difficulty understanding language, difficulty naming common objects accurately (e.g., saying “cow” for a horse, a “sit down thing” for chair, “fork” for spoon), or speech that is difficult to understand are indicators of literacy difficulties.

4 years. Four-year-old children who experience difficulties with language structure and putting words together in sentences appropriately (e.g., “she-her going to-a store” for “she is going to the store” are at risk for experiencing literacy difficulties. Another indicator is word junction problems, which occur when word boundaries are not easily determined (e.g., when asked if the child wanted “to sit on a pillow or a chair,” the response was “pillowora” combining three words). Another indicator is difficulty differentiating between similar sounding words and producing complex sound clusters and words (e.g., saying “ice fream” for ice cream or “pasgetii” for spaghetti or “I fed the pigeons to the flag” for “I pledge allegiance to the flag...”).

5 years. Oral language indicators for children entering kindergarten may include difficulties with accurate naming or word-finding problems. There may be a lack of print awareness, poor letter and sound knowledge, poor rhyming skills, and a limited sensitivity of phonological awareness.

Some educators tend to believe that learning to read does not begin until children encounter formal, sequenced, direct instruction and that emerging reading and writing behaviors are not real, but are precursors. Because it is sometimes thought that children with special needs often are not “ready” to interact with print, they may have and be provided very limited experiences with reading and writing activities (Watson et al., 1994).

Current research overwhelmingly supports the importance of facilitating emerging literacy and language skills in all preschool age children as a critical foundation for literacy development. Increasingly, the programs that children enter after their experience in early childhood special education settings are general kindergarten classrooms.

Developmentally appropriate literacy activities for toddlers and preschoolers are a powerful determinant of their enjoyment and success with primary grade literacy activities, and the successful inclusion of children with disabilities in elementary level settings is enhanced when they can participate in the “general” curriculum (Vincent, 1996).

The Montana Early Literacy Project Model embraces the notion that early childhood programs should not replicate formal reading instruction provided in elementary school. Instead, they should include experiences that promote children’s development of vocabulary, concept understanding and reasoning skills, listening comprehension, expanded use of sentence structures and sense of story, sensitivity to the sounds of language, and print awareness (Paulson et al, 2001).

Assessment

The development of emerging literacy skills in young children is too important to allow a “wait and see” approach. To facilitate the development of literacy skills, children need to acquire oral language skills, develop phonological awareness skills, and have many exposures and experiences with print. Identifying children’s strengths and needs in language and emerging literacy skill development allows educators to plan early and appropriate interventions.

If a parent, caregiver, or teacher has concerns about a child’s development, they can make a referral to their local school district. After obtaining parental permission in writing to assess the child, the evaluation process can begin. It is imperative that educators and service providers use a variety of both informal and formal assessment tools to determine children’s individual present levels of literacy and language skills, rather than using one assessment to determine a child’s skills. An example of a formal assessment is the *Peabody Picture Vocabulary* standardized test. Some examples of informal assessments are parent interviews, portfolios with samples of student work, language samples, the *Emerging Literacy Checklist*, and the *Emerging Literacy Screening* (Paulson et al, 2001).

Emerging Literacy Checklist. The *Emerging Literacy Checklist* may be used by early childhood educators, speech and language pathologists, parents, and caregivers to identify the general level of children’s literacy development. The items on the list provide a basis for determining which skills have been acquired, which skills can be enhanced, and which skills need to be developed.

The checklist is designed to provide information in the areas of language use, phonological awareness, and print awareness and can be used initially to identify the level of skill development and later to document the child’s progress and growth. It is

particularly important to identify skill areas that are not developing at an expected rate, especially those skills that are predictive of future difficulties with reading and writing. When delays are identified, appropriate interventions can facilitate the development of those skills. The specific assessment dates can be noted on the lines provided at the top of the form. Also, the date that skills were observed can be written on the line in front of specific items. Children's understanding of many basic concepts develops during the preschool years. (See Appendix B for the *Emerging Literacy Checklist*.)

Emerging Literacy Screening. Knowing the level of emerging literacy development children have attained is fundamental in designing the most appropriate educational program. To identify specific skill development, the *Emerging Literacy Screening* can be used to assess emerging literacy skills as part of a comprehensive evaluation in determining children's level of skill development. The results can be used to identify goals and objectives for specific children's Individualized Education Programs (IEPs). There is no standardization or normative data available for this screening instrument. The information obtained from the screening can be used as a guideline to estimate the rate of children's growth and areas of strength and need in their emerging literacy development. The screening items in each of the three areas are ordered in a general developmental sequence with earlier skills listed first followed by more complex skills. The skill items in the Language Use, Phonological Awareness, and Print Awareness sections begin to develop in children as young as two years. All of the skills on the screening should hopefully be acquired by the time children complete kindergarten.

The *Emerging Literacy Screening* is designed to be given individually to children ages three through six years. The administration time generally requires 10 to 20 minutes

depending on the child's participation, cooperation, and attention. The items in the *Emerging Literacy Screening* were chosen because of the relevance to developmental sequences in young children and the ease in identifying the particular skills. The list is in no way intended to be exhaustive of all the skills that are part of language development or emerging literacy. The listed skills provide a general picture of children's awareness and understanding of emerging literacy development in the areas of language use, phonological awareness, and print awareness which have been identified as being predictive of success or failure in learning to read and write. Identifying skill areas that are lacking and then providing appropriate activities to help children develop those skills, builds a strong foundation needed for the development of reading and writing. (See Appendix B for the *Emerging Literacy Screening* and instructions.)

Individualized Education Programs

Over 90% of preschool age children receiving special education services in the state of Montana are identified as having speech and language needs (McCarthy, 1996). Early communicative competence is already affected in these children, leading to the finding that later literacy competence also suffers. In fact, approximately half of these children identified during the preschool years as needing special education are then labeled as either learning disabled or speech and language impaired by third grade (Vincent, 1996).

After a child has been evaluated and identified by a Child Study Team (CST) as having special needs, a team writes an Individualized Education Program (IEP). The IEP team is comprised of the following: the child's parents and/or caregivers; advocates or any person who has knowledge of and interest in the child and who is invited by the child's family; the child's teachers; a representative of the public agency, other than the child's

teacher, who is qualified to provide, or supervise the provision of, special education; the child (when appropriate); other individuals at the discretion of the parents or agency; and member(s) of the evaluative team or related service providers with evaluative information to share from the Child Study Team. In addition, if transition services are being considered, a representative must be included from each agency providing such services (Bateman, 1996).

IEPs serve many purposes. For instance, they are a communication vehicle and contract between parents and school personnel that enable both, as equal participants, to jointly decide what the student's needs are, what services will be provided to meet those needs, and what the anticipated outcomes may be. The IEP provides an opportunity for parents and school personnel to come to a mutual agreement regarding the student's individual needs. It serves as an evaluation device for use in determining the extent of the student's progress toward meeting the prioritized goals and objectives. An IEP is a management tool as well as a written commitment of school resources, to ensure that each student's individual educational needs are addressed. Finally, the IEP serves as a monitoring instrument that may be used by parents, administrators, and authorized personnel to ensure that the student receives a free, appropriate public education (Bateman, 1996).

Effective IEPs individualize the child's program; specify all necessary special education, related services, and modifications; address behavior/discipline for every child for whom there is any reason to believe it may be an issue; base IEPs on the individual child's needs, not on present availability of services in the district; observe all procedural requirements of the law; and ensure meaningful parent participation remembering that the

parents are decision-makers just as other team members are (Bateman, 1996). IEP goals and objectives should address what the child needs to be successful, be understandable to families and all other team members, and be written so that they can be implemented in the classroom and child progress can be measured.

Changing View of Developmental Disabilities

Vincent (1994) identified the need for educators, service providers, and families to make a shift in the way they view and practice special education and to make a transition from the “Old Model” to the “New Model” of viewing and approaching developmental disabilities. The Old Model of practicing special education began with professionals identifying and explaining to parents a child’s deficits and then diagnosing or labeling a child with a disability. Next, the goal of professionals was to “fix” the child. However, it is now understood that people with disabilities are not broken and do not need or want to be “fixed.” While they may have certain neurological or physiological differences, they need people to have high expectations of them, to be recognized for their capabilities, and to be supported with appropriate resources and interventions to meet challenges.

The New Model of practicing special education begins by using a team approach, which includes the parents, to identify the strengths of a child and to look at capabilities and possibilities. Next the team’s goal is to identify supports and resources necessary for the child to be successful and to reach his full potential. Most importantly, embracing the New Model encourages home/school partnerships and the recognition that parents have a great deal to share with and to teach professionals, as they are experts with regard to their own children. (See Appendix B for Vincent’s “Changing View of Developmental Disabilities.”)

Mapping Systems Approach

Mapping, developed by Marsha Forest and Judith Snow in 1985, is a systems approach to help team members plan for the inclusion of students with special needs into general classrooms. The Mapping process is a way to put the “New Model” of special education into practice. Mapping is usually implemented as part of the IEP meeting process, but it can also be used during Child Study Team meetings, transition meetings, parent/teacher conferences, open houses, professional development goal setting, family orientations to a new program or school, or whenever there is a need to set a positive tone for a meeting.

The Mapping process drives inclusion and allows for all team members to participate and brainstorm during the meeting. The goal of the IEP team is to help children achieve and reach their highest potential, not to “fix” them. Mapping ensures that supports and resources will be in place when a child comes to school, and ensures that the team of family members, educators, and service providers all participate in the process of building on the child’s strengths to make possibilities become realities (Vincent, 1994).

There are three key questions at the heart of the Mapping process: 1) What are the child’s strengths? 2) What are the team’s hopes and dreams for the child? and 3) What are the child’s individual needs and the team’s concerns for the child? When team members participate in the Mapping process and collaboratively answer these three questions, they begin to build a positive relationship with both the child and her family. (See Appendix B for the IEP Mapping Form).

Five rules for the Mapping process.

The rules for the Mapping process have been adapted from Forest and Snow (1985).

Rule 1. The team uses three large pieces of butcher paper, which become the visual maps, to address each of the three key questions:

- Strengths become the present level of performance for the IEP
- Hopes and Dreams become the broad goals for the IEP
- Needs and Concerns become the short-term objectives for the IEP

Rule 2. The IEP team should identify one team member to be a Mapping facilitator and one team member to be a Mapping scribe. The facilitator makes introductions, keeps track of time, and ensures that educational jargon is eliminated and vocabulary used by team members is easily understood by everyone. The scribe validates what each team member contributes by writing down word-for-word what the speaker says on the butcher paper or maps.

Rule 3. Parents are invited to speak first. They can express what they know their child can do and what they see as their child’s strengths, skills, motivations, and interests.

Rule 4. Everyone on the team is an equal partner, and everyone has an opportunity to participate and contribute ideas, knowledge, and priorities for the child. There are no right or wrong answers or judgments made about contributions.

Rule 5. No one comes to the meeting with pre-written goals and objectives.

Because Mapping is a strengths and needs driven model, statements during the meeting are positive and focus first on what a child is able to do well. Mapping is family-centered, empowering families to share their knowledge with other team members and schools. Parents are recognized as experts and decision-makers regarding their child’s motivations, interests, and abilities. During the Mapping process good meeting manners

are fostered, because everyone participates, waits his turn, and listens while someone else is speaking.

Early Literacy and Language Sample Goals and Objectives for IEPs

Identifying young children's strengths and needs in the context of early literacy and language development allows educators to plan appropriate interventions that lead to literacy competence and can be bridged into the child's home and school experiences (Vincent, 1996). When writing IEPs for preschool children with disabilities, IEP teams must intentionally include goals and objectives that address emerging literacy and language skills within the five inter-related developmental domains identified in federal eligibility regulations for children with disabilities (Neilsen, et al., 1994). As stated in Component One, the five developmental domains are: 1) communication; 2) social, emotional, and behavioral; 3) physical; 4) self-help and independence; and 5) academic readiness.

The following are Early Literacy and Language Sample Goals and Objectives for IEPs. The goals and objectives are divided into the three areas that research has identified as critical for early literacy and language development: language use, print awareness, and phonological awareness.

Language use.

Goal: Understands basic concepts (i.e. up, down, over, under, etc.)

Objective 1: imitates model demonstration of basic concept

Objective 2: identifies basic concept by pointing to picture or object

Objective 3: expresses basic concept to describe picture or object

Goal: Uses speech that is understandable

Objective 1: uses speech that is understandable 50% of the time

Objective 2: uses speech that is understandable 75% of the time

Objective 3: uses speech that is understandable all of the time

Goal: Uses sentence structures appropriate for age

Objective 1: uses 2 – 4 word sentences

Objective 2: uses 5 – 7 word sentences

Objective 3: uses 8 – 10 word sentences

Goal: Uses rhythm in songs, nursery rhymes, and finger plays

Objective 1: fills in key words to familiar songs/finger plays

Objective 2: follows tune using half of words in verse

Objective 3: follows tune using most or all of words in verse

Goal: Relates a story using a sequence of events

Objective 1: tells a story using 3 related events

Objective 2: tells a story using 5 related events

Objective 3: tells a story with a defined beginning, middle, and ending

Phonological awareness.

Goal: Improves understanding of rhyming

Objective 1: recites words in verse that rhyme

Objective 2: identifies words that rhyme

Objective 3: produces strings of words that rhyme

Goal: Blends parts of speech into word units

Objective 1: blends 2 to 5 syllable words from syllables

Objective 2: blends beginning sound and rest of word in
monosyllabic words

Objective 3: blends monosyllabic words from sounds

Goal: Segments speech into word units

Objective 1: segments words into syllables

Objective 2: segments onset (beginning sound) and rime (rest of
word) in consonant-vowel-consonant (CVC) words

Objective 3: segments sounds in CVC words

Objective 4: segments sounds in CCVC words

Print awareness.

Goal: Understands the function and purpose of books

Objective 1: identifies the pictures and the words on a page

Objective 2: uses left to right sequence sweeping finger across
words in text

Objective 3: uses 1:1 word correspondence when pointing to words in
familiar text

Goal: Improves understanding of letter/sound relationship

Objective 1: sings the alphabet song

Objective 2: identifies letters in alphabet

Objective 3: identifies letter sounds

Goal: Improves writing development

Objective 1: uses mock letters in writing

Objective 2: uses random letter strings in writing

Objective 3: uses semiphonetic spelling of words in writing

Objective 4: uses phonetic spelling of words in writing

Examples of Early Literacy and Language Activities

Examples of activities that target early literacy and language IEP goals and objectives are located in Appendix B. Many of these activities are included in the Literacy Tubs and implemented at the project demonstration and replication sites. These activities are published along with the *Emerging Literacy Checklist* and the *Emerging Literacy Screening in Building Early Literacy and Language Skills* (Paulson et al, 2001) and can be put into practice in early childhood preschool programs, childcare centers, and family homes.