

How to Choose a Preschool Curriculum

WHAT IS A CURRICULUM?

The Head Start Program Performance Standards define curriculum as a written plan that includes:

- Goals for children’s development and learning;
- Experiences through which they will achieve the goals;
- Roles for staff and parents to help children to achieve these goals; and
- Materials needed to support the implementation of a curriculum.

Following are recommendations and guidelines for selecting and implementing a research-based early childhood curriculum based on reviews and studies on the effectiveness of preschool programs and curricula.

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

The Head Start Act as amended in December 2007 requires each Head Start agency to implement a research-based early childhood curriculum that—

- promotes young children's school readiness in the areas of language and cognitive development, early reading and mathematics skills, socio-emotional development, physical development, and approaches to learning;
- is based on scientifically valid research and has standardized training procedures and curriculum materials to support implementation;
- is comprehensive and linked to ongoing assessment, with developmental and learning goals and measurable objectives;
- is focused on improving the learning environment, teaching practices, family involvement, and child outcomes across all areas of development; and
- is aligned with the Head Start Child Outcomes Framework developed by the Secretary and, as appropriate, State early learning standards.

CHOOSING A CURRICULUM

The following eight features were identified as common characteristics of effective curricula:

- Comprehensive domains of learning
- Specific learning goals
- Well-designed learning activities
- Responsive teaching
- Culturally and linguistically responsive
- Individualizing instruction
- On going assessment
- Family Involvement
- Appropriate for program staff, children and families

Comprehensive domains of learning

What to look for

- ✓ How comprehensive is the curriculum? Does the curriculum address all areas of children's learning?
- ✓ How does it align with the Head Start Child Development and Learning Framework?

Why is it important?

The most effective programs provided interventions that focused on the whole child including socio emotional development (Barnett, 2008; Galinsky, 2006)

Specific learning goals

What to look for

- ✓ Does the curriculum identify specific goals and learning objectives that clearly define what to teach?

Why is it important?

The most effective programs had a clear focus on what they wanted to teach (Chambers et al., 2010; Galinsky, 2006). Clearly defined objectives help teachers and families know exactly what a program/curriculum is trying to accomplish, and what skills are being measured. Clear goals and objectives help establish a clear alignment between goals of program and strategies.

Well-designed learning activities

What to look for

- ✓ Does the curriculum include well-designed learning activities?
- ✓ Are the activities linked to specific learning goals and objectives?
- ✓ Does the curriculum include clear guidelines for planning environments?
- ✓ Does the curriculum include clear guidelines for selecting materials?
- ✓ Does the curriculum include clear guidelines for implementing activities?
- ✓ Are the activities engaging for children?
- ✓ Do the activities provide opportunities for children to engage in hands-on active learning experiences?

Why is it important?

Effective programs/curricula include well-designed engaging learning experiences that support specific goals and objectives (Chambers et al., 2010). Children learned best with highly interactive experiential learning activities (Chambers et al., 2010; Galinsky, 2006).

Responsive teaching

What to look for

- ✓ Does the curriculum provide guidance to teachers in using child responsive teaching interactions that build on what the child is interested in and ready to learn?

Why is it important?

The most effective programs/curricula used responsive teaching – where teachers use a mixture of child focused and direct teaching strategies to make learning more appropriate to children’s needs (Galinsky, 2006). Higher quality emotional and instructional teacher-child interactions have been linked to preschool children’s academic and language skills (Mashburn et al., 2008).

Culturally and linguistically responsive

What to look for

- ✓ Does the curriculum provide guidance to teachers in creating a classroom environment that reflects the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of the children?
- ✓ Does the curriculum provide guidance to teachers in supporting language development in children who are learning English in addition to other languages?

Why is it important?

The most effective programs/curricula were designed to be responsive to the needs of specific children, families and communities (Galinski, 2006). Programs that integrate children’s home language and home culture results in better overall outcomes for children. Children in preschool programs in which staff spoke children’s home language showed better development of social skills (Chang et al., 2007). Programs that support the development of English and of children’s home language help low income DLL children increase proficiency in both languages (Winsler, Diaz, Espinosa, & Rodriguez, 1999).

Individualizing instruction

What to look for

- ✓ Does the curriculum provide guidance to teachers for individualizing instruction by:
 - Arranging environments
 - Adapting materials
 - Using a variety of child and adult directed teaching strategies

Why is it important?

The most effective programs/curricula addressed individual differences (Ramey & Ramey, 1992).

On going assessment

What to look for

- ✓ Does the curriculum provide an assessment system that is directly linked to the curriculum learning goals?

Why is it important?

The most effective programs/curricula included an on going assessment component (Barnett, 2008).

Family Involvement

What to look for

- ✓ Does the curriculum provide guidance for communicating with families and involving them in their child's education?

Why is it important?

The most effective programs/curricula included strong parent education and/or support component (Galinsky, 2006).

Appropriate for Program Staff, Children and Families

What to look for

- ✓ Has the curriculum been implemented with children of similar ages, needs, linguistic backgrounds and cultures?
 - Have any studies been published on the curriculum effectiveness?
- ✓ Has the curriculum been used successfully by similar programs?
- ✓ How consistent are the curriculum's overall philosophy and practices with those of our program?
- ✓ What does it take to successfully implement the curriculum?
 - Levels of teacher qualification
 - Costs for materials and training
- ✓ What kinds of professional development support and resources are available?

Why is it important?

The most effective programs/curricula were informed by the best available research on children's development and learning and designed to be responsive to the needs of the specific children, families and communities in which they were located (Galinsky, 2006).

Teachers are more likely to implement the curriculum if it is compatible with their philosophy and if they are receptive to on going coaching (Lieber et al., 2009). Children tend to make stronger educational gains in programs where teachers are provided with ongoing professional development and support (Barnett, 2008; Chambers et al., 2010; Galinsky, 2006).

IMPLEMENTING THE CURRICULUM

Three main features were identified as critical to successful implementation of a curriculum:

- Fidelity of implementation
- Professional development support
- Ongoing assessment of child learning

Implementation Fidelity: How Well is the Curriculum Being Implemented?

Getting Started

What to look for

- ✓ Are staff familiar with the curriculum's scope and sequence?
- ✓ Are staff familiar with the lesson plans goals and activities?
- ✓ Are all recommended materials available?

Why is it important?

- The most effective programs had well trained staff who were knowledgeable about the goals of the curriculum (Barnett, 2008; Galinsky, 2006).

Doing It Right

What to look for

- ✓ Do staff implement the curriculum lessons with regularity?
- ✓ Do staff focus on the specific goals identified in the lesson plans?
- ✓ Do staff follow all the steps or activities suggested in the lesson plans?
- ✓ Do staff use all the recommended materials?
- ✓ Do staff use the recommended teaching strategies?

Why is it important?

It is important to implement the curriculum the way it was intended to be implemented by the developers. Implementing a program or intervention exactly as described is referred to as implementation fidelity. Children tend to make more gains when teachers faithfully implement the teaching strategies or curriculum (Hamre et al., 2010; Wasik, Bond, & Hindman, 2006).

Professional Development Support

What to look for

- ✓ Does the program have the resources for providing teachers with individualized consultation and coaching?
- ✓ Does the program have procedures for providing teachers with feedback on a regular basis?

Why is it important?

Individualized consultation and regular feedback are most effective in improving preschool teachers' effective use of instructional strategies (Pianta et al., 2008).

Ongoing Assessment: How Well is the Curriculum Working for the Children?

What to look for

- ✓ Does the program have an assessment system for documenting children's learning over time?
- ✓ Does the program have procedures for reviewing children's learning on a regular basis?
- ✓ Do staff document children's behaviors during activities?
- ✓ Do staff make appropriate adaptations and modifications for children with special needs?
- ✓ Do staff use strategies to support language development in English Language learners?

Why is it important?

The most effective programs included an on going assessment component for teachers to assess whether or not the child met their expectations and to make adjustments if expectations were not being met (Barnett, 2008; Galinsky, 2006).

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