

NEWS YOU CAN USE

News for Head Start, Early Head Start, & Migrant/Seasonal Programs

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FOUNDATIONS OF SCHOOL READINESS: APPROACHES TOWARD LEARNING, PART 1 OF 3

The world is catching on to what parents, teachers, and home visitors have known for a long time. Babies are always learning! Long before infants and toddlers can ask questions aloud, they are creating them in their minds and seeking answers. We also know that everyday experiences and interactions with caring adults are essential for healthy development and contribute to infants' and toddlers' understanding of how the world works. Put another way, we help infants and toddlers develop "skills, knowledge, and attitudes necessary for success in school and for later learning and life."¹ Yes, adults help infants and toddlers get ready for school and in some very important ways! Although it is fairly new to use the term school readiness with such young children, research has shown that both brain development and skills that form the foundation of all later learning are developed in the first few years of life.² This *News You Can Use* three-part series will focus on some of those important foundational skills found in the approaches toward learning domain. Part 1 introduces approaches toward learning and highlights self-regulation, an important skill that helps infants and toddlers use learning approaches effectively.



"Yes, adults help infants and toddlers get ready for school and in some very important ways!"

In This News You Can Use, we explore some vignettes about approaches toward learning as they relate to school readiness goals. (See School Readiness Goals for Infants and Toddlers in Head Start and Early Head Start Programs.)

Approaches Toward Learning and School Readiness Goals for Infants and Toddlers

The Office of Head Start requires all Head Start programs, including Early Head Start, to write school readiness goals for children who participate in the program [1307.3.(b)(1)(i)-(iii)]. These goals must describe what staff and families believe children should learn as a result of program services so that they are ready for kindergarten. The goals cover five essential domains: language and literacy development, physical well-being and motor development, cognition and general knowledge, social and emotional development, and *approaches toward learning*.

Many of us are familiar with supporting children as they learn to communicate and talk; move their bodies; explore and learn about objects and people in their environments; become attached to important adults in their lives; and begin to develop friendships. What about the “approaches toward learning” domain? The term *approaches toward learning* might be new for many of us, but the approaches may be more familiar than you realize!



What Are Approaches Toward Learning?

The approaches toward learning domain is different than the other domains and presents a different way of thinking about learning. It doesn't focus on **what** skills, concepts, or behaviors children acquire across all the essential domains; it focuses on **how** children acquire them!ⁱⁱⁱ Approaches toward learning refer to learning styles, habits, motivation, and attitudes that reflect the many ways children involve themselves in learning—how they go about developing new skills and concepts. These approaches are influenced

by characteristics that children are born with, such as gender and temperament, and by attitudes and expectations fostered early in life through family, community, and cultural patterns and values.

^{iv} Partnering with families to understand and support their children's approaches toward learning in a culturally responsive manner is going to be a very important part of your work!

What are these approaches? They include: attention, curiosity, information gathering, memory, persistence, and problem solving. You can find approaches like these in infant/toddler state early learning guidelines, curriculums, assessment tools, or articles about child development. You will also learn more about them in Part 2 (attention, curiosity, information gathering) and Part 3 (memory, persistence, problem solving) of this series. But as we talk about approaches toward learning in relation to infants and toddlers, we also need to consider *self-regulation*, the ability to “manage powerful emotions and keep one's attention focused.”^v Why is self-regulation important and how does it relate to approaches toward learning?

Self-Regulation and Approaches Toward Learning

Enrico (two months old) lies on a soft blanket on the living room floor of his family's apartment. Sonia, his mom, and Reza, the home visitor, sit on either side of him. Reza holds a rattle above him and shakes it to get his attention. For a brief moment, Enrico seems to notice the sound (and Reza), but he startles and begins to cry. "Shhh, shhh, mi niño, shhh, shhh," Sonia whispers over and over again as she leans over and gently rubs Enrico's belly. Enrico's body soon quiets and he calms down. Reza says, "I wonder what will happen if you shake the rattle now?" Sonia takes the rattle, holds it above Enrico, and shakes it. Enrico looks briefly in the direction of the sound and then at his mom's face, waves his arms, and kicks his legs.



We know that all learning for infants and toddlers happens within the context of their relationships with nurturing, responsive adults. Enrico and his mom are already on their way to developing this close bond. Sonia's response to Enrico's need for comfort and security—whispering familiar sounds and words in Spanish, rubbing his back—helps him feel safe; this, in turn, helps him calm down, pay attention, and respond to the rattle shaking. Sonia's response is also helping Enrico learn how to regulate himself—to manage his reactions to sensations inside and outside of his body. Even at two months old, Enrico is able to calm himself with his mom's help. Both Sonia and Reza are learning how to support Enrico as they introduce new objects and sounds. Also, this is a great opportunity for them to talk about cultural definitions, values, and practices around self-regulation—how they might be the same or different for each of their cultures!

Research is showing us that children who are able to regulate, or manage, their emotions and behaviors do better in school and have an easier time getting along with peers. In fact, kindergarten teachers say self-regulation is the most important characteristic necessary for school success!^{vi} Children who are able to self-regulate can do things like handle strong emotions, tolerate frustration, control their impulses, follow rules and expectations, pay attention, and delay gratification.^{vii} If children can regulate themselves, they are able to use different learning approaches more effectively. So how can you help infants and toddlers begin to develop this important skill? Here are some ideas:

For infants:^{viii}

- Maintain a calm attitude and presence. Infants are "tuned in" to adults' emotions; your calmness can help infants manage strong emotions, especially when they are not calm!
- Follow their schedules and routines in predictable ways, but make sure to adjust schedules/routines as their needs change.

- Identify, acknowledge, and support self-soothing behaviors: For example, "You found your thumb! Now you feel better with your thumb in your mouth." "Would you like to hold your blanket? That always seems to make you feel calmer." Use the child's home language. And make sure to ask families what their children's self-soothing behaviors are and how they support those behaviors. Thumbsucking might be okay for some families but not for others!
- Anticipate infants' needs and respond as soon as you can. If you can't get to a child quickly, use your words to let the child know you've heard him. Describe the child's feelings, what you are doing, and what will happen next in a soothing manner: For example, "Are you hungry? Do you want your bottle? As soon as I put Jamal in his crib, I'll get your bottle and warm it up. Then we'll sit together in our favorite rocker while you drink."
- Stay close when infants are lying or sitting near each other. Gently separate them if they touch each other too roughly. Take their hand and show them how to be gentle. Use clear, simple language to tell them what is acceptable: For example, "Use gentle touches on Kali's back."



For toddlers, you can still use the strategies that you use with infants and add the following: ^{ix}

- Support transitions between different parts of the daily schedule by preparing them for the transition: "In five minutes, it will be time to clean up." "After we go inside, we'll have a snack."
- Give toddlers simple but valid choices: "You may have apple slices or orange slices."
- With close supervision, allow children time to work through their emotions. Give them words to express their feelings: "If you are mad, tell me. Say 'No!' or 'I'm mad!' That way, I know what you're feeling and I can help you."
- Comment on toddlers' attempts to handle a challenging situation: "Mei-lin took the pail from you. You didn't grab it back from her. You used a different pail. That was a kind

way to solve the pail problem!" For older toddlers, you might provide verbal guidance: "There are only two watering cans. But three children want to water our vegetable garden. What can we do about this?"



Conclusion

Approaches toward learning are at the heart of children's development and they play a very important role in children's success in school and in life. The ability to self-regulate, a critical skill for school readiness, can affect how young children develop the approaches toward learning characteristics. As you read about Enrico and the strategies for helping infants and toddlers regulate their emotions and behaviors, you might have identified ones you already use, others that are not on the list, and ones you want to try. You might have also thought about engaging families in supporting their children's ability to self-regulate. Remember—development and learning are rooted in culture; how young children learn to regulate themselves is influenced by their home culture and family expectations. So make a plan! How will you use those strategies in the weeks to come? Then, stay tuned for Parts 2 (attention, curiosity, information-gathering) and 3 (memory, persistence, problem-solving) of this *News You Can Use* series to learn more about approaches toward learning. The more you know, the more intentional you can be in how you help infants and toddlers get ready for school and beyond.



ⁱOffice of Head Start, "Head Start Approach to School Readiness—Overview," (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services/Administration for Children and Families/Office of Head Start, 2011), accessed July 19, 2012, <http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/sr/approach>.

ⁱⁱJ. Ronald Lally, "School Readiness Begins in Infancy: Social Interactions During the First Two Years of Life Provide the Foundation for Learning," *Phi Delta Kappan* 92:3 (November 2010): 17–21, accessed July 19, 2012, Early Head Start National Resource Center, *News You Can Use Foundations of Learning Series: Brain Development* (in press).

ⁱⁱⁱBright from the Start Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning, *Georgia Early Learning Standards: Birth Through Age 3*, 24, accessed July 19, 2012, <http://decal.ga.gov/documents/attachments/GELSCComplete608.pdf>.

^{iv}Department of Education and Early Development and Department of Health and Social Services, *State of Alaska Early Learning Guidelines: A Resource for Parents and Early Educators* (December 2007), 90, accessed July 19, 2012, <http://www.eed.state.ak.us/publications/EarlyLearningGuidelines.pdf>.

^vNational Research Council and Institute of Medicine, From *Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development*, ed. J. P. Shonkoff and D. A. Phillips (Washington, DC: National Academy Press, 2000), 93.

^{vi}Cate Heroman et al., *Teaching Strategies GOLD Objectives for Development & Learning: Birth Through Kindergarten* (Washington, DC: Teaching Strategies, LLC, 2010), 3.

^{vii}Ibid.

^{viii}Massachusetts Association for the Education of Young Children and Massachusetts Department of Early Education and Care, *Massachusetts Early Learning Guidelines for Infants and Toddlers* (May 2011), 28–29, http://www.eec.state.ma.us/docs1/curriculum/20110519_infant_toddler_early_learning_guidelines.pdf; Cate Heroman et al., *Teaching Strategies*, 7.

^{ix}Massachusetts Association for the Education of Young Children and Massachusetts Department of Early Education and Care, *Massachusetts Early Learning Guidelines for Infants and Toddlers* (May 2011), 97–98, http://www.eec.state.ma.us/docs1/curriculum/20110519_infant_toddler_early_learning_guidelines.pdf.

STUDY GUIDE

for

NEWS YOU CAN USE

FOUNDATIONS OF SCHOOL READINESS: APPROACHES TOWARD LEARNING

SUMMARY:

This *News You Can Use* (NYCU) begins a three-part series on approaches toward learning. In Part 1, we explain the approaches-toward-learning domain and describe how it differs from the other domains. We also discuss self-regulation as a foundational skill for later learning and relationships.



Key Messages:

- The approaches toward learning domain differs from the other four domains in that it looks at how children learn instead of what they learn.
- Among many other skills, infants and toddlers are working on developing self-regulation. Acquiring this skill begins with support from a trusted adult who can help a very young child manage her physical self, attention, emotions, and behaviors.
- Consistent, supportive responses from a trusted adult facilitate the growth of self-regulation.



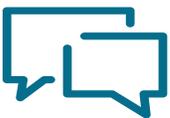
Think:

- This NYCU shares many strategies to support approaches toward learning. What other strategies do you use in your practice?
- Think of a time when you supported an infant or toddler's ability to regulate emotion. What did you do? How did the child respond?



Reflect:

- Think about how you approach learning. In what ways have your approaches helped you learn in your life?
- Reflect on your own ability to self-regulate. Are there times when self-regulating is difficult?
- Think of a specific child. What approaches toward learning do you see when the child is learning about something?



Discuss:

- In one study (see link below), 650 kindergarten teachers in California named self-regulation and emotional maturity as the most important criteria for the school-readiness of children entering their classrooms. Why do you think that is? How do you support school readiness as you support approaches toward learning?
- Look at the approaches toward learning goals in *School Readiness Goals for Infants and Toddlers in Head Start and Early Head Start Programs*. Have you observed infant and toddler learning as described by these goals? What did you see?
- What are the approaches toward learning goals identified in your program? How do they link to the ideas in this NYCU?



Next Steps:

- For a deeper understanding of the approaches toward learning domain, read "School Readiness for Infants and Toddlers? Really? Yes, Really!" from *Young Children*: http://issuu.com/naeyc/docs/petersen_yc0912?e=2112065/2211050.
- For more information on the California study, read <http://www.californiakindergartenassociation.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/03/Cappelloni-Article1.pdf>.