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Introduction

The Importance of Early Childhood Development, Education, and Intervention

Vincent C. Alfonso and George J. DuPaul

In recent decades, especially the past 20, early childhood development, education, and intervention have been major topics in professional print outlets such as articles, books, and presentations; social media outlets, including blog posts, YouTube videos, and TED Talks; the Internet in general; and local, state, and national debates and legislation. For example, social–emotional learning, early literacy, numeracy, play, diversity, and creativity have become an increasing focus among early childhood educators, parents, and legislators. Although not designed as a best-practices text, this volume has that flavor, as each chapter addresses what can be done now to assist young children to develop and maintain a healthy trajectory in life to become valuable contributors to society.

We assembled committed scholar–practitioners and expert researchers from around the country to translate accumulated empirical evidence into everyday practice to improve the lives of young children, educate parents and other caregivers, and influence government officials to support early childhood development, education, and intervention. In the pages that follow, we offer our rationale for proposing and producing this volume, an overview of the contents that are divided into five parts, and concluding thoughts on the topic and the future of early childhood education and intervention.

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Healthy Development in Young Children: Evidence-Based Interventions for Early Education,

V. C. Alfonso and G. J. DuPaul (Editors)

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RATIONALE

It may seem that early childhood education has been in existence for a long time and that we know much about the development of early academic skills, social-emotional functioning, self-regulation, and other important aspects of life (e.g., Weikart, 1989). However, it is really in the past 50 to 60 years that we have studied early childhood development, education, and intervention in earnest (e.g., Spodek & Saracho, 2003). A critical moment or time period for implementing and studying early childhood education occurred in the mid-1960s, when arguably one of the most significant programs in American education—namely, Head Start—was born (S. L. Ramey, 1999; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Head Start, National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement, 2018; Vinovskis, 2005; Zigler, 1994; Zigler & Bishop-Josef, 2006). Although primarily an early education program for young children in low-resource environments, Head Start and its younger sibling, Early Head Start, have had an impact on our thinking about young children for decades (e.g., Love et al., 2005).

Another important moment or time period was the mid-1980s, when services for young children (i.e., birth–5 years) with disabilities or at risk for disabilities became available (Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014; Education of the Handicapped Amendments of 1986; Rounds, 1991; Shonkoff & Meisels, 1991). Legislation regarding young children with disabilities has continued to the present time (i.e., Individuals With Disabilities Education Improvement Act, 2004) and will likely be an enduring part of American education given the plethora of evidence for the effectiveness of early intervention (Campbell & Ramey, 1994; Clarke & Clarke, 1989; Guralnick, 1991; C. T. Ramey & Ramey, 1998; C. T. Ramey, Sparling, & Ramey, 2014; Rose & Calhoun, 1990).

In addition, we have learned that myriad short- and long-term benefits are associated with early childhood education, including improved literacy (e.g., Dickenson & Neuman, 2006; Good, Simmons, & Smith, 1998; Kilpatrick, 2015), acquisition of number knowledge and skills (Jordan, Kaplan, Ramineni, & Locuniak, 2009; Mazzocco, Feigenson, & Halberda, 2011; Salillas & Wicha, 2012; Vo, Li, Kornell, Pouget, & Cantlon, 2014), higher graduation rates from high school and reductions in special education placement (e.g., McCoy et al., 2017), higher income, greater life satisfaction and quality of life, and a healthier society overall (Barnett, 1995; Gorey, 2001; Heckman, 2011; Masten & Coatsworth, 1998; C. T. Ramey et al., 2014; Weissberg, 2000; Yoshikawa et al., 2013). Thus, given the benefits of early childhood education and intervention for typically developing children, those at risk for disabilities, and those who have a disability, we believed an up-to-date volume that bridges the science–practice gap in educational settings was long overdue, especially when we reviewed what texts were available in the science and practice worlds.

This edited volume is intended primarily for experienced education and mental health practitioners who work in early childhood settings such as day care centers, preschools, special education preschools, and kindergarten.

Practitioners who regularly work with young children (e.g., 2–5 years of age)—whether psychologists, speech–language pathologists, social workers, teachers, special education teachers, or related services professionals—make up the target audience for this volume. However, parents, caregivers, and other adults who work with or care for young children may also benefit from its contents.

OVERVIEW OF PARTS AND CHAPTERS

The 15 chapters in this volume are divided into five parts: Assessment; Preparing for School: Ensuring Academic Success; High-Quality Learning Environments; Special Populations; and Advocacy for Early Education. The first four parts consist of two to six chapters, focuses on young children (typically between 2 and 5 years of age), and offers practical guidelines for working with these young members of society. Chapter 15 is a stand-alone chapter that addresses national policies and laws affecting children’s health and education, respectively.

Assessment is addressed in Part I because we believe that for any intervention to be effective, it must be based on reliable and valid data garnered from a variety of assessment methods such as norm-referenced tools (e.g., cognitive and early academic tests, rating scales), observations, and interviews. When multisource, multimethod, and multisetting assessment take place, we have more confidence that our interventions, when delivered with fidelity, will be effective. As such, the first chapter on assessment by Alfonso, Engler, and Lepore focuses on five areas of development (i.e., cognitive, motor skills, language, behavioral and social–emotional functioning, adaptive behavior) that are typically measured and that are most critical for screening for developmental delay and making diagnostic and educational placement decisions. In addition, they offer guidelines in choosing assessment methods and tools stressing psychometric rigor, with a focus on standardization, reliability, validity, and score interpretation.

In Chapter 2, Hojnoski and Missall discuss the importance of assessment and describe various methods for assessing young children’s early learning and social–emotional development. The chapter begins with a review of empirical literature to provide a strong rationale supporting effective assessment practices with young children, including early emerging differences in growth trajectories, longitudinal patterns of performance, and the malleability of key constructs, such as early learning and social–emotional competence. Then Hojnoski and Missall discuss key considerations to maximize the benefit of assessment efforts, including defining constructs of interest with an emphasis on practical implications and the critical role that context plays in supporting children’s development. After a review of broad approaches to assessment, they conclude with a discussion addressing linking assessment to action to support healthy growth and development.

Part II addresses preparing for school and ensuring academic success. In this part, the authors of six chapters summarize the literature and research on how to prepare young children to be successful in educational settings, what this success looks like, and how to ensure continued success in the school-age years. We know from the more than 50 years of Head Start that early intervention is effective only when it is delivered consistently into about the third grade; otherwise, developmental gains may be short-lived, and regression to earlier stages of development can occur. Bierman, Sanders, and Ho begin this part of the book with a chapter on school readiness. These authors report that two thirds of American children now attend preschool, and 43 of the 50 states offer state-funded prekindergarten. Accordingly, academic expectations for kindergarten have risen, amplifying pressures on early education programs to promote the preacademic and social-emotional skills children need to sit, listen, and learn at school entry. This chapter also provides reviews of the empirical evidence linking various approaches to early education with the effective promotion of school readiness in children growing up in economically disadvantaged circumstances and the narrowing of that socioeconomic gap. The next chapter, written by Roskos and Lenhart, describes the scientific research base, highlighting how far we have come in our understanding of early literacy development and learning (ages 2–5 years). Roskos and Lenhart discuss the early literacy pedagogy grounded in this research base, including key principles and guidance for instruction by parents and teachers. They close with a look into the future of early literacy teaching and learning with a special focus on the growing influence of multimedia in early childhood.

Early number knowledge and skills are the topics covered in Chapter 5 by Nelson and Mazzocco. These authors focus on developmental and individual differences in early numerical abilities and skills to help readers understand how to support the development of numerical thinking in young children and the roles that numerical thinking plays in mathematics achievement. Nelson and Mazzocco also provide readers with resources to support planning and implementation of learning environments and instruction to promote an understanding of early number knowledge and skills sense for all learners.

Next is a chapter on self-regulation in young children by Dettmer, Clinton, and Mildon. The authors describe the biological and behavioral indicators of self-regulation, with insights from comparative psychology, and the long-term benefits that emerge from the early development of this skill. They also discuss the complex relationships between biological bases of behavior and environmental influences, review prevention and intervention programs and methods related to education and schools, and present practical applications of the science of self-regulation to classroom settings.

In Chapter 7, DeMarie and Bugos state that opportunities for play in early childhood are important for children's later academic development. They describe different types of play activities along with the role of these activities in advancing the development of language, literacy, and science, technology, engineering, and mathematics among a diverse group of children. In addition,

they note how children's engagement with play materials, their opportunities for expressing language, and adult scaffolds benefit later academic achievement.

The final chapter in this part, Chapter 8, by Bulotsky-Shearer, Futterer, Bailey, and Morris, highlights research on within-child (i.e., internal developmental capacities) and external (e.g., contextual factors within the home) strengths that affect the development of young children's skills (e.g., socio-emotional competence). They provide an overview of these factors within a bioecological framework along with a summary of their research conducted within Head Start programs; illustrate the importance of family-school, teacher-child, and child-initiated peer play interactions as critical contexts for supporting engagement in learning, particularly for children from ethnic, racial, and linguistically diverse low-income backgrounds; and present evidence-based, practical suggestions to support these relational contexts as key contributors to early school success, particularly related to the transition to kindergarten.

High-quality learning environments are the topic of Part III, which comprises three chapters. We know that quality of the learning environment is critical in early childhood education and intervention. What makes a quality learning environment, how we can ensure the existence of these environments, and what steps we need to take to improve them are questions addressed in the chapters of this part. For example, Chapter 9, written by DuPaul and Clemen Shaw, discusses principles and practices that promote positive guidance in early childhood. These authors see a critical need for early childhood educators to address children's challenging behaviors given the relatively high rates of behavior control difficulties among preschoolers and the importance of self-regulation skills for early school success. They maintain that teachers and parents typically use reactive, punitive strategies to address children's behavior, techniques that often are ineffective in promoting durable behavior change. Thus, DuPaul and Clemen Shaw describe methods for teachers and parents to prevent children's challenging behaviors and promote growth in self-regulation skills in the context of a multitiered system of support.

The next chapter in Part III focuses on creating successful early learning environments. According to Curby, a primary task of early childhood is for children to become socially and emotionally competent. The chapter begins with a discussion of the importance of teacher-child interactions as a mechanism for promoting social and emotional competencies in young children. Curby then describes the skills associated with children being socially and emotionally competent, such as being able to identify the antecedents and consequences of emotions. Finally, he describes noncurricular ways in which teachers can promote these competencies in the preschool classroom, such as through validating the emotions that underlie behaviors. The final chapter in this part, Chapter 11, written by Tinio, Katz-Buonincontro, and Barbot, emphasizes creativity and creative potential in early childhood education. Tinio and colleagues stress that early childhood is an optimal time for promoting creativity and imagination in children. They discuss the key cognitive, socio-emotional, and environmental factors that support and impede the development

and expression of creative and imaginative behaviors. These authors conclude with a discussion of the implications of these interventions on children's cognitive and socioemotional development as well their engagement with and appreciation of the world around them.

The fourth part of this volume consists of three chapters, each of which addresses a special population. When we were conceptualizing this project, we knew we had to include chapters on special populations given the changing demographics in the United States. It is not uncommon to see children from all walks of life in early childhood education settings, as well as young children with disabilities or specific learning and developmental challenges. In Chapter 12, Stanton-Chapman and Schmidt discuss a definition of social competence, how professionals can facilitate the development of social competence in preschoolers with disabilities, and why promoting social competence in children who lack the needed skills is critical in the early childhood years. In Chapter 13, Radzicki, Hughes, Schoenenberger, Park, and Sánchez focus on working with young children who are culturally and linguistically diverse. These authors posit that as the United States becomes more linguistically and culturally diverse, educators need to prepare even more for working with young children and their families. They provide an outline of what culturally sensitive practices should look like, discuss disparities often faced by children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, and provide recommendations for early childhood professionals to implement culturally competent practices. In the final chapter in this part, Hughes and Quinn report that a substantial research base shows that early negative experiences (i.e., adverse childhood experiences) can lead to lifelong problems and, often, psychopathology that impairs a young child's current and ultimately later life, including adult functioning. According to these authors, early intervention can prevent the consequences of early adversity. They also address how to work with young children living in stressful environments.

Part V, the last chapter of this volume, prepared by Raines, Malone, Beidleman, and Bowman, describes national policies and laws affecting children's health and education. According to Raines and colleagues, policies and laws play a vital part in the growth and development of young children, who can be supported or harmed by the climate created through policy. Understanding the roles legislation and policy play in children's well-being is a key component of providing well-rounded and responsive services. Their chapter reviews policies and laws that have left a lasting impact on resources for children along the developmental spectrum.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

This volume addresses many topics in early childhood education, but no individual volume can cover all topics of interest or importance in this area. As such, we welcome feedback, thoughts, and suggestions regarding the

current chapters and other topics as well via email at the following addresses: alfonso@gonzaga.edu for Vincent C. Alfonso and gjd3@lehigh.edu for George J. DuPaul. There is no reason to believe that early childhood education research, practice, and policy are going to slow down anytime soon, and we look forward to future publications and presentations that carry on the good work assembled here. Effective translation of evidence-based practices to implementation in real-world, early education settings is critical for promoting the success of all young children, regardless of ability and background.

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