

Everyday Children's Learning Opportunities: Characteristics and Consequences

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Young children's everyday lives are made up of many different kinds of planned and unplanned, and intentional and incidental learning opportunities and experiences. Going to a parent/child play group is an example of a planned activity, and getting to pet a puppy on a neighborhood walk is an example of an unplanned activity. Teaching a child to tie her shoes is an example of an intentional activity, and splashing in a puddle is an example of an incidental activity.

Research shows that everyday family and community activity settings are a primary source of these kinds of learning opportunities (Dunst & Bruder, 1999). *Activity settings* are the social experiences (e.g., parent/child lap games) and the characteristics of physical places and locations (e.g., quacking ducks at a community pond) that give rise to children's natural learning opportunities. This **Children's Learning Opportunities Report** presents findings from an intervention study examining the characteristics of everyday activity settings and learning opportunities related to improved child learning and parents' judgments of child progress.

DEVELOPMENT-ENHANCING LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

The everyday experiences of young children can either promote or impede learning and development (Bronfenbrenner, 1992). Research shows that children's learning and development occurs

more rapidly when their *interests* engage them in social and nonsocial interactions, which provide them opportunities to *practice* existing abilities, *explore* their environments, and *learn* new competencies. Nelson (1999), for example, found that variations in children's competence were "related to children's [everyday] life activities and interests" (p. 2).

Figure 1 shows four child characteristics we have identified as important for children's learning, and how everyday family and community activity settings are the sources of interest-based and competency-enhancing learning opportunities. Things that are interesting to children engage them in interactions with people and objects. Engagement in turn provides children opportunities to express existing abilities, learn new skills, and explore their social and nonsocial environments. Opportunities to practice, learn, and explore are conditions promoting children's sense of mastery about their own capabilities and the actions and responses of people and objects. An increased sense of mastery in turn strengthens children's interests, setting in motion once again the development-enhancing cycle.

APPROACH

Participants

Participants were 63 parents and other caregivers of infants, toddlers, and preschoolers with disabilities or delays. The children were involved in early intervention or preschool special-education programs in CA, CT, HI, NC, NM, and WI.

Procedure

Each parent or caregiver identified 8 to 10 family or community activity settings as sources of learning opportunities for his or her child. Study participants and Institute staff together developed and implemented procedures for increasing children's participation in the activity settings. Increasing children's participation, and data collection about the characteris-



Figure 1. Activity Settings as Sources of Interest-Based and Competence-Enhancing Children's Learning Opportunities.

tics of the learning opportunities and their consequences, lasted 18 weeks.

Characteristics of the activity settings serving as sources of children's learning opportunities were examined on 8 occasions during the study. We assessed each activity setting in terms of child interests, child engagement, child competence (expressing existing abilities and learning new skills), and child exploration. This information was used to determine for each child how many learning activities mirrored the characteristics shown in Figure 1. Based on this information, each child was put into one of three groups based on whether his or her activity settings and learning opportunities were low, moderate, or high interest-based and competency-enhancing learning opportunities.

The Everyday Child Performance and Child Progress subscales of the Child and Parent Experiences Scale (Dunst, 1998) were used to assess improvements in child learning and development. The Everyday Child Performance subscale measures child competence as part of everyday life. Parents were asked how often their child displayed 8 social affective, social interaction, communication, and volitional behaviors during a typical day. The Child Progress subscale includes 6 items measuring a parents' judgments regarding whether his or her child has made less, more, or about the amount of progress expected at the time the scale is completed. Parents made judgments about

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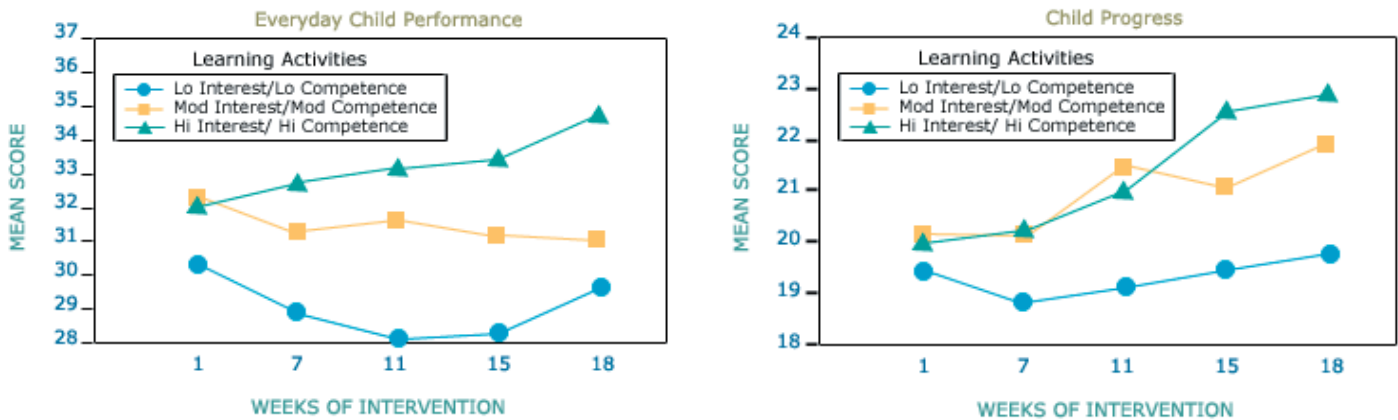


Figure 2. Changes in Parents' Judgements About Everyday Child Performance and Child Progress.

child progress in terms of ambulation, social-adaptive, communication, cognitive, and socialization abilities.

RESULTS

Figure 2 shows the results. Learning activities that were both highly interesting and highly competency-enhancing were the only ones associated with improvements in parents' ratings of everyday child performance.

Parents indicated that their children made more progress than expected in instances where learning activities were moderately to highly interesting and moderately to highly competency-enhancing. The largest changes in parents' ratings of child progress were found in instances where children's learning opportunities were both highly interesting and highly competency-enhancing.

Both sets of findings support the fact that the presence of the influences shown in Figure 1 are associated with parents' judgments of improvements in child functioning. Results from our study show that the characteristics of everyday learning opportunities matter if optimal benefits are to be realized.

RESEARCH TO PRACTICE

There are two major implications from this study for practice. The first is to use children's interests as a basis for identifying activity settings as sources of

learning opportunities. The second is to involve children in activity settings providing lots of opportunities to practice existing abilities, learn new skills, and explore their social and nonsocial surroundings.

Answers to the following kinds of questions can be used to identify a child's **interests**, and to decide which kinds of everyday activity settings provide opportunities to express interests:

- What makes the child smile or laugh?
- What makes the child happy and feel good?
- What are the child's favorite things?
- What is enjoyable to the child?
- What does the child work hard at doing?

The following questions can help identify a child's **competencies**, which in turn can be used to identify everyday activity settings providing opportunities to practice existing skills and to learn new abilities:

- What gets and keeps the child's attention?
- What is the child good at doing?
- What "brings out the best" in the child?
- What does the child like to do a lot?
- What gets the child to try new things?

The answers to these two sets of questions will give you a good idea about a child's interests and abilities. With this information, you will be better able to decide which kinds of activity settings and everyday learning opportunities are best

for the child. Involving children in activity settings matching their interests and competencies is an excellent way of providing children development-enhancing learning opportunities.

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