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Recommended Practices

Program Practices for Promoting the Social Development of Young Children and Addressing Challenging Behavior

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-  There is clear evidence that beginning intervention early makes a big difference in the cost of intervention and in its probable success (Dodge, 1993; Kazdin, 1995; Strain & Timm, 2001).
-  High quality early education environments are related to positive outcomes in children's social and emotional development and reduced problem behavior. While providing a high quality early education environment is not a stand-alone intervention practice, it is an essential foundation for the implementation of development promotion and intervention practices (Burchinal, Peisner-Feinberg, Bryant, & Clifford, 2000; Helburn et al., 1995; Love, Meckstroth, & Sprachman, 1997; National Research Council, 2001; NICHD, 1999; Peisner-Feinberg et al., 1999; Phillips, McCartney, & Scarr, 1987).
-  Research indicates that a responsive, sensitive, and nurturing caregiver style of interaction is supportive of young children's social and emotional development. Children of mothers who are depressed and have less maternal sensitivity are more likely to have children who have problem behavior. In addition, there is a relationship among the use of harsh and punitive discipline and a negative or controlling style of parenting and the development of challenging behavior. Interventions that target improvement in parental sensitivity to children's behavior are effective in changing caregiver interaction style (see review: Dunst & Kassow, 2004).
-  Programs that provide high-risk families and their infants with home visiting, parent training, and the enrollment of children in high quality early childhood settings (when toddlers) show promising outcomes. (Brooks-Gunn, Berlin, & Fuligni, 2000; Love et al., 2002; Yoshikawa, 1995). Parents who receive these services are more emotionally supportive, less detached, and have more positive interactions with their children than control group families (Love et al., 2002).
-  Effective early education programs include a parent-training component. Parent instruction focuses on behavior management skills, increasing positive interactions, increasing children's prosocial behavior, and child guidance procedures (Feil, Severson, & Walker, 1998; Forness et al., 2000; Strain & Timm, 2001; Strain, Young, & Horowitz, 1981; Walker et al., 1998; Webster-Stratton, 1998; Webster-Stratton, Reid, & Hammond, 2001).



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-  Early education environments should be structured to provide universal, secondary, and indicated prevention and intervention practices. There are promising data indicating that the adoption of this model as a program-wide approach results in positive outcomes for children, families, and the programs that support them (Dunlap, Fox, & Hemmeter, 2004).
 -  At the universal level, all children should receive sufficient density of positive feedback from their caregivers (Shores, Gunter, & Jack, 1993; Shores, Jack, Gunter, Ellis, Debrine, & Wehby, 1993). Early educators should maintain a predictable schedule, minimize transitions, provide visual reminders of rules, give time and attention for appropriate behavior, use positive reinforcement to promote appropriate behavior, provide choices where appropriate, and maximize child engagement to minimize problem behaviors (Laus, Danko, Lawry, Strain, & Smith, 1999; Lawry, Danko, & Strain, 1999; Strain & Hemmeter, 1999).
 -  At the secondary level, a social skills curriculum should be adopted and implemented. Research indicates that systematic efforts to promote children's social competence can have both preventive and remedial effects (Walker et al., 1998; Webster-Stratton & Reid, 2004).
 -  At the tertiary (or intervention) level, assessment-based interventions that are developed through the process of Positive Behavior Support (PBS) have been shown to be effective (Blair, Umbreit, & Bos, 1999; Blair, Umbreit, & Eck, 2000; Dunlap & Fox, 1999; Galensky, Miltenberger, Stricker, & Garlinghouse, 2001; Moes & Frea, 2000; Reeve & Carr, 2000). In PBS, early educators team with families to determine the function of problem behavior through functional behavior assessment and then develop a behavior support plan that is implemented across all environments.

While we have good evidence that the trajectory of a child's social and emotional development and challenging behavior can be changed, the field lacks the necessary information to ensure the adoption and sustainability of these program practices. Our current knowledge comes from model programs or research endeavors. Little information exists on how to ensure the widespread adoption and sustainability of these practices within community-based programs. Given the wealth of knowledge of what practices will work, the priority should be on supporting the demand for, adoption of, and funding for evidence-based approaches.

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