

Early childhood education centers can boost parents' engagement at home

July 7 2020



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COVID-19 has temporarily shuttered many early childhood education centers across the country, shifting full-time child care and teaching responsibilities largely to parents.

As some of those centers look toward reopening, they can play an important part in ensuring that parents continue to be engaged in their [children's education](#) at [home](#), says University of Arizona researcher Melissa Barnett.

In a study conducted before the pandemic began, Barnett and her colleagues looked at the role that early [childhood](#) education centers play in encouraging parents to engage in educational activities with their [children](#) both at the centers and at home. The researchers also explored how parental engagement can help better prepare young children for kindergarten.

Their findings were recently published in *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*.

"There's been some research evidence that when parents of preschoolers are more engaged in early childhood education centers, their children may be more prepared for kindergarten. But it's not entirely clear why that's the case," said Barnett, lead study author and an associate professor of family studies and human development in the UArizona Norton School of Family and Consumer Sciences, housed in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences.

"One of the goals of our study was to understand the extent to which parents perceive that early childhood educators are working with them and engaging them, and whether that is linked to school readiness," said Barnett, who also is director of the Norton School's Frances McClelland Institute for Children, Youth and Families.

Among the researchers' key findings:

- When parents perceive that early childhood education centers do a [good job](#) of communicating with them and providing

information about how their children are doing, they are more likely to engage in educational activities such as reading and singing with their children—both at the center and at home. And the more parents engage in educational activities at home, the better prepared their children are for kindergarten, in terms of language and early reading skills.

- The more involved parents are in center activities—such as volunteering in classrooms, attending meetings or chaperoning field trips—the more educational activities they do with their children at home.
- Although early childhood education centers appear to influence the quantity of at-home educational activities, they do not influence the quality of those activities. And the quality of at-home educational activities is one of the strongest predictors of a child's school readiness, influencing not only language and early reading skills but also early math skills.

The research is based on data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study—Birth Cohort, a nationally representative sample of 10,700 children who were born in the United States in 2001 were followed from birth to kindergarten. The researchers homed in on the 17% of those children who were enrolled in early childhood education centers at age 4.

Those children's parents rated a series of statements designed to measure how well they thought their early childhood education centers did at keeping them informed and involved. The parents also answered questions about how often they engaged in educational activities with their children, both at the center and at home.

The children completed assessments to measure their language, reading and early math skills prior to entering kindergarten.

"For children who are enrolled in early childhood education centers, what parents did at home was a good predictor of how well children were prepared for school, in terms of the quantity of what parents were doing and the quality of what they were doing," Barnett said. "We found that more engagement in the early childhood education centers was related to doing more at home, and that seemed to be especially true for lower-income households."

The researchers also observed parents and children engaging in learning activities and assessed the quality of those interactions based on how much cognitive stimulation they provided. They found that quality matters even more than quantity for school readiness.

"It's important that parents read with their kids and sing to their kids. But the quality of what parents are doing also is really critical and perhaps harder to change," Barnett said.

That's an area where early childhood education centers could make a difference in the future, she said.

"Parents who are able to engage and volunteer at those centers are getting the message that they need to read with their kids and sing songs with their kids, but they may not be getting messages about how best to do that," Barnett said.

Some best practices, she said, include thinking about ways to build activities around a child's unique interests and abilities, and making activities such as reading more meaningful by stopping to ask questions that help children relate stories to their own experiences.

Pandemic could impact access

Unfortunately, Barnett said, many families don't have access to early

childhood education centers and the support they provide, especially in lower-income areas, where, according to her findings, they might have the most impact. The problem could be made even worse by COVID-19, she said, as some centers hit hard financially may be forced to close permanently.

"We know that many families in many communities didn't have access to high-quality early childhood education, even before the pandemic, and it's become an increasingly significant problem as centers have closed and may need to remain closed," she said. "In part, our findings point to the value of those opportunities for lower-income parents to be involved in early childhood [education](#) centers, so this potentially could even further increase what we see as a socioeconomic gap in school readiness."

For now, with many parents of all socioeconomic backgrounds at home with their kids, Barnett stresses the importance of focusing on quality activities as much as possible.

"This may be an especially challenging time to do that, as [parents](#) are juggling multiple potential stressors and time crunches," she said, "but those home learning activities really are important to prepare children for school."

More information: Melissa A. Barnett et al, Influences of Parent Engagement in Early Childhood Education Centers and the Home on Kindergarten School Readiness, *Early Childhood Research Quarterly* (2020). [DOI: 10.1016/j.ecresq.2020.05.005](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecresq.2020.05.005)

Provided by University of Arizona

Citation: Early childhood education centers can boost parents' engagement at home (2020, July 7)
retrieved 19 April 2024 from

<https://phys.org/news/2020-07-early-childhood-centers-boost-parents.html>

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