



Handout 6.1 Instruction – Ask the Expert

What Does the Research Say?

Children learn by doing. Although children learn many valued skills (e.g., communication, motor, social skills) through play and independent exploration of the environment, the type and variety of behaviors that children acquire can be facilitated by the addition of high quality instruction. Instruction is the intentional arrangement of the environment to enhance learning. Instructional strategies include arranging the physical or temporal environment, changing or modifying materials in the environment, or changing the adult behavior.

People often assume that adults are always the best teachers, especially for children with disabilities. This is not true. Research clearly demonstrates the effectiveness of peer mediated instruction for children with and without disabilities. Research is also clear that children learn best when they learn together. There are social, academic, and behavioral benefits for all children participating in diverse learning environments. Learning environments that include children with and without disabilities and children from diverse backgrounds provide multiple opportunities for early learning professionals to provide general and targeted instruction for all children.

Why is this Important?

The importance of early childhood education is cited so often in the popular and scientific press that this statement has become self-evident. Data from the seminal Hart and Risley research demonstrate that children who hear more words say more words, and children with larger vocabularies are more successful in school. The Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis estimates the benefit to cost ratio of the Abecedarian Educational Child Care Program, one of the most successful comprehensive early childhood programs to be \$7 to \$1. That means that for every dollar invested, there are \$7 worth of societal benefits.

The most effective early childhood programs use high quality curricula, provide training for their staff, and implement instruction throughout the day. We know that children who participate in high quality early learning programs make important and long-lasting gains across developmental domains. In other words, teaching works. As public support for access to universal early learning program increases, it is incumbent on the field of early education to be able to describe effective and sustainable instructional strategies.

Why Is This Important for Children With Disabilities?

Children with disabilities by definition, have delays in valued areas of development. The purpose of early intervention and early childhood special education is to provide children and their families with the knowledge and support that they need to change their child's developmental trajectory. That is, we want to help children with disabilities acquire the skills that will help them be more successful in school and in the community alongside their typically developing peers. This will only happen when children receive the adequate intensity of high quality instruction. There is over 50 years of data demonstrating that children with disabilities can and do learn when they participate high quality early learning programs. Therefore, children must have access to high quality learning environments and the adults (e.g., teachers, therapists, parents, caregivers) in these environments must be able to provide individualized instruction. To maximize the effect of early intervention/early childhood special education, instruction must be personalized to address the unique strengths and areas of need for every child and family. Although the core characteristics of good instruction cross age and disability, the ability to individualize instruction improves outcomes and overall satisfaction with the educational program.

Bottom Line

Student failure is instructional failure. If children do not learn what we attempt to teach them, then the instruction has not been effective and must be changed. Effective instruction yields improved child outcomes.

Effective instruction is essential to help children learn valued skills and behaviors. Instruction should occur across time and settings. It can occur in a classroom, on the playground, on a walk, and in the bathtub. It can be provided by a parent, peer, licensed therapist (e.g., speech-language pathologist), or a teacher. Instructional interactions should be fun for both the teacher and the learner. Instruction facilitates the full participation of all children in valued activities, routines, and rituals in their home, school, and community. Good instruction can prepare children to be more successful in school and teach them skills and behaviors that will help them be full members of their community. Although the best instruction is individualized to address the needs of every child, the best instructional practices share some common characteristics. High quality instructional practices:

- Are intentional
- Address skills and behaviors that are important to the family
- Address pivotal skills that will help the child be more independent
- Are implemented with high fidelity
- Use child performance data to determine the effectiveness of instruction, and modify instruction as necessary to ensure the best possible child outcomes

About the Expert

Dr. Ilene Schwartz is a professor in the Area of Special Education at the University of Washington and the Director of the Haring Center for Research and Training in Education at UW. She earned her Ph.D. in child and developmental psychology from the University of Kansas and is a board-certified behavior analyst (BCBA-D). Dr. Schwartz has an active research and professional training agenda with primary interests in the area of autism, inclusive education, and the sustainability of educational interventions. Dr. Schwartz is the director of Project DATA, a model preschool program for children with autism that has been in operation since 1997; and is currently involved in research projects examining the efficacy of the Project DATA model with toddlers and preschoolers with autism.
