



Curriculum in Early Childhood Family Education: Philosophy and Implementation 2011

Introduction

Because Early Childhood Family Education (ECFE) is available to every family with young children, and every family has diverse needs, no single curriculum is appropriate. There is, however, a clear rationale for an intentional, systematic approach to curriculum. To meet the needs of children and families, each program needs to engage in a planned, coordinated curriculum process. Early childhood curriculum is discussed first, followed by parent education curriculum.

Early Childhood

A valuable resource for early childhood professionals is the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). In the NAEYC's Position Statement on Curriculum, Assessment and Program Evaluation, they state that:

Curriculum is more than a collection of enjoyable activities. Curriculum is a complex idea containing multiple components, such as goals, content, pedagogy, or instructional practices. Curriculum is influenced by many factors, including society's values, content standards, accountability systems, research findings, community expectations, culture and language, and individual children's characteristics. (p. 6)

ECFE programs must provide structured learning activities for children that promote children's development and positive interaction with peers. Early learning standards should be a main reference when developing, assessing or selecting curricula for ECFE classes. Among other benefits, early learning standards contribute to the process of curriculum alignment. In curriculum alignment, the official curriculum of the school district or program is matched to the early learning standards (Morrison, 2008).

For example, the primary purpose of the *Early Childhood Indicators of Progress (ECIPs)* is to:

...provide a framework for understanding and communicating a common set of developmentally appropriate expectations for young children within a context of shared responsibility and accountability for helping children meet these expectations. (p. 1)

Indeed, one of the five goals of the ECIPs is:

To provide teachers, caregivers and administrators in early childhood education and care programs and settings with a common conceptual framework and guidelines for planning curriculum, instruction and assessment of young children.
(p. 1)

Since ECFE programs should emphasize programming for children ages birth to three, program coordinators, teachers and others involved in the curriculum process need to find age-appropriate learning standards, guidelines or goals. To this end, one valuable resource is the *Early Childhood Indicators of Progress: Minnesota's Early Learning Guidelines for Birth to 3*. It should be noted that

The Early Learning Guidelines for Birth to 3 are not intended to be a curriculum or assessment tool. Instead, the guidelines and framework identify the desired learning outcomes that quality instruction and assessment need to address. (p. 3)

The **Head Start Act** serves as an example of putting these elements together. In Part 1304, curriculum means a written plan that includes:

1. *The goals for children's development and learning;*
2. *The experiences through which they will achieve these goals;*
3. *What staff and parents do to help children achieve these goals; and*
4. *The materials needed to support the implementation of the curriculum.*

The curriculum is consistent with the Head Start Program Performance Standards and is based on sound child development principles about how children grow and learn.

For further information, **reference Early Head Start Tip Sheet No. 10**. Below are some important points from the document:

1. Improved curricula and lesson plans based on the child's interests should guide Early Head Start programs.
2. The written curriculum plan defined in the Performance Standards provides a framework within which a local EHS program can articulate their beliefs about what infants and toddlers need to learn and how they learn those things.
3. Providing intentional and purposeful learning moments within the curriculum plan means using the knowledge of the child and his/her development to provide experiences and materials the child needs to ensure on-going development.

Planning, Implementation and Evaluation Tool (follows this document)

Over recent years, evidence has increased that the use of curricula has positive effects on young children's development and learning. However, research supports the notion that, for the findings of positive results of curricula to be realized, "*efficacious curricula must be implemented well by practitioners in the community*" (Odom et al, 2010).

Purpose:

The attached instrument has been developed for the following purposes:

1. To inform program staff, parents and any other interested individuals about the philosophy of curriculum in Early Childhood Family Education (ECFE) and implications for implementation of the philosophy.

2. To guide ECFE staff in the cycle of planning, aligning, implementing, evaluating, and goal-setting for the purpose of program quality and improvement.
3. To be used as a companion to the “Quality Indicators for Early Childhood Family Education Programs” when curriculum is a particular focus in program planning and self-evaluation.

In this instrument, curriculum is an organized framework that delineates:

- the CONTENT (knowledge, perceptions, skills) children/parents are to learn/experience,
- the PROCESSES through which children/parents achieve the above goals,
- the STAFF’s role in helping children/parents achieve these goals, and
- the CONTEXT in which teaching and learning occur.

Goals:

The assumptions/belief statements on the attached chart state *why* ECFE programs do the things they do to achieve the goals of ECFE listed below:

Goals of Early Childhood Family Education:

1. Parent-child relationships support the child’s development in:
 - physical well being and motor development,
 - social and emotional development,
 - approaches to learning (e.g., curiosity, persistence, attentiveness, reflection, interpretation, imagination, invention),
 - language development and communication skills, and
 - cognition and general knowledge.
2. Parents* understand the importance of what they do with their children and how it changes over time.
3. Parents have the knowledge and realistic expectations to anticipate and meet the developmental needs of their children.
4. Parents demonstrate sensitive and responsive care and interaction with their children.
5. Parents and children experience a smooth transition from early childhood programs and services into kindergarten and the larger school system.
6. Parents are involved in their children’s learning and education in the school-age years.
7. Families participate in formal and informal social networks in their communities that support effective parenting.
8. Families are knowledgeable about and appropriately use community resources.

* The word “parents” includes all individuals who function in a primary parenting role.

These goals, based on theory and research, allow for flexibility in local community implementation that includes input from parents as to their goals for themselves and their children. Curriculum, as defined above, reflects avenues through which these goals are accomplished.

How to Use Instrument

The “implications for practice” listed on the following chart correspond with each assumption/belief on the chart. These “implications for practice” offer some recommended

ways for staff to act on the assumptions and beliefs in order to accomplish the ECFE goals listed previously.

This instrument was designed so that it can be used by ECFE program staff and others to assess the level at which programs are implementing curriculum activities that are likely to accomplish program goals.

Implementation can be assessed as to whether each implication for practice is to be achieved or has been achieved at one of the following five levels:

1. Need more information to respond
2. Needs to be done
3. Planning stage
4. Partially implemented
5. Implemented with ongoing reassessment

Suggested uses of this document include the following:

- Periodic curriculum planning and goal setting
- Curriculum reassessment after several years of operation
- Orientation of new and current staff to curriculum in ECFE
- Staff development and performance evaluation

Parent Education

ECFE programs rely on the *Parent Education Core Curriculum Framework* to guide their curriculum planning, implementation and evaluation. The *Parent Education Core Curriculum Framework* is not a prescribed curriculum, rather it “provides a framework that defines and places parameters around the core content – what we teach – in parent education” (p. 2). The framework is “based on the assumption that parent educators should have autonomy and exercise creativity in assessing the specific and unique needs and expectations of each parent and parent group with whom they work and in designing curriculum and selecting resources to best meet their needs and expectations” (p. abstract).

Goals:

The specific goals of the *Parent Education Core Curriculum Framework* are to provide a resource that:

1. Frames or defines the body of knowledge in the field of parent education.
2. Is applicable across the field of parent education with any type of parent education program, population, setting and delivery mode.
3. Is a planning tool for development and delivery of parent education curriculum and lesson plans.
4. Identifies the intended content and objectives of parent education, originally designed for Early Childhood Family Education and Even Start in Minnesota.
5. Provides guidance for parent goal setting in parent education.
6. Guides assessment of parent education outcomes and programs.
7. Promotes accountability in parent education programs and with individual parent educators.
8. Informs practice in parent education.

References and Resources

Early Childhood Curriculum, Assessment, and Program Evaluation, 2003. National Association for the Education of Young Children. Accessed from <http://www.naeyc.org/files/naeyc/file/positions/CAPEexpand.pdf>

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Morrison, G. S. (2008). *Fundamentals of Early Childhood Education, 5th edition*. Pearson Education, Upper Saddle River, NJ.

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Odom, S.L., Fleming, K., Diamond, K., Lieber, J., Hanson, M., Butera, G., Horn, E., Palmer, S. & Marquis, J. (2010). Examining different forms of implementation and in early childhood curriculum research, *Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 25*, 314-328.

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