

Introduction

A parent had heard that it was a good early childhood center, but she was not impressed when she came to observe and saw the morning activity: learning to dance to music of different tempos. “Don’t you do anything educational?” she asked the teacher.

The teacher didn’t know what to say. She had been taught that this kind of music and movement activity was good for children although she didn’t really know why. She was “doing early childhood education” as she had been taught—the children loved it—but she didn’t really know the reasons behind her own “developmentally appropriate practice.”

Because this teacher didn’t fully understand the reasons behind her early education practices, she couldn’t explain the benefits of various classroom activities to either the parent or her new aide. And because she could not interpret her classroom to the parent, the parent was unlikely to view her classroom as an educational setting—a key reason why many parents see no justification for higher fees to pay staff higher wages. If she knew and could articulate the *why*’s behind her practices, she might feel like a more professional teacher. She might also be able to promote her program and earn more professional wages.

This book was written to help just such a teacher answer parents’ naïve yet unnerving questions about our classroom practices. This book explains *why* we do *what* we do in early care and education.

Knowing the *why*’s behind our practices can also improve those practices. Many highly skilled early childhood teachers have developed an automatic and unconscious pattern of classroom practices. They don’t have to think about what they are doing. But if this book makes them more conscious of their

skills, of how these skills influence child development, then they can exercise those skills more consistently and teach them to new teachers more easily. Although Jean Piaget explained it better, Maria Montessori was the first to point out that people often learn unconsciously through everyday actions. But if we raise a skill to the conscious, conceptual level, then we have a new kind of control over that skill and can wield it in a more powerful way.

The ability to explain the why's of good practice is important for another reason. Policymakers are increasingly interested in expanding public education into lower age groups, beginning with a movement toward four-year-old kindergartens in many U.S. states. This trend could be very good, not only for young children, but also for elementary-aged children, because it could yield a partnership between early childhood and elementary education programs. Although there are many potential benefits to this relationship, there is also the chance that the methods common to elementary education might simply be extended downward into classrooms of four-year-olds and three-year-olds. This would be a disaster. In our view, elementary education may have more to learn from early care and education programs than the other way around.

Elementary teachers are trained in schools of education that often focus more on curriculum and the practice of teaching than on how children learn. If the teacher focuses on curriculum (the subject matter to be mastered), then providing the same instruction and experiences to the whole class at once seems natural and, indeed, efficient. And yet when the focus is on curriculum, treating a child's emotions may seem like a distraction from learning, rather than a key to motivating learning.

The roots of early childhood education lie more in the field of child psychology than education. Child psychology begins by asking how children grow and learn. When you're part of this tradition, teaching doesn't start with the curriculum, which places the emphasis on what children *don't* know. Instead, it begins with what the child currently knows and builds from there. In this approach, treating every child differently seems natural, as each child approaches a topic with different understandings and learns through her own experiences. Early childhood teachers and cognitive scientists understand knowledge in the same way: as something the child actively constructs through self-motivated action and experience, not as something poured into him.

We hope this book is useful not only to early childhood teachers, but also to the field of early care and education, because it shows the link between the practice of early childhood education and the science of child development. For example, petting the classroom bunny and talking about how the bunny feels may seem old-fashioned and “low tech”;

it might look like mere play rather than education. And yet these are exactly the kind of activities scientists say we should be using to teach preschoolers important abilities such as perspective-taking, empathy, and prosocial behavior (see chapter 2). Similarly, playing Simon Says is fun, but it is also an exceptional method for teaching impulse control. Impulse control, which has been extensively studied by scientists, is considered an important early predictor of later success in school and in life (see chapter 3).

In the chapters that follow, we describe the science of child development and introduce corresponding information about classroom practices at appropriate points. Throughout the book you will find Practice Tips that offer practical guidance for working with young children based on scientific research. You will find vignettes in each chapter that highlight promising, as well as mistaken, practices based on notes we took observing early childhood programs. They show how scientific research on child development comes to life in real programs, with real people. Following chapters 1 through 3, you will find reproducible handouts you can give to parents explaining how the everyday practices in your program promote children's social-emotional development.

The two components of each chapter, one on science and one on practice, are really just two ways of talking about the same thing. Whatever aspect of child development we are discussing, highly professional practice comes from knowing both how children grow (the ages, stages, and processes of their development) and what we can do to promote that growth as early childhood teachers. You may read these parts independently or sequentially; the important thing to remember is that the two parts—science and practice—support and enrich each other. The science is meaningless unless we apply it, and the practices may be ineffective unless they are based on scientific research.

The linked fields of child development and early childhood education have much to teach each other as well as the broader field of education. We hope this book helps explain the scientific validity of early care and education practices, many of which look simpler than they are and have a much bigger impact on children's lives than may first appear.

A NOTE ON TERMS

Are you a child care provider? An early childhood teacher? Today these roles have merged, and everyone agrees that children grow best in settings that care for their physical, social, and emotional needs while stimulating their intellectual growth. To

reflect both the caring and the educating components of helping young children grow, in this book we call the adult staff alternately “caregiver” and “teacher.” We intend these terms to include everyone who works directly with young children. Whether you are a family child care provider or a kindergarten teacher, this book is for you.