An Investigation of Play Time
Among Even Start Children and Their Parents:
A Parent Education Model to Enhance the Benefits of Even Start

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Introduction

This presentation describes the preliminary findings of a pilot research project to investigate the effects of a parent education model to enhance the benefits of Even Start. The researchers investigated play time among Even Start children and their parents during the spring semester, 1990 with funding from the Morehead State University Research and Patent Committee.

The project researchers planned to replicate a pilot study of a parent-education program conducted in Missouri in 1983 in order to broaden the data base supporting benefits derived from effective parenting education programs (Coleman and Ganong, 1984). The researchers are in agreement with a conference speaker who said, "A primary goal in all our professionals and institutions (is that) of strengthening and supporting parenting and families as the major way of providing for the health, education, and welfare of children..." (Schaefer, in Snow, 1981, p. 4).

Though the researchers of the Even Start project, once in process, could not replicate the Missouri project due to technical difficulties, a variation of the Missouri project was designed and conducted with the same premise and similar procedures in place but with research materials different from those utilized for the Missouri project. The hypothesis of the researchers was that children of parents who viewed the video on play received guided instruction on ways to play with their child would make higher posttest scores than children of parents who did not view the video. (See graphs).

Even Start was designed to address the cycle of poverty through an early system of organized, continuous educational intervention thus continuing to support the philosophy that ability is more susceptible to change during early years. Such early intervention to aid in improved achievement is of prime importance in a geographical region such as eastern Kentucky where there are few job opportunities for those with limited education. High drop-out rates, unemployment, teen-age pregnancy and dependence on welfare are all problems with which families in Appalachia must contend.

In order to address these issues, Congress passed an $8.3 billion reauthorization (HR 5-PL 100-297) in 1988 to continue funding most federal elementary, secondary, and adult education programs. It also created a number of new programs such as Even Start to provide educational and social services to very young children (ages 1-7) and their parents. The bill provides $35 million in fiscal year 1989 and funding as needed thereafter, with a state minimum of $250,000. The federal government will bear 90% of the cost of the project in the first year, 80% in the 2nd, 70% in the third, and 60% in the 4th and succeeding years. The secretary of education has been directed to submit an evaluation of the program to congress in 1993.
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Subjects

There were fifty preschool children and thirty-five adults initially enrolled in the local Even Start Project when it began in 1988. At the time of this study in March of 1990 eight adults and their eleven children had left the program due to relocation and the inability to maintain the Even Start schedule. While this left thirty-nine children and twenty-seven adults as potential participants of the study, eleven children were under the age of three and therefore considered too young to participate in the study. This left only twenty-eight children between the ages of three and eight years of age as potential subjects of the study. Eighteen children who were not included in the study were either attending primary school or did not complete the project due to logistic problems leaving ten pre-K and K level children completing all components of the study.

The mothers of the ten children who completed the project ranged in age from 23 to 43 years of age. The mean year of educational achievement of the mothers before dropping out of school was 8.75. One female was raising her sister's child so technically she wasn't the child's mother. The parents in Even Start attended classes two days a week in order to prepare for the GED examination. Their preschool children were enrolled in classrooms at the same site.

Procedures

Six randomly selected mothers viewed the video, Time Together: Learning to Play with Young Children (Educational Productions, 1990) which assists adults in understanding their role in play. Four mothers did not view the video. The mothers who viewed the video were also given a guide to supporting play with their children. All the mothers who took part in the study were given the same toys to use in playtime with their children: a complete roll of photocopy paper, an eight ounce bottle of glue, a gallon-size zipped plastic bag filled with green and white macaroni shapes, a set of sponge blocks in a mesh bag, and a funnel. The parents were also asked to complete Playtime Record forms and take part in an interview designed to gain selected information concerning themselves and their family. The mothers were awarded a set of large markers for their children if they turned in their Playtime Records to the researchers at the end of the project. All the mothers returned their records.

The researchers administered the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test, Form L to the children prior to the viewing of the video by their mothers. At the end of the study, the children were assessed with Form M of the PPVT.

Results

The "M" scores of the children whose mothers viewed the video on the measure employed, the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test, were not significantly higher than the scores of the children whose mothers did not view the video.

Generally, children who gained less were children of mothers with lower levels of educational achievement before dropping out of school.
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In the Playtime Record forms, parents reported playing with their children nine times in the morning, nineteen times in the afternoon, and twenty-six times in the evening. There was one instance of playing with the children from one to five minutes, twelve instances of playing with the child from six to ten minutes, fourteen instances of playing with the children from ten to fifteen minutes, and twenty-three instances of playing with the child from fifteen to twenty minutes.

The mothers were the individuals who most often played with the child, totaling twenty-nine instances. The category of sister was named next often, with twelve cases, followed by brother, eight instances, father, seven instances, and "other", two cases.

The location of play was reported in the Playtime Records was most often the living room, twenty-three cases, followed by kitchen, fifteen instances, bathroom, eight instances, bedroom, seven instances, dining room, three instances and two instances of play reported in the back yard, front yard, and "other".

The mothers all reported using the toys supplied by the project. Other toys were utilized in playtime thirty-nine times.

Discussion

Inherent in many field studies are difficulties with scheduling places and times to conduct the research. This project coped with such interferences. On some of the scheduled days for data gathering, parents and/or their children were absent; on other days, research assistants could not keep their scheduled appointments. In addition to these difficulties, many miles separated the research center from each of the field centers requiring transportation over rural roads. Another factor influencing the data gathering process was the time line. By the time funding was received, there was little time before the end of the school year to carry out the project in the depth planned. Nevertheless, the researchers established a system for conducting this a study and created data gathering instruments which yielded, in addition to the research data, some interesting incidental information provided by parents on the Playtime Records and Parent Questionnaires.

Working with parents of children enrolled in Even Start provided an opportunity for the researchers to gather data which provided explanations of questions and subjective responses not coded, but gathered, from the Playtime Records.

Also questions from the Parent Questionnaire provided subjective responses pertaining to the parents' perceptions of children's actions at-home, children's interest in school, parental actions and feelings about school, and beliefs about whether they (the parents) feel they have special problems most other parents do not have.

A review of the Playtime Records revealed parental dialogue from various perspectives and will be studied and reported in another article by the researchers. Some of the categories of interest to the investigators include parental comments of praise vs encouragement statements; mentioning of descriptors or attributes of the toys; phrases which encourage autonomy, dependence, or cooperation; comments which develop or thwart problem solving; statements which provide extension or elaboration of play; and references to feelings during playtime.
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By a cursory review of the Playtime Records the investigators noticed that some parents used praise statements while others used encouragement statements to describe their responses to their child's play. One parent praised the children saying, "I told both of the kinds how pretty their pictures were." Another parent wrote, "I told him he done a great job." Many of the parents described commenting on the function, color, size, and shape of the toys. For example, one mother reported, "I told her to watch the water come out of the hole in the funnel." Several parents reported cooperative play when they told their child, "I'll be your helper." One parent reported her child "told the children (siblings) what she would build." One parent reported questioning her child's action. "He set the roll of paper in the middle of the paper. I asked him why? He said he can jump over it." Many parents described extension of their child's play with materials and games not provided for by the research project, e. g., walk through the woods, playing on a slide, playing hide-n-seek, swinging. One parent said about her child playing on the slide, "I discussed what trees, flowers, and animals we might see." Finally, one mother wrote about feelings associated with playing, [when my child] "played with the toy vehicle and people he smiled and laughed."

On the Parent Questionnaire the following responses were given to the question pertaining to the child's actions at home perceived to result from parental participation in Even Start: talks more; asks more questions; more interested; better attitude about starting school; doing ok, no other differences; learning to get along more with others; at first, [my child] didn't know how to play with toys, but after I explained there was not special way, she really took off by herself; child more outgoing and talks more; plays more with others and is learning manners; more independent and more sure about self; involved in more projects; has learned more word meanings.

Asked by the researchers if their child's interest in school had changed, nine parents responded "yes"; two responded "not sure." When asked if their [the parent's] actions or feelings have changed since participating in Even Start, eight responded "yes" while three reported "no." All parents reported feeling better about themselves since participating in Even Start.

Summary

Though the data do not support significant relationships between cognitive growth and parental viewing a video to enhance parental support of children's play, information gathered during the project from the Parent Questionnaire and Play Time Records offers insight into parents' interactions with their children self-reported to the researchers.


FORM L vs. FORM M
DIFFERENCE AFTER VIEWING VIDEO

SCORE

CHILDREN

L-SCORE1  M-SCORE2
LEVEL OF PARENTS EDUCATION GAIN SCORES AND PARENTS EDUCATION

GAIN SCORE

PARENTS ED. LEVEL

CHILDREN

- PARENTS ED.  ■ GAIN SCORE
TIME OF DAY
TIME OF DAY PLAYED WITH CHILD

REPORTED INSTANCES

01 02 03 04 05 06 07 08 09 10

CHILDEREN

MORNING  AFTERNOON  EVENING

REPORTED INSTANCES FROM PLAYTIME RECORDS
PLAYMATE FREQUENCIES
PERSON WHO PLAYED WITH CHILD

REPORTED INSTANCES FROM PLAYTIME RECORDS
REPORTED INSTANCES FROM PLAYTIME RECORDS