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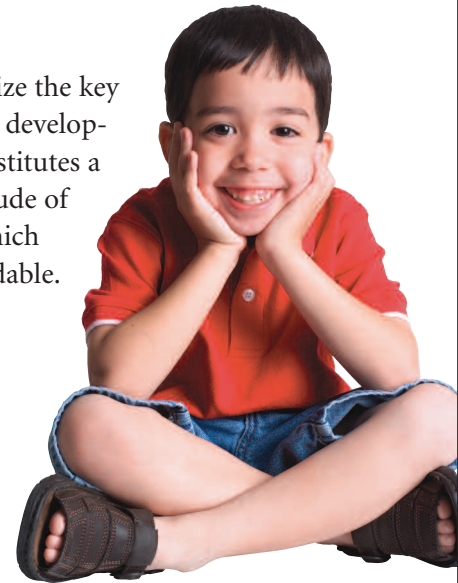
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Preschool Curriculum Decision-Making: Dimensions to Consider

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Policymakers at the federal, state, and local levels recognize the key role preschool education plays in children's learning and development, but they may have less understanding of what constitutes a quality preschool program curriculum. Given the multitude of available curriculum models, the confusion regarding which ones are appropriate for 3- and 4-year-olds is understandable. However, if one of the goals of preschool is to improve children's school success by enhancing their early skills and knowledge, programs serving preschoolers need to decide the content of what children should learn, as well as how they will best learn it. This report provides a framework for decision-makers to use in evaluating which curriculum might be most appropriate for their specific preschool program.



What We Know:

- Preschool curriculum models vary widely. Some may detail exactly what to teach. Others may provide guidance in developing activities and interactions. How play is defined and used can also vary.
- A single curriculum may not address all of the different areas of learning. Curricula may appear to be comprehensive, but the focus on some domains is superficial and will not expand children's knowledge or develop the skills necessary for their later learning.
- Even if a curriculum fits a program's philosophy and provides the needed amount and type of content, it might not be appropriate for the children enrolled. In addition, if it is impossible for teachers to implement, it will be ineffective.
- Not all curriculum models have been empirically evaluated or even based on a systematic and comprehensive review of research of how young children learn. In addition, no single curriculum or approach has been proven to be best for all preschool programs.

Recommendations for Decision-Makers:

- To help discern which curricula are more appropriate, the roles of the teacher and the child in the learning process and the areas of learning to be addressed should be considered.
- Curricular decisions should take into account children's ages, behavior or learning needs, linguistic and cultural backgrounds, and economic status, as well as teachers' prior training and experience and need for ongoing professional development.
- Assessment systems should be specifically designed to measure whether learning objectives are being reached, engage children in meaningful tasks within a realistic context, and document changes over time.
- For parent involvement, curricula should help build program-family partnerships and establish ongoing meaningful communication with families.
- Decision-makers should look for research evidence of a model's effectiveness and attempt to see the model in action in multiple settings.

Today, increasing numbers of 3- and 4-year-olds are enrolled in preschool programs. Many parents, teachers, and policymakers look to such programs to help children become successful learners in kindergarten and beyond. Yet, while programs may claim to promote young children’s learning and development, their educational effectiveness varies. This is due in part to the skills children bring to preschool and overall program quality. Effectiveness also relies on a program’s curriculum, or the content of what children learn in preschool and how it is taught.

Policymakers at the federal, state and local levels recognize the key role preschool programs play in children’s learning and development, but they may have less understanding of what constitutes a quality preschool program curriculum. Given the multitude of available curriculum models, the confusion regarding which ones are appropriate for young children overall or more effective for specific populations of 3- and 4-year-olds is understandable. Although the early childhood education field recommends programs utilize what are known as Developmentally Appropriate Practices,¹ it does not yet have the research base to promote any single curriculum model as “best.” In addition, no state government or federal entity mandates use of just one particular curriculum in their publicly funded preschool programs.

However, if one of the goals of preschool is to improve children’s school success by enhancing their early skills and knowledge, programs serving 3- and 4-year-olds need to decide the content of what children should learn, as well as how they will best learn it. The purpose of this report is to provide a framework for decision-makers to use in evaluating which curriculum might be most appropriate for their specific preschool program. The framework consists of a series of questions focusing on specific features of any curriculum model and the supports the model developer may provide. We begin with some definitions of curriculum.

What Makes a “Curriculum” a Curriculum?

At its simplest, curriculum is defined as what to teach and how to teach it. However, deciding what to teach—as well as how to teach it—is influenced by “concepts of what repertoire of knowledge and skills it is important for the young child to master, what role the child shall have in achieving mastery, and what organization of learning experiences is most likely to yield maximum cognitive power.”²

Any curriculum model, therefore, is “an ideal representation of the theoretical premises, administrative policies, and pedagogical components of a program aimed at obtaining a particular educational outcome.”³ No matter what model is ultimately used, curriculum “affects students by initiating learning and by exposing students to experiences designed to help all children to attain skills and knowledge and to change values and feelings.”⁴

At the same time, the term “curriculum” can have a variety of meanings in preschool programs, particularly in contrast to how the term is used in K-12 settings. This is due in part to the fact that curriculum is often heavily defined by the content to be taught, but theories of child development and learning are more likely to provide implications for how to teach, rather than *what* children should learn. As a result, some preschool stakeholders feel that a curriculum must detail exactly what to teach, as well as how to teach it and when.

Others argue that while this is a type of curriculum, what is more appropriate for young children is one that provides learning goals and guidance to teachers in developing activities and interactions. This would include carefully planned environments and activities in the classroom, such as recurring story telling at circle time or the obstacle course added to the playground for one week to help children develop spatial terminology and exercise. It would also include unplanned and spontaneous learning, such as learning about water systems when a pipe bursts or developing self-regulation skills while waiting for your turn on the slide. In short, curriculum in the extremes can be as minimal as offering guidance for deciding what and how to teach, or as structured as not only telling the teacher what the content should be on any given day, but also exactly what to say when teaching the content.

Although views of what makes a “curriculum” a bona fide curriculum vary, when the term is left undefined, it can be difficult for a preschool program to answer the question: “What should be learned?”⁵ It is also difficult to outline “the set of goals which are the aims of education for children”⁶ in their programs, including those that support “children’s physical, social, emotional, and cognitive growth.”⁷ The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and the National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education (NAECS/SDE) therefore advise the following:

“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.”⁸

In short, if preschool programs are to be educationally effective, it is not enough to set up a classroom with well-trained teachers and appropriate materials. Early childhood educators must also make some curriculum decisions.

Questions to Consider When Making Curriculum Decisions

Preschool policymakers and stakeholders face a variety of curriculum-related decisions. These include selecting a curriculum for a specific preschool program or generating a list of recommended curricula from which programs may choose. They may also need to evaluate the appropriateness of curricula already in use.

Yet, just as one will most likely be unable to find a size-, color-, and activity-appropriate pair of footwear by blindly choosing from among every item in a shoe store, preschool stakeholders need to consider a variety of criteria when accomplishing these curriculum-related tasks, as well. As we discuss next, these include the specific population of children served and the skills and experience levels of the teachers who will implement the curriculum. The place to begin in the decision-making process is with an examination of where a curriculum model places both teachers and preschoolers in the learning process.

Checklist for Preschool Curriculum Decision-Makers

1. How does the curriculum define the roles of the teacher and the child in the learning process?
2. What domains of learning are addressed? Are they integrated or treated separately? Will the curriculum lead to achievement of state early learning standards?
3. Does the curriculum provide guidance for differentiating teaching for students with special behavior, linguistic, or learning needs?
4. Do the curriculum's developers provide an assessment system that is consistent with the teaching philosophy and learning content?
5. What research evidence exists to support the value or effectiveness of the curriculum?
6. Is the curriculum appropriate for all teachers, regardless of their qualifications? What kind of professional development is provided?
7. Are specific materials required to implement the curriculum?
8. Does the curriculum model provide guidance for such services as parent involvement and the transition to kindergarten?

1. How does the theoretical orientation of the curriculum define the roles of the teacher and the child in the learning process?

Curriculum models in the 18th and 19th centuries focused on issues such as what children should know to become contributing, law-abiding members of American society. An additional premise was the importance of providing health and nutrition assistance, as well as basic skills to children who were poor, immigrants, or living in unhealthy conditions.⁹

During the latter half of the 20th century, the connection between opposing theories of development and the curriculum derived from them was of great interest. Multiple curriculum approaches were developed that were based on the dominant developmental theories. These represented three broad streams of thinking about development and learning.¹⁰

Direct instruction curriculum. The first approach—the didactic or direct instruction curriculum—stems from behaviorist or social learning theories that view learning as mostly input by the environment. In this approach the teacher typically presents information to the entire class of children in whole groups and uses structured, drill-and-practice lessons that are fast-paced, teach discrete skills or isolated facts in small steps, and involve frequent praise. A major advantage of this approach for some programs is the structure provided for the teacher, which may ensure more consistency across classrooms even if teachers have varying experience, abilities, and education.

Socialization curriculum. At the other end of the continuum is the maturationist theory, which leads to an open classroom or socialization curriculum. This theory derives from the belief that children must direct their own learning, and if developmentally ready, will learn when teachers are nurturing and provide stimulating materials and support for children’s choices. The main goal of curricula based on this approach is socialization. This approach also relies on unstructured play as its main activity. In contrast to direct instruction models, such models allow great freedom for teachers to develop activities based on their own experiences, creativity, and understanding of child development. Thus, content and activities can be based on the interests and needs of individual children and reflect the values of the community and program.

Constructivist curriculum. The third theoretical tradition falls in between these two approaches and comes from the constructivist theories of Piaget or Vygotsky. Adherents of interactive or constructivist curricula view learning as an active exchange between the child and his/her environment. In this model, teachers initiate activities designed to foster children’s reasoning and problem-solving abilities, but they also interact with children during child-designed activities to add new ideas or enhance learning. Peer-to-peer interaction is also viewed as essential to the learning process. Models derived from the constructivist theories also respect teachers as decision-makers and expect them to design activities and interactions to meet individual and community needs and interests. However, a framework for making these decisions, as well as specific methods for achieving learning objectives, are provided by the curriculum model. This third approach is the mostly widely espoused in preschool and supported by NAEYC.¹¹

What does research tell us about the value of these approaches? Research exists that compares the effects of curriculum derived from each of the three theoretical approaches. In general, all increase children’s academic abilities if teacher qualifications and class size are held constant. But, one study found long-term benefits in social behavior (e.g. reduction in crime) and another in application of knowledge (e.g. reading comprehension as opposed to discrete decoding) from participation in classrooms that allowed children to initiate their own activities and focused on integrated learning across domains.¹² Other studies have found beneficial effects of practices that mirror those of the constructivist approach.¹³

What about an eclectic approach? Of course, describing these three broad approaches oversimplifies the variety of curricula available and blurs some real differences among curriculum models within the same theoretical tradition. This variation is partly due to other dimensions of curriculum discussed below and to the fact that distinctions may exist even within one theoretical approach. In addition, not all curriculum models clearly follow one theoretical approach and may prescribe an eclectic mix. Taking a “little of this, little of that” approach may have some appeal to curriculum decision-makers. Choosing particular aspects of different curricula would seem to allow a program to “hedge its bets” and ensure children have all of their needs met. However, some research exists that indicates that the eclectic approach should be used with caution. Studies comparing “pure” implementation of a specific theoretical approach to mixed models have found some benefits for a pure approach.¹⁴ This is likely due to the consistency provided for the teacher. Learning to embed learning standards and integrate across different subject areas by guiding individual children’s development and enhancing their learning within child- or teacher-initiated activities is a formidable task, yet is expected of teachers in the constructivist tradition. If teachers then spend part of the day in skills-focused whole group instruction as is expected in most direct instruction models, it may cause confusion for the teacher, resulting in less effective teaching.¹⁵

Theoretical and practical importance of play. Preschool stakeholders must also exercise caution when analyzing curriculum models, as the theoretical orientation and the activities promoted may be misrepresented. For example, the use of “play” in a curriculum may seem to signal a more child-initiated program. However, *how* it is used also needs to be examined to determine where classrooms might fall on a teacher/child-initiated continuum. On one end of the continuum, if play is used, its sole purpose may be to reward the completion of academic work. Play in the form of structured learning games can have a more prominent role in the day-to-day activities in direct instruction classrooms, but may in actuality only be a variation of one-size-fits-all academic work. “Play” in this case only focuses on practicing skills and repeating facts and does not provide children with the opportunity to engage in abstract thinking, problem solving, or cooperation with peers.¹⁶

On the other end of the continuum, play is not used as a reward or a disguise. Rather, children have the opportunity to choose among many different types of materials and activities for much of the day, with play deliberately included in the curriculum to enhance children’s social and emotional development. In these classrooms, the teacher’s role is mainly to support children and manage materials.

In constructivist classrooms, in order for play to also enhance children’s intellectual curiosity and capacities, the teacher must make conscious decisions regarding what materials should be incorporated into such activities. The teacher must then scaffold, or support children’s learning through interactions with the children and by carefully orchestrating the opportunities for dramatic play and other peer-to-peer interactions. In this approach, play is seen as the opportunity for children to construct knowledge, develop self-regulation skills, acquire content knowledge, and enhance their oral language skills. This type of play also provides young children with the opportunity to deepen their intellectual understanding of various concepts with the help of teachers and peers.¹⁷

2. What domains of learning are addressed, and are they integrated or treated as distinctly separate content and skills? Will the curriculum lead to achievement of state standards?

A preschool program’s curriculum should attend to children’s overall development.¹⁸ This is not only because of the role social emotional development plays in a child’s ability to learn and the importance of enhancing children’s early learning skills in a variety of areas, but also because much of the economic benefits of attending high-quality preschool come from a combination of social emotional and academic competencies.¹⁹

Yet, a single curriculum may not address all of the different domains—or areas—of learning, including the traditional academic subjects, as well as children’s language, cognitive, social and physical development. Conversely, curricula may appear to “cover all the bases,” but the focus on some domains is superficial and will not expand children’s knowledge or develop the skills necessary for their later learning. While there is still much left to be learned about the effectiveness of various preschool curricula, an analysis of the curricula used in programs that have shown long-term benefits revealed two essential commonalities: a concentration on interesting and relevant content across subject areas, combined with a deliberate and intense focus on language development through meaningful interactions among children and between children and their teachers.²⁰

Developmental psychologists generally agree that learning within one domain is highly dependent upon each of the others. Thus, it is not surprising that national organizations (e.g. NAEYC and NAECS/SDE) and expert panels (e.g. National Goals Panel, Eager to Learn) call for comprehensive curricula that focus on teaching the whole child across all domains.²¹ Rather than taking the approach of most elementary school textbooks and curricula and always teaching each subject distinctly and at separate times, preschool curricula should explicitly integrate, or connect learning across developmental domains and academic subject areas. While there may be times when it is advantageous to focus on one area in depth, guidance to preschool teachers and suggested activities should emphasize how oral language, early literacy, science, social studies, math, the arts, and socio-emotional and motor learning can be integrated.

Theme-based curricula. A common approach to integrated learning is a theme-based curriculum where one broad topic or “big idea,” such as “Alive!” (a study of living versus non-living things) or “How We Grow” is the organizing structure for teaching and learning for a period of time. Such themes may transition into what is known as the project approach,²² which entails a “research effort deliberately focused on finding answers to questions about a topic posed either by the children, the teacher, or the teacher working with the children.”²³

Themes can be predetermined by the curriculum model, the program, or the individual classroom teacher. Advantages of predetermined topics are that there may be less need for teacher preparation time and materials are often provided by the curriculum model. It may also be easier to systematically meet state learning standards or curriculum objectives.

Themes can also emerge from the interests or activities in the classroom. This is the basis for an emergent curriculum, which—as the name suggests—involves the study of a topic that emerges from the interests of the children and may involve a short- or long-term, in-depth examination of that interest.²⁴ The advantages of the emergent approach are that teaching and learning are more easily adapted to the interests and needs of individual children and the particular community. Since topics aren't repeated yearly unless there is great interest and more depth added, the emergent curriculum may be more appropriate for programs that serve both 3- and 4-year-olds. In some cases the emergent curriculum may also be better suited to meet state standards, as most curriculum models that have a prescribed content are national and not necessarily keyed to local standards.

In determining whether a curriculum model aligns with specific state standards or guidelines from national organizations such as the National Goals Panel, NAEYC, International Reading Association, or National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, decision-makers should be somewhat cautious in relying on the developer's analysis alone. A thorough comparison, or the results of a disinterested reviewer, should be used to ensure that the connections between the standards and the curriculum objectives are substantive. Decision-makers may also wish to view a curriculum “in action,” particularly if they are aiming to serve a specific population of preschoolers.

3. Does the curriculum model provide guidance, adaptations, and specific strategies to differentiate teaching for children with special learning or linguistic needs or challenging behaviors?

Even if a curriculum model fits the program's stance on the role of the teacher and child in learning and provides the needed amount and type of content and language instruction, it might not be appropriate for the children enrolled. This might be because a curriculum is “context-free,” with no mention made of the differences in children that are a result of culture or socioeconomic status. Some curricula can be “context-sensitive” and cognizant of the “crucial role that culture and subculture play in determining cognitive abilities,” yet still not be appropriate for the children enrolled in a program.²⁵

Stakeholders must therefore also consider the following:

The age of the children served. Does the program serve both 3- and 4-year-old children? Are these mixed-age classrooms? Do children stay with one teacher over more than one year? In addition to considering if the curriculum takes into account how young children develop and learn, policymakers must look at the specific ages of children served in their program. If both ages are served or programs engage in “looping,” then the program must consider whether the content and skills are overly repetitive from one year to the next or whether the curriculum is designed for individually differentiated instruction.

The home language and culture of the children. Do the children and families served by the program speak more than one language and have different cultures? If so, is the goal of the program to provide dual language instruction? Or, is it to acknowledge and support the home language as much as possible, but primarily teach English? This goal would generally be the case where many languages are spoken and it is not possible to have teachers who speak all of them or where bilingual teachers are unavailable. Alternatively, is the goal to maximize acquisition of concepts and oral language in the home language and teach English as a Second Language? Also, are there specific content or teaching methods that are best suited to the cultural backgrounds of the children? Decision-makers should check that the curriculum is compatible with the chosen language approach and provides the necessary supports, such as lesson plans in both languages or suggested materials that reflect the culture and language of the children.

The economic status of the families enrolled. Are the children enrolled in the program predominantly low-income? Compared to their more affluent peers, they may have less complex language abilities, which are predictive of later reading skills.²⁶ Programs may therefore want to seek out a curriculum with a heavy emphasis on language development.

The developmental abilities of the children. Does the program serve children with special learning or behavior needs? If a program is inclusive and serves children with and without identified disabilities together in the classroom, then the curriculum model chosen should provide specific adaptations for activities and the environment. No curriculum can anticipate exactly the precise combination of strategies that will meet the needs of every child with disabilities, but methods for thinking about adaptations for common characteristics should be provided. For example, many children with and without identified disabilities have difficulty transitioning from one activity to another or need extra help developing fine motor skills. The curriculum should provide evidence-based methods for integrating individual objectives for these and other concerns.

4. How is learning assessed? Do the curriculum developers provide an assessment system that is consistent with the teaching philosophy and content of the model?

Both parents and policymakers look to preschool programs to improve children's early learning. There are no shortage of norm-referenced, standardized early childhood assessments that measure young children's skills and knowledge, many of which have established reliability and validity. Given the current policy focus on testing and accountability, preschool programs may feel increasing pressure to regularly assess children's learning using such tests.

However, standardized tests are rarely the best method for helping teachers learn how to improve their instruction overall or for particular children. This is especially true if the test is not specifically developed to measure the curriculum goals and objectives. The information generated may not inform how well the curriculum is "working" for any particular child, or how a teacher's practice might be modified as a result. When making curriculum decisions, preschool program stakeholders also need to determine if their curriculum choice includes an assessment system that has been specifically designed both to measure whether learning objectives are being reached and to inform teaching. In addition, it should engage children in meaningful tasks within a realistic context. Such assessments should also document changes in individual children over time.²⁷

5. What research evidence exists to support the value, as well as the effectiveness of this curriculum model?

NAEYC has noted that, “Teachers who use a validated curriculum model benefit from the evidence of its effectiveness and the accumulated wisdom and experience of others.”²⁸ Yet, not all curriculum models have been empirically evaluated, or even based on a systematic and comprehensive review of research of how young children learn.²⁹ At the same time, of those that have been researched, no single curriculum or approach has been definitely proven to be best for all preschool programs.

While the literature comparing outcomes of different curricula is too large to detail here, in general such studies have compared outcomes for approaches that represent different points on the child-centered vs. teacher-centered continuum outlined above. They have also explored the difference in outcomes between boys and girls, as well as children from specific socioeconomic backgrounds.³⁰ Preschool program decision-makers might wish to investigate the research base for any particular curriculum model, paying careful attention to the demographics of the children who served as the sample for the study. For example, if research studies examined the outcomes of middle-income, English-speaking children only, such a curriculum might not necessarily be as effective in meeting the needs of low-income children or English Language Learners.

6. Is the curriculum appropriate for all teachers in a preschool program? Is there a systematic and well-researched plan for teacher professional development?

Evidence of wide-spread use and successful implementation in multiple settings is a good indication that a curriculum model is transportable. However, no matter how perfectly the curriculum seems to fit a program’s children and how effective it has proven to be in other settings, if it is impossible to implement in your setting, then it will be ineffective.

Because teachers are the “street level” implementers of children’s daily experiences in any classroom,³¹ curricula also need to be evaluated on how dependent they are on teachers’ experience levels and educational backgrounds. For example, if teachers do not have an educational background that provides a foundation in child development or early childhood pedagogy, it can be difficult for them to implement curricula that give teachers great latitude in choosing daily learning activities.³² This issue is particularly salient given the variety of qualifications required of preschool teachers in any state. While some teachers in state-funded preschool programs are required to have a bachelor’s degree and certification related to early childhood education,³³ many teachers in child care settings are not required to have any credential beyond a high school diploma.³⁴ In addition, in light of the rapid expansion of preschool programs, many teachers are new and inexperienced and may require more guidance to provide an effective program.

“Scripted” curricula can override such difficulties by providing clear directions, examples, and sequences that are to be used by all teachers and for all students.³⁵ However, teachers may wish to differentiate their teaching practices based on children’s ongoing needs, but instead of allowing for a great deal of teacher choice, such curriculum may be “teacher proof.”³⁶ For experienced, well-qualified certified teachers, such curricula can also lead to feelings that their teaching skills or professional experience are of little use.³⁷

Tanner and Tanner's³⁸ three levels of teacher competency may be helpful for determining a teacher's capacity for implementing particular curricula. At Level I, teachers employ ready-made, routine materials, such as worksheets. Such materials are not critically evaluated and are used in isolated activities. Level II teachers may try to integrate both emerging classroom issues and different content areas, but may not necessarily be successful. For example, one teacher tried to focus on a letter of the week and connect it with each new theme. This left her with simplistic connections, such as choosing the letter "d" for the farm unit and singing both BINGO (because it was about a dog) and the "Farmer in the Dell" (because dell begins with "d").

At Level III, teachers emphasize broad themes that are related to specific content areas and also exercise quite a bit of independent judgment in adapting curriculum to children's individual needs. For example, in a larger theme about living things, the class visited a pet store. Although the teachers had planned to focus on pets generally and classification, the children's excitement about the snake that was fed a live mouse led to a more specific focus on snakes and their prey.

No matter what a teacher's background, he or she cannot implement a curriculum well without initial training and ongoing professional development. To be effective, such training should be provided by individuals who are familiar not only with adult learning principles, but also with the realities of teachers' classrooms. Decision-makers will therefore want to look for a comprehensive professional development plan and examine the research on its effectiveness. They must also examine the types of built-in supports available for providing ongoing technical assistance, including those at the site level, such as supervisors, coaches, or directors. Decision-makers must also ascertain the supports that are available within their own organizational context, such as money and time for teacher professional development.³⁹

7. Are specific materials required to implement the curriculum effectively?

Young children's cognitive and socio-emotional development often occurs through interactions with physical objects.⁴⁰ Thus, one additional area of inquiry for preschool decision-makers might be the materials used as part of any curriculum, as well as the cost of acquiring them. When considering cost, preschool program stakeholders might also wish to determine if such materials are closed- or open-ended. Closed-ended objects have just one single answer or correct way to use them (such as a puzzle) and tend to promote a single specific skill. Conversely, because there are many "correct" ways to use them, open-ended materials—such as blocks, sand, clay, or art supplies—can promote children's language growth, imagination, and problem solving skills each time children interact with them.⁴¹

8. Does the curriculum model provide guidance for related services, such as parent involvement and transition to kindergarten?

Children's early learning and development, as well as their transition from preschool into kindergarten, also relies on their family contexts. Effective early childhood educators need to know children's families to enhance young children's learning. Even if a curriculum seems to be a good match for the children enrolled in a program, decision-makers might also wish to determine whether an emphasis is placed on connecting preschool programs with families, and if so, the role families are expected to play in their children's early education. If preschool stakeholders view parent involvement as a key contributor to program effectiveness, curricula should provide materials and suggestions to help build program-family partnerships and establish ongoing meaningful communication with families about children's progress. There should also be opportunities to work together to develop goals for both individual children and the program overall.⁴² Finally, the curricula should include mechanisms and activities to assist programs and families in transitioning children into the more formal setting of K-12 education.⁴³

Final Thoughts for Preschool Curriculum Decision-Makers

Clearly, the quality and content of the curriculum provided will influence the effectiveness of any preschool program. Years of development and research have been invested in designing and researching a variety of curriculum models. However, choosing a curriculum model also involves careful research on the part of the decision-makers. They must reflect on their own beliefs about how children develop and learn and the role a classroom teacher should have in that development and learning. They must also consider the characteristics of the children and families served, and in turn, the goals of program participation. The characteristics of the teaching staff must be kept in mind as well.

If the goals and objectives of a program include all domains of development and relationships with families and the K-12 system, then the search will be for a comprehensive curriculum model. However, as described above, curricula can fall on a wide flexibility-to-structure continuum. Program decision-makers will need to balance their need for structure with their desire for individualization at the child, classroom, and family level. They might also wish to use the items in the checklist provided above to weight which additional criteria matter most for their program.

An additional common theme is evidence of effectiveness. Decision-makers need to be skeptical of curriculum developers' claims unless they are confirmed by researchers who are unaffiliated with the curriculum model. Seeing the model in action in multiple settings is also especially helpful in deciding whether it will meet a program's objectives. The promise of preschool will not be met if the curricula implemented are not rigorously designed, carefully researched, and implemented as intended.

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