



SPR: PRACTICE AND POLICY CONNECTIONS

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Study Supports Importance of Preparing Children Academically and Socially Prior to School Entry; Identifies Key Family and Classroom Factors Related to Educational Success in First Grade

SPR Article: *Academic and Cognitive Functioning in First Grade: Associations with Earlier Home and Child Care Predictors and with Concurrent Home and Classroom Experiences*, *SPR*, Vol. 35, No. 1, NASP 2006. Available at www.nasponline.org/SPR.

Key Findings:

- Fostering early learning *and* social competence from infancy through early childhood promotes higher academic success in first grade.
- Providing high quality educational resources *and* emotional support at home is important.
- Exposure to instruction in the first grade classroom plays a positive role in early achievement.

Article Summary

Given that children's academic growth is most malleable before third grade, it is important to promote early learning and educational success during the pre-kindergarten and early elementary school years (Entwisle & Alexander, 1993). Related findings from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development's Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development are reported in a recent article published in *School Psychology Review (SPR)*; Volume 35, No. 1), the official journal of the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP). These findings have both practical and policy implications concerning the targets and timing of such early interventions. For one, results indicate that having children well-prepared academically, socially and emotionally prior to entering elementary school is a key component of academic success in first grade. From a practical standpoint, the question becomes – in what ways can children's environments be shaped to support their early development and preparation for school?

The *SPR* article and related research suggest two major environmental influences on young children's academic development: families and preschool settings (i.e., child care, pre-kindergarten classrooms). Specifically, family experiences from infancy through early childhood, especially sensitive interactions with mothers and access to high quality home learning resources, play an important role in helping children develop pre-academic and social skills (see Table 1). Other research also indicates that high quality pre-kindergarten experiences positively contribute to children's academic and social skills upon entrance into school (Howes et al., in press). Teachers in these effective classrooms can be observed providing consistent emotional and instructional supports to children throughout the school day (Pianta, LaParo, & Hamre, 2005; see Table 1). Continued investment in promoting high quality emotional and instructional support in families and pre-kindergarten settings is needed. Specifically, more attention needs to be paid toward standardized observational assessment of these settings and adult-child interactions (Pianta, 2003), as well as bolstering family supports and teacher professional development to boost the value of adults' interactions with children.

Table 1. *Key Elements to Promoting Early School Success*

Key Elements to Promoting Early School Success	
<u>Family Setting</u>	<u>Classroom Setting</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parent-child interactions that are: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Supportive and warm - Responsive to child needs - Encouraging - Cognitively stimulating • Rich learning environment, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Multiple books - Language stimulation - Encouragement to learn alphabet, colors, shapes, and numbers • Parental involvement with school 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teacher-child interactions that are: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Sensitive and responsive to child needs - Positive and enthusiastic about learning - Focused on the process of learning - Providing children with feedback that helps them think and expand their understanding of concepts • Availability of ongoing professional development for teachers • Standardized observational assessment of teachers' interactions with children • Teachers connecting with parents

Findings from this study indicate two additional factors that are important for children's development of academic skills in first grade. First, a child's first grade classroom experiences were key contributors to early reading skills. Exposure to high quality instruction in first grade is clearly a valuable support to academic development, particularly emergent literacy. Second, this paper highlights the importance of social competence at school entry as a forerunner of first grade achievement. Socially competent behaviors in relationships with peers and adults, such as cooperation, assertiveness and attentiveness, allow children to take full advantage of instructional opportunities and interactions. There is growing evidence that schools and teachers can play a significant role in the continued development of these relational skills in pre-kindergarten, kindergarten and first grade, with implications for later school success (Greenberg, Kusche, Cook, & Quamma, 1995; Pianta & Hamre, 2001). Schools are encouraged to facilitate young children's relational competencies via use of evidence-based socio-emotional curricula and professional development efforts that enhance the quality of teacher-child relationships and interactions, as a means of improving children's first grade academic functioning.

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Author Bios

Jason Downer received his PhD in Clinical-Community Psychology from the University of South Carolina in 2003 and is currently a research associate in the Center for Advanced Study of Teaching and Learning at the University of Virginia. Downer's research interests primarily focus on the identification of family and classroom processes that serve as resources to young children as they develop the self-regulatory abilities and basic academic skills necessary to adjust and succeed in increasingly structured and demanding classroom environments. Specific areas of interest include observation of classroom quality, father involvement, and parent-teacher relationships.

Robert Pianta, PhD is the Novartis US Foundation Professor in the Curry School of Education, and Professor of Psychology at the University of Virginia where he also directs the University of Virginia Center for Advanced Study of Teaching and Learning. Pianta's research and policy interests are in the applications of developmental systems theory to research on early childhood settings and their contributions to child outcomes in preschool and the early school years, particularly social and emotional development. Pianta has published more than 200 scholarly papers, the majority having a focus on schooling and development in early childhood.

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