Early Childhood Services: Promoting Positive Outcomes for All Young Children

The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) supports the provision of high-quality early childhood services from birth through early elementary school. NASP advocates for early childhood services that are culturally responsive and inclusive at individual and systems levels. NASP believes school psychologists play an active role in collaborating with caregivers and early educators to create rich learning environments for young children that are grounded in evidence-based practices and informed by data-based decision making. NASP advocates for systems-level change to advance social justice and to promote educational access and equity for young children and their families.

RATIONALE

The foundations for learning and social–emotional competence begin early in development within a complex system of relationships (e.g., parent–child interactions, teacher–child interactions) and dynamic interactions between the environments in which young children develop (Ashiabi & O’Neal, 2015). Research has documented that high-quality early childhood services, including center-based programs, home visiting, and parent education, have a positive effect on a range of short- and long-term outcomes for children and their families (e.g., Cannon et al., 2017; Meloy et al., 2019; Yoshikawa et al., 2013). The provision of rich learning experiences is particularly important for children who are marginalized based on child and family characteristics. One year of universal access to a high-quality preschool program is estimated to eliminate the Black–White literacy skill gap that is present in kindergarten (Friedman-Krauss & Barnett, 2020), and participation in high-quality early childhood services has been associated with higher achievement in third grade for Latino children (Ansari et al., 2017). For children who have experienced trauma, high-quality early childhood services can provide needed support and stability (Bartlett & Smith, 2019). All children, and particularly young children with disabilities, benefit from inclusive environments that support their individual needs (Barton & Smith, 2015). Guided by NASP’s (2020) Professional Standards, school psychologists play an active role in increasing access to and delivery of high-quality early childhood services to promote positive outcomes for all young children and their families.

ROLE OF THE SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGIST

School psychologists working with young children and families examine issues of equity, access, and inclusion that have the potential to undermine the benefits of high-quality early childhood services for young children from diverse backgrounds. Research suggests there are racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic disparities in access to high-quality early childhood services (Friedman-Krauss & Barnett, 2020; Nores & Barnett, 2014). Disproportionality in exclusionary discipline practices further limits access to high-quality early childhood services for certain groups of children, including Black children and children receiving special education services, with negative long-term consequences (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2021; Zinsser et al., 2022). School psychologists advocate for systems-level change by working with early educators and administrators to address implicit bias, routinely examining data on exclusionary discipline practices, and supporting efforts to increase the quality of early childhood services for children who are marginalized by systemic influences (Bassok & Galdo, 2016; Neitzel, 2018).

The quality of early childhood services for culturally and linguistically diverse children and their families can be enhanced through the provision of culturally responsive practices. To promote culturally responsive practices, school psychologists facilitate discussions among early educators on ways to recognize the diversity reflected in their settings, moving beyond specific cultural celebrations to include ongoing implementation of culturally relevant practices and continuous communication with families regarding their perceptions of inclusiveness within the educational setting and connectedness to the school setting. For example, school psychologists can (a) work with early educators to develop...
classroom supports for home language, including high-quality read-aloud experiences in children’s home language and books, prints, and other materials in children’s home language (Partika et al., 2021); (b) respond to the unique needs of young children who are refugees, such as leveraging the use of peer models and facilitating connections with community agencies (Hurley et al., 2013); and (c) incorporate children’s cultural background into the curriculum, building on children’s immediate cultural environment as well as the broader global environment (Durden et al., 2015).

School psychologists also work with providers to ensure that information about early childhood services is made available through different formal and informal channels and in multiple languages (Mendez-Smith et al., 2021). Culturally responsive practices increase access to the benefits of early childhood services and promote equity in educational outcomes (Mendez-Smith et al., 2021).

Issues of access, equity, and inclusion are also important for young children with disabilities, who may also experience intersectionality of marginalization; for example, children with disabilities who are also multiple language learners and come from a low-income background. Participation in early childhood services can facilitate early identification and intervention and is an important point of entry for child and family support. Early childhood education provides a critical opportunity for young children with disabilities to receive culturally responsive, individualized, and specialized services. School psychologists have an integral role in the eligibility process and the provision of comprehensive services for young children with disabilities and their families to improve short- and long-term outcomes. School psychologists advocate for access to inclusive environments, provide professional development and coaching to early educators and families, and facilitate communication among special and general education professionals to promote continuity of support for children and families (Barton & Smith, 2015).

COLLABORATIVE RELATIONSHIPS

School psychologists recognize the opportunity to create the foundation for enduring positive and collaborative family–school partnerships for children. The provision of early childhood services varies significantly based on local population demographics, state and district regulations, and funding, and school psychologists seek creative opportunities to engage families, care providers, and community agencies through means appropriate to the characteristics of their locale. They understand principles and research related to family systems, strengths, needs, and culture, and they apply these principles in collaborative and consultative relationships with families. Through effective consultation characterized by a problem-solving and capacity-building approach (Duran et al., 2009), school psychologists collaborate with families to promote positive social and emotional growth and early learning skill development (Leyva et al., 2018; Pears et al., 2015). Constructing collaborative relationships demonstrates the value of family engagement in early learning and supports young children in the transition from early education to formal schooling and throughout children’s educational experiences (Sheridan et al., 2019; Sheridan et al., 2020).

School psychologists also develop and maintain relationships with early childhood service providers to promote high-quality experiences for children that foster early learning and social–emotional competencies linked to continued school success (Jancart et al., 2021; Pierce & Bruns, 2013). They engage in collaborative consultation and coaching with early educators to facilitate the use of developmentally appropriate early learning practices (Friesen et al., 2014), provide school-based mental health support (Gilliam et al., 2016), and promote equitable practices in behavior management and discipline (Downer et al., 2018; Steed & Kranski, 2021). They also work with state early intervention systems to facilitate early identification efforts to ensure that children’s needs are met at the earliest point possible. Alignment of learning goals, linked systems of assessment, coordination of services, and collaborative communication and planning facilitate transition and promote young children’s adaptation from one educational context to the next (Abry et al., 2015). The transition to kindergarten is important for establishing a trajectory for school success, and many children face challenges in moving from one environment to another as expectations, routines, activities, and relationships change. School psychologists work with early educators and families to provide transition support before, during, and after the transition as they move from preschool to kindergarten; they ensure that transition activities are intentional, coordinated, and sequenced with children’s developmental needs (Hojnoski & Missall, 2020).

To promote cross-system partnerships, school psychologists collaborate with community agencies, connecting families and early childhood service providers with community support. School psychologists are aware of the impact of adverse
childhood experiences, and they build collaborative relationships with a network of community agencies as part of trauma-informed service delivery (Chafouleas et al., 2016; Ormiston et al., 2020). These connections support prevention and early intervention efforts by providing access to a wide spectrum of services to address child and family needs and well-being, including access to adequate medical care, mental health services, housing, and nutrition. These connections further support the school psychologist in participating in state and local procedures for identifying children not yet attending public school who may have disabilities requiring special education services.

School psychologists promote the use of effective practices within an ecological approach that accounts for the child’s unique characteristics and skills and the environments in which they live (Albritton et al., 2021). Effective practice should be evidence-based and grounded in scientific principles. School psychologists facilitate the use of multitiered systems of support for early childhood services that include assessment and aligned instruction and intervention with an emphasis on data-based decision making to meet the diverse needs of young children and families (Albritton et al., 2021; Missall et al., 2021). Assessment, instruction, and intervention are embedded within data-based decision-making practices (e.g., methods of data collection, linking data to program changes, integrating classroom-based or home observational data) to promote responsive early childhood services that accommodate all young learners.

To support effective assessment, school psychologists use multimethod, multi-informant approaches that provide a comprehensive understanding of the early learning, behavioral, and social–emotional needs of young children in early childhood settings, homes, and the community. They collect data in naturalistic settings across a range of targets, including child performance and behavior, contextual variables that support early learning and social interactions, adult–child interactions, and factors within the learning environment. School psychologists integrate these data with other sources of information to identify appropriate instructional supports and interventions for children, promoting flexibility in outcomes so individual child progress is meaningful and measurable.

School psychologists support implementation of evidence-based practices across environments, assisting educators, related service providers, community partners, and families in coordinating and implementing appropriate behavioral, social–emotional, or learning supports delivered through varied instructional models and in children’s daily routines. School psychologists also support collaborative teaming practices to facilitate robust data-based decision making for the purpose of making educational decisions for children (Kerr et al., 2020). Collaborative teams engage multiple partners in addition to early childhood educators and related service providers (e.g., families, childcare providers, extended family or other caregivers, medical community, social service agencies). At a systems level, school psychologists support collaborative teams in implementing universal screening to identify children who may need additional support and to evaluate the effectiveness of overall programming (Missall et al., 2021). Furthermore, they assist teams in using effective progress monitoring of early learning and social–emotional skills as a means of formative data-based decision making grounded in developmental science (Division for Early Childhood, 2021). School psychologists promote effective implementation of instruction and intervention at all levels by monitoring the integrity of procedures and the meaningfulness of outcomes, supporting teams in making adjustments when necessary.

SUMMARY

In summary, NASP supports the provision of high-quality early childhood services for all children and advocates for school psychologists to have an active role in service delivery. School psychologists are knowledgeable about best practices in high-quality early childhood services, and they support systems-level efforts to ensure access to such services. School psychologists engage in collaborative consultation with families and early childhood service providers to increase equitable access to high-quality early education, facilitate the use of developmentally appropriate practices that support the learning and social–emotional competency of all children, support data-based decision making through the facilitation of collaborative teams, and promote inclusive and equitable practices in service delivery.

Federal Policy Recommendations

- Enact legislation, and provide robust investments, to expand access to universal preschool and other high-quality, evidence-based early learning opportunities that address the whole child.
• Incentivize partnerships between elementary schools and early childhood settings to improve the quality of early childhood education across the full pre-K–3 continuum.

• Provide increased investments in key programs that support improved access to high-quality early learning opportunities, including:
  - IDEA Part C
  - Child Care and Development Block Grant
  - Preschool Development Grants
  - Head Start

State and Local Policy Recommendations

• Increase investments in universal, high-quality, evidence-based early learning opportunities that address the whole child.

• Ensure school psychology credentials issued by the state education agency, or other relevant regulatory body, allow school psychologists to work with children across the full pre-K–12 spectrum.

• Extend eligibility criteria for Developmental Delay, as defined in IDEA, to age 9, inclusive.

• Foster improved collaboration between elementary school educators, including school psychologists, and educators in early learning settings, to support a successful transition to kindergarten and promote early identification intervention.

• Promote and incentivize evidence-based prevention and early identification practices, embedded within a multitiered system of supports, for students demonstrating developmental, academic, social–emotional, or mental and behavioral health (including adaptive behavior) delays or difficulties.

• Prohibit the use of suspension and expulsion in early learning settings and for those in elementary school, unless explicitly mandated by state law.

REFERENCES


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