

Early Childhood Services: Promoting Positive Outcomes for Young Children

The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) supports effective early childhood education and intervention as a means of promoting positive outcomes for all young children (Pianta, Barnett, Justice, & Sheridan, 2012). NASP believes that school psychology services should be provided for young children with and without identified disabilities and risk factors from birth to age 8. NASP advocates for services that are coordinated, prevention-oriented, developmentally appropriate, and grounded in evidence-based practice. Furthermore, NASP recognizes that children develop in the context of families, communities, and culture, and therefore, services must be sensitive and relevant to the cultural and linguistic diversity of young children and their families. NASP supports active roles for school psychologists in early childhood education and intervention that result in innovative approaches to collaboration, assessment and evaluation, and instruction and intervention across multiple settings, including schools, primary practice settings, and early childhood centers. Effective practices across these environments support behavioral and social–emotional development, school readiness, transition to school, and early school success for all young children.

COLLABORATIVE RELATIONSHIPS

Young children must be valued within the context of their families, cultures, communities, and society (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2015). School psychologists form collaborative relationships with families, early educators, and communities to best understand young children and meet their needs. Collaborative relationships with families demonstrate value of the role of parents' engagement in early learning, and such relationships support young children in the transition from early education to kindergarten and later school experiences (McIntyre, Eckert, Fiese, Reed, & Wildenger, 2010). School psychologists develop relationships with families of young children that are consistent with family needs and build on family strengths (Coffee, Ray-Subramaian, Schanding, & Feeney-Kettler, 2013). School psychologists collaborate with families in assessment and intervention practices to ensure that practices result in meaningful outcomes that increase children's participation in their daily environments.

Collaborative relationships with community partners—such as physicians, preschool teachers, child care providers, parent support groups, early childhood educators, and related service providers (e.g., occupational and physical therapists, speech-language pathologists and mental health service providers)—facilitate comprehensive and thorough Child Find¹ activities and ensure access to services across a wide spectrum of supports. Collaboration with early childhood professionals promotes high-quality experiences for children that foster early learning and social–emotional competencies linked to continued school success (Pierce & Bruns, 2013). These collaborations also provide a connection between settings to support children's transition to elementary school (McGoey, Rispoli, Schneider, Clark, & Novak, 2013). Alignment of learning goals, linked systems of assessment, coordination of

¹ Child Find is a component of special education that involves evaluation of children's developmental progress to identify children at risk for disabilities.

services, communication, and planning facilitate transition and promote adaptation to the next environment.

ASSESSMENT AND EVALUATION

NASP believes that effective assessment and evaluation practices are likely to result in improved outcomes for all young children. To promote accurate and meaningful assessment for young children, school psychologists encourage families' active engagement in assessment efforts and ensure that practices are responsive to the cultural, linguistic, and diverse needs of young children and their families (Ortiz, 2008). Collaborative relationships with families and early educators facilitate the identification of important goals for learning and development, methods of formative assessment, carefully planned instruction, and program evaluation. Additionally, consideration of the purpose and utility of screening and assessment data, criteria for data-based decision making, and the technical adequacy of the tools selected is paramount in early education. Assessment and evaluation efforts emphasize multimethod, multi-informant approaches that incorporate observations in natural environments that contextualize data, and that provide a more comprehensive understanding of the academic, behavioral, and social-emotional needs of young children in classrooms and early education settings.

A multitiered system of services (MTSS) delivery framework for assessment and instruction and intervention to meet the diverse needs of young children is likely to be the most effective (Coffee et al., 2013). Multitiered services include successively more intensive assessment and instruction for children based on their needs. At the universal level (i.e., Tier 1), school psychologists promote universal screening practices that facilitate identification of young children who may benefit from additional intervention to support the development of adaptive early learning and social-emotional competencies (Kettler & Feeney-Kettler, 2011). School psychologists support universal screening by working toward the inclusion of all children in evaluation and accountability efforts and by implementing screening practices at regular intervals using technically adequate indicators of growth and learning in key domains. Finally, school psychologists support universal screening by analyzing screening results in the context of an MTSS, using data to develop criteria for determining when children are at risk for not acquiring necessary foundational skills. With regard to instruction, at the universal level, school psychologists collaborate with early educators to identify positive classroom practices for all children that increase opportunities for learning in key domains.

Early childhood education should be guided by formative assessment approaches that are grounded in developmental science and are developmentally appropriate. For young children participating in early childhood services, effective progress monitoring of early learning and social-emotional skills promotes formative data-based decision making (Greenwood, Carta, & McConnell, 2011). School psychologists collect data in naturalistic settings across a range of targets, including observations of child performance and behavior as well as contextual variables that support early learning and social interactions. Collectively, these data are used to guide effective intervention and evaluation of intervention efforts. Such data also can be used to evaluate the effectiveness of early intervention programs and inform any necessary changes (Greenwood et al., 2011). At the targeted level (i.e., Tier 2), school psychologists assist educators, related service providers, and families in developing supplementary instructional strategies for children who may benefit from additional support, which may include additional supplemental practice of a behavioral, social-emotional, and/or academic skill delivered through small group instruction.

At the intensive level (i.e., Tier 3), school psychologists integrate assessment data with other sources to identify appropriate supports for children, promoting flexibility in defining outcomes so individual child progress is meaningful and functional. School psychologists also guide educators and families in identifying targets for skill development, developing individualized appropriate interventions, and evaluating interventions to determine effectiveness (Conroy, Sutherland, Vo, Carr, & Ogston, 2014).

At all levels, school psychologists support effective implementation of assessment practices and instruction and intervention by monitoring the integrity of procedures and the meaningfulness of outcomes. School psychologists consult with families, teachers, physicians, and educational personnel, providing professional development, support, and technical assistance in data-based decision making (e.g., methods of data collection, creating and interpreting graphs, and linking data to program changes) to plan and evaluate instruction to accommodate all young learners in early education and as they enter kindergarten (Sheridan, Clarke, Knoche, & Edwards, 2006).

EFFECTIVE INSTRUCTION AND INTERVENTION

NASP believes there are core features of effective early childhood educational environments, regardless of the service delivery system used. Through intentional and strategic experiences, children develop learning-related skills that allow them to participate in classroom activities and routines; gain social and emotional skills that facilitate positive interpersonal relationships; and acquire fundamental skills related to communication, literacy, mathematics, and critical thinking. Effective early childhood instruction includes specific learning goals across domains of development (e.g., social and emotional, motor, language and communication, cognitive, and early academics) to promote interactions, instruction, and interventions that are focused and intentional (Hemmeter, Ostrosky, & Fox, 2006). Teaching practices incorporate appropriate learning goals for all children with a focus on functional skills that increase children's participation in their daily environments (Hojnoski & Missal, 2010; McGoey et al., 2013) as well as attention to maintenance and generalization of skills across settings and time. Teacher-directed instruction is balanced with strategic and thoughtful learning experiences that allow children to play, explore, and discover independently. All instructional approaches are authentic, culturally responsive, and contextually appropriate. Consideration is given to ecological congruence, sustainability over time, and acceptability to families and teachers.

ROLE OF THE SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGIST

To promote high-quality early education practices, school psychologists partner with early educators and families to create rich learning experiences that will provide children with the skills for school success. Through collaboration with early educators, they identify classroom strengths and instructional needs to create effective learning environments. By promoting research-based instructional strategies that support children's learning, and by using a scientific framework in developing instruction and intervention, school psychologists collaborate with families and early educators to create home-school connections that support children's learning (Sheridan et al., 2006). They support ongoing evaluation of instruction and intervention at the program, classroom, and individual child levels to ensure that children are making adequate progress towards meaningful outcomes.

SUMMARY

NASP advocates for school psychologists as active partners in early childhood education. School psychologists can serve to link early childhood settings with K–12 systems to promote a more seamless

continuum of services. The NASP domains of training and practice are highly relevant to the provision of effective services for young children with and without identified disabilities and risk factors, from birth to age 8. Collaborative relationships, responsive assessment, evaluation and accountability efforts, and effective developmentally appropriate instruction and interventions are all elements of practice consistent with NASP's vision and mission. NASP advocates for school psychologists to have active roles in early education and intervention to prevent later school problems and support optimal outcomes for all young children.

REFERENCES

- Coffee, G., Ray-Subramanian, C. E., Schanding, G. T., & Feeney-Kettler, K. A. (2013). *Early childhood education: A practical guide to evidence-based, multi-tiered service delivery*. New York: Routledge.
- Conroy, M. A. Sutherland, K. S., Vo, A. K., Carr, S., & Ogston, P. L. (2014). Early childhood teachers' use of effective instructional practices and the collateral effects on young children's behavior. *Journal of Positive Behavioral Interventions, 16*, 81–92.
- Greenwood, C. R., Carta, J. J., & McConnell, S. R. (2011). Advances in measurement for universal screening and individual progress monitoring of young children. *Journal of Early Intervention, 33*, 254–267.
- Hemmeter, M. L., Ostrosky, M., & Fox, L. (2006). Social and emotional foundations for early learning: A conceptual model for intervention. *School Psychology Review, 35*, 586–601.
- Hojnoski, R. L., & Missall, K. N. (2010). Social development in preschool classrooms: Promoting engagement, competence, and school readiness. In M. R. Shinn & H. M. Walker (Eds). *Interventions for achievement and behavior problems in a three-tier model including RTI* (pp. 703–728). Bethesda, MD: National Association of School Psychologists.
- Kettler, R. J., & Feeney-Kettler, K. A. (2011). Screening systems and decision making at the preschool level: Application of a comprehensive validity framework. *Psychology in the Schools, 48*, 430–441.
- McGoey, K. E., Rispoli, K., Schneider, D. L., Clark, B., & Novak, K. J. P. (2013). Improving behavior with preschool consultation: A pilot study of the TOTS model. *Journal of Educational and Psychological Consultation, 23*, 185–199.
- McIntyre, L. L., Eckert, T. L., Fiese, B. H., Reed, F. D. D., & Wildenger, L. K. (2010). Family concerns surrounding kindergarten transition: A comparison of students in special and general education. *Early Childhood Education Journal, 38*, 259–263.
- National Association for the Education of Young Children. (2015). *Strategic direction*. National Association for the Education of Young Children: Washington, DC.
- Ortiz, S. O. (2008). Best practices in nondiscriminatory assessment. In A. Thomas & J. Grimes, *Best practices in school psychology V*, 61–74.
- Pianta, R. C., Barnett, W. S., Justice, L. M., & Sheridan, S. M. (2012). *Handbook of early childhood education*. New York, NY: Guilford.
- Pierce, C. D., & Bruns, D. A. (2013). Aligning components of recognition and response to response to intervention to improve transition to primary school. *Early Childhood Education Journal, 41*, 347–354.
- Sheridan, S. M., Clarke, B. L., Knoche, L. L., & Edwards, C. P. (2006). The effects of conjoint behavioral consultation in early childhood settings. *Early Education and Development, 17*, 593–617.

Acknowledgment of position statement writing group members: Robin Hojnoski (chair), Kara McGoey, Gina Coffee, and Kristen Missall. Adopted by the NASP Leadership Assembly September 26, 2015.

Please cite this document as:

National Association of School Psychologists. (2015). *Early Childhood Services: Promoting Positive Outcomes for Young Children* (Position statement). Bethesda, MD: Author.