

# EARLY CHILDHOOD INDICATORS OF PROGRESS:

## *Minnesota's Early Learning Standards*



### **INTRODUCTION**

A large and growing body of research supports the critical relationship between early childhood experiences and successful learning outcomes. The responsibility for providing support systems and resources that result in positive outcomes for young children is a shared one. Families, early childhood teachers and caregivers, community members, and policymakers all contribute to the well-being of children.

The *Early Childhood Indicators of Progress* document recognizes the importance of this shared responsibility and accountability in order to achieve positive outcomes for children. This document stresses the importance of collective efforts among families, early childhood education and care, communities, and policymakers in supporting the learning and development of children. The efforts of each and every one of these groups are vital in the process of developing healthy, well-functioning children.

### **PURPOSE**

The primary purpose of this document is to provide a framework for understanding and communicating a common set of developmentally appropriate expectations for young children within a context of shared responsibility and accountability for helping children meet these expectations.

The document was developed with five goals in mind:

1. To increase understanding of all areas of a child's development and to recommend strategies for supporting optimum development.
2. To expand understanding of the multiple influences on the education and life success of young children.
3. To support families by providing examples of strategies that facilitate and enhance children's development.
4. To provide teachers, caregivers, and administrators in early childhood education and care programs and settings with a common conceptual framework and guidelines for planning curriculum, instruction, and assessment of young children.
5. To provide a resource for community members and policymakers to use in assessing the impact of current policies and resources on the optimal development of young children.

These goals are consistent with reports from several national groups studying the development of state-level early learning standards (NAEYC & NAECS/SDE, 2002; Scott-Little, Kagan, & Frelow, 2003a; Shore, Bodrova, & Leong, 2004). Early learning standards express shared expectations for young children's learning and provide a common language for measuring progress toward achieving these goals (Kendall, 2003; Kagan & Scott-Little, 2004). Research emphasizes the importance of brain development and the early years for later development and learning (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000; Hyson, 2003). Researchers have concluded that "Young children are more capable learners than current practices reflect, and good educational experiences in the preschool years can have a positive impact on school learning" (Bowman, Donovan, & Burns, 2000, p.2).

## ORGANIZATION AND STRUCTURE

The *Early Childhood Indicators of Progress* document is divided into six **domains** that reflect the full range of child development as recommended by national guidelines (Kagan, Moore, & Bredekamp, 1995):

- Social and Emotional Development
- Approaches to Learning
- Language and Literacy Development
- Creativity and the Arts
- Cognitive Development
- Physical and Motor Development

Each domain is further divided into three to five **components** that designate areas of children's development within each domain. **Indicators** of children's progress in gaining concepts, knowledge, and skills within each component are then specified.

The *Early Childhood Indicators of Progress* were initially written in 2000 and have been systematically reviewed and revised using recently developed guidelines related to child outcome standards (NAEYC & NAECS/SDE, 2002; Shore, Bodrova, & Leong, 2004). The following criteria, based on national reviews (Scott-Little, Kagan, & Frelow, 2003b, 2003c; Neuman & Roskos, 2004), were used for the inclusion of specific indicators:

1. **Research-based** - Indicators are reasonably achievable and age-appropriate.
2. **Clearly written** - Indicators are clear and coherent as to what preschool-age children should know and be able to do.
3. **Measurable** - Indicators reflect observable behaviors, concepts, and skills.
4. **Comprehensive** - Indicators cover all domains of development and provide sufficient breadth and depth of each area of development.
5. **Manageable** - There are a reasonable number of indicators in each domain to comprehend.
6. **Applicable** - Indicators are broadly applicable to children from diverse linguistic, economic, and cultural backgrounds and to children with variations in developmental needs and abilities in different early childhood settings.

**Strategies** that family members and teachers and caregivers in early childhood education and care programs and settings can use to facilitate children's development are listed for each component. The strategies for family members and teachers and caregivers are not intended to be all-inclusive, but rather provide suggested learning activities to enhance children's development.

Strategies community members and policymakers can use to promote and support children's development are also included for each domain. These strategies for community members and policymakers are repeated for each component within a domain.

## THE EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENTAL PERIOD

The early childhood period of growth and development spans the years from birth to age eight (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997). The *Early Childhood Indicators of Progress* are intended as a guide for children in the pre-school period of ages three to five. The indicators are based on **widely held developmental expectations** observed in a child at approximately four years of age. It is expected that most children will meet the majority of these expectations by the end of the pre-kindergarten year. Because normal development varies greatly from child to child, the *Early Childhood Indicators of Progress* document is intended to be used as a flexible guide in describing a child's individual progress.

Child development progresses differently for every individual child. Children are influenced by their distinct experiences with the diverse values and practices of their family, their culture, and their community (*National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1996*). For these reasons, although children develop in generally similar stages, their individual life experiences are reflected in greatly diverse patterns of behavior and learning. Such individual differences are normal and must be respected in order for children to maintain a sense of self-worth.



## A NEW APPROACH

The *Early Childhood Indicators of Progress: Minnesota's Early Learning Standards* provide a unique approach in the movement toward increased accountability. Especially at the early childhood level, children's development must be considered within the context of the family, early childhood education and care, and the community. These systems, along with policymakers, share a role in being accountable for the optimal development of young children. The *Early Childhood Indicators of Progress* underscore the importance of shared responsibility and shared accountability for optimal development in terms of both learning opportunities and outcomes for children. By emphasizing the necessity for collaboration among families, early childhood education and care, communities, and policymakers, this document suggests that everyone must work together. This must be done in an interdependent way if all children are to have optimal opportunities for learning and development. Underlying this work is the belief that only when all stakeholders are both individually and collectively responsible and accountable for the learning and development of young children will all of Minnesota's children experience and achieve success.

The *Early Childhood Indicators of Progress* are written intentionally to include both typically and atypically developing children. Children with disabilities will make progress on the knowledge, concepts, and skills that are described by the indicators, with expected variations for each child. Recommendations for serving children with special needs in inclusive early childhood settings are reflected in the suggested learning strategies (Sandall, McLean, & Smith, 2000).

The development of Minnesota's *Early Childhood Indicators of Progress* was informed by the following **Guiding Principles**, which are based on child development research:

- Young children are capable and competent.
- Development occurs in predictable patterns.
- Children are individuals who develop at different rates.
- Many factors influence a child's development.
- Children exhibit a range of skills and competencies within any domain of development.
- Expectations for children must be guided by knowledge of child growth and development.
- Young children learn through play, interaction with others, and active exploration of their environment.
- Families are children's first and most important caregivers and educators.

## **EARLY CHILDHOOD INDICATORS OF PROGRESS:**

### ***Minnesota's Early Learning Standards***



### ***POTENTIAL USES***

The *Early Childhood Indicators of Progress: Minnesota's Early Learning Standards* is to be used as a resource for family members, teachers and caregivers, community members, and policymakers in ways that are supportive of young children's development. Since the publication of the first edition in 2000, many individuals and groups from across the state have used the indicator document in many of the ways described in this section.



**TO BUILD AWARENESS  
OF THE SYSTEMS NEEDED  
TO SUPPORT THE GROWTH AND  
DEVELOPMENT OF CHILDREN**

Parents are the best advocates for their children. This document can be used to make concrete connections between actions by people and the quality of life for children and families. Parents can use strategies listed in this document to offer suggestions and promote various projects and activities within their communities. The document can also provide guidance to parents about what to look for as they choose programs for their young children.

**FOR FAMILY MEMBERS**

**TO BUILD AWARENESS OF  
CHILD DEVELOPMENT**

The *Early Childhood Indicators of Progress* can be used to help parents develop new ways of viewing their child's development. Many teachers and caregivers have summarized or adapted sections of the document for use with parents and family members. One way this has been done is to develop a series of parent tip cards for specific domains with an emphasis on the strategies family members can use to support their child's development (*Minnesota Department of Education, 2004b*).

**TO INVOLVE FAMILIES  
IN LEARNING**

A high level of family involvement is an indicator of a high quality program. Children benefit when family members are invited to participate in ongoing communication about what is happening in their child's early childhood education and care through discussions with caregivers, parent-teacher conferences, open houses, parent-child activity times, parent education, transition-to-kindergarten sessions, and volunteer opportunities. Information about widely held developmental expectations can be shared with parents during these times (*Meisels, Marsden, & Stetson, 2000*). Families who are engaged in their child's education are better able to support their child's learning and development (*Mueller, 2003*).

**FOR TEACHERS  
AND CAREGIVERS**

**TO GUIDE PLANNING  
FOR CURRICULUM CONTENT  
AND TEACHING STRATEGIES**

The *Early Childhood Indicators of Progress* provide a common framework for developmentally appropriate expectations for children who are approximately four years of age. It is expected that most children will accomplish the majority of the indicators by the end of the pre-kindergarten year. In order to meet this expectation, the indicators can be used as a guide for planning curriculum content and teaching strategies for children in the preschool period of ages three to five.

The indicators provide a common language for use across programs. A common language and framework facilitates discussion and collaboration among home visitors, home-based caregivers, school and center-based staff, and others. The domains and indicators included are consistent with the national Head Start Child Outcomes Framework (*Head Start Bureau, 2003*). The use of the indicators can help programs align curriculum, instruction, and assessment with both state and national outcome standards and guidelines (*NAEYC & NAECS/SDE, 2003*).

Individual teachers and caregivers can develop curriculum with the indicators in mind and plan assessment appropriate to their setting and related to the indicators. Teachers and caregivers can focus their curriculum on significant learning experiences to support the concepts, knowledge, and skills described by the indicators. In this way, teachers and caregivers are not locked into a set curriculum, but rather can design activities within particular domains that will give children opportunities to practice the concepts, knowledge, and skills identified by the indicators.

Each child's culture and language background, developmental level, learning style, and personal interests must be taken into account as learning experiences are implemented (Bredenkamp & Rosegrant, 1992; Cople, 2003). This approach to curriculum supports exploration, innovation, and individualization within a setting as opposed to a prescribed curriculum (Bredenkamp & Rosegrant, 1995). The framework promotes diversity and equity in terms of what children do, how children show what they know, and what constitutes success.

### **TO PROVIDE DIRECTION FOR AUTHENTIC ASSESSMENT OF YOUNG CHILDREN**

The indicators can help teachers and caregivers define the kinds of things young children need to know and be able to do. Once those are articulated, teachers and caregivers need to consider how to collect evidence of children's learning through authentic assessment.

Authentic assessment practices are those that are based on everyday learning experiences, provide for actual child performance, and involve children in the evaluation process (NAEYC & NAECS/SDE, 2003; Santos, 2004; McAfee, Leong, & Bodrova, 2004). Authentic assessment methods for children should meet these criteria:

- Fair to all cultures, language groups, and developmental levels
- Reflect real-world classroom or family contexts
- Tied to children's daily activities and assess children's actual performance
- Done in natural settings and situations that are non-threatening to the child
- Inclusive of families and responsive to cultural and linguistic variations
- Use multiple sources of information on multiple occasions
- Insure continuity and consistency over time
- Supported by ongoing professional development to ensure skilled observation and assessment

In addition, assessment should bring about benefits for children, be connected to specific purposes, and value parents as sources and audiences for assessment (Shepard, Kagan, & Wurtz, 1998).

Components of authentic assessment include: observation, observation checklists, rating scales, portfolios, and summary reports. These components may be used individually or in combination depending upon the desired purposes of the assessment information. Observation includes the gathering and recording of information by noting facts or occurrences of children's skills, abilities, and behaviors (Jablon, Dombro, & Dichtelmiller, 1999). Observational checklists, when combined with observation notes and samples of children's work, provide reliable ways to understand growth and development of skills and behaviors over time (Helm, Beneke, & Steinheimer, 1998).

One of the primary purposes of assessment is to inform instruction and help teachers and caregivers make decisions concerning children's subsequent learning experiences. In that way, a continuous cycle of planning, implementing, and evaluating children's learning experiences helps ensure that children are challenged appropriately to develop the concepts, knowledge, and skills needed to reach their full potential.

Examples of authentic assessments include the Work Sampling System of Child Assessment, the Child Observation Record, and the Creative Curriculum Assessment System. The Work Sampling System is a curriculum-embedded, teacher-guided assessment that emphasizes the collection of multiple sources of documentation over time. The system involves the child, family, teacher, or caregiver in the ongoing process of assessment and reporting (Meisels & Atkins-Burnett, 2002; Dichtelmiller, Jablon, Dorfman, Marsden, & Meisels, 2001).

The Child Observation Record (COR) evaluates children's behavior during normal learning activities and assesses broad areas of child development. Teachers and caregivers use the observational records to report to families and to create individual plans for children (Schweinhardt, 1993; High/Scope, 1992).

The Creative Curriculum approach uses an assessment that includes teacher or caregiver observations and a checklist based on a developmental continuum. This approach emphasizes the integration of curriculum and assessment through teacher or caregiver planning and implementation. Parents are involved through conferences and the sharing of reports (Dodge, Colker, & Heroman, 2002).

### **TO PROVIDE A FRAMEWORK FOR PROGRAM STANDARDS AND PROGRAM EVALUATION**

Staff within early childhood education and care programs and settings can use the *Early Childhood Indicators of Progress* to frame questions for meeting program standards and conducting program evaluation. High quality programming provides opportunities that support each child's developmental stage and need to engage in play, exploration, and active learning.



A first set of questions centers on the types of resources, activities, and learning experiences provided. The requirements for the services children receive are generally referred to as program standards. Program standards provide criteria for important program features such as adult-child ratios, group sizes, teacher or caregiver qualifications, and curriculum (Scott-Little, Kagan, & Frelow, 2003a). Four major variables that impact desired program outcomes are the learning environment, interpersonal relationships, daily schedules and routine, and materials and activities (Harms, Clifford, & Cryer, 1998). These components interact to support the desired learning opportunities and outcomes for children. The best programming considers all of these variables when planning, teaching, and evaluating effectiveness.

The Head Start Program Performance Standards provide a sound foundation for achieving positive child outcomes (Head Start Bureau, 2004). The Head Start Program Performance Standards provide for all aspects of early childhood development, health services, family and community partnerships, and program design and management. Child outcome information for groups of children becomes part of the data used to determine how well programs are doing in meeting overall goals and objectives.

Accreditation processes such as those established by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and the National Association of Family Child Care (NAFCC) help assure that high quality standards are present. The NAEYC program standards specify ten areas for program evaluation: relationships, curriculum, teaching, assessment, health, teachers, family involvement, community partnerships, physical environment, and leadership and management (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2004). Specific indicators in each of these ten areas are assessed as part of the accreditation procedures. The NAFCC process sets and assesses standards for health, safety, and personal and professional development for family child care providers (National Association of Family Child Care, 1999).

A second set of questions about program evaluation focuses on the actions staff take as they interact with other groups and programs within the community. These inquiries lead to information about linkages to other agencies or programs and the development of common goals and expectations for children in the community.

#### **TO PROVIDE IDEAS FOR STAFF TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT**

Teachers and caregivers can benefit not only from a concise framework of child development as provided in this document, but also from an understanding of how what they do in early childhood settings impacts child outcomes and school readiness. A related document, Minnesota Core Competencies, defines core competencies for teachers and caregivers who work with young children (Minnesota Association for the Education of Young Children, 2004). The Core Competencies describe expectations for what the adults who

work with young children need to know and be able to do, similar to the way these early learning standards, the *Early Childhood Indicators of Progress*, describe expectations for what young children need to know and be able to do. Teachers and caregivers can identify any number of areas in the *Early Childhood Indicators of Progress* and Core Competencies documents where they may need further information and training. Some of these areas could include authentic assessment, curriculum development, teaching strategies and best practices in instruction, and program evaluation. They might also include advocacy with the community and with policymakers, communication with parents, and parent education and involvement.

Many of the institutions of higher education in Minnesota also use the *Early Childhood Indicators of Progress* to help ensure that teachers and caregivers enrolled in early childhood education and related courses understand these widely held developmental expectations for young children and the implications for curriculum, instruction, and assessment.

## **FOR COMMUNITY MEMBERS**

### **TO PROVIDE A FRAMEWORK FOR NEEDS ASSESSMENT WITHIN THE COMMUNITY**

The *Early Childhood Indicators of Progress* can serve as a guide for identifying the sources of support within the community that encourage the healthy growth and development of young children. Community resources such as early childhood centers, family child care homes, playgrounds, libraries, recreational centers, and elementary schools all work together to contribute to children's development (*National Association of State Boards of Education, 1991*).

Business leaders and employers are key players in helping communities focus on the importance of early childhood education and care for the future economic development of the community (*Committee for Economic Development Research and Policy Committee, 2002; Rolnick & Grunewald, 2003*). Community members can also use county-by-county information on key indicators to assess how well their local community is doing in providing opportunities for the healthy development of young children (*Kids Count, 2004*).

### **TO HELP ORGANIZE ADVOCACY EFFORTS WITHIN THE COMMUNITY**

This document can be useful in helping various groups see the continuity of their efforts across home and program settings where there are young children. This document provides concrete connections between healthy child development and access to resources within the community. Community members and policymakers can help assure the optimal learning and development of young children by making a commitment to support early childhood education and care efforts (*Child Trends, 2001; Committee for Economic Development Research and Policy Committee, 2002*). Communities can support and strengthen the resources available to support families with young children and build stronger connections among the various programs and services that impact children's lives.

## **FOR POLICYMAKERS**

### **TO ASSESS THE IMPACT OF PUBLIC POLICIES ON YOUNG CHILDREN AND THEIR FAMILIES**

Policymakers can use the *Early Childhood Indicators of Progress* as a reference for assessing the impact of policy decisions on the lives of children and their families. By providing consistent and reliable support and resources to families, a larger proportion of families with young children can participate in opportunities that enhance learning and development. Prevention and early intervention efforts to make sure that all children get a strong and healthy start help reduce the likelihood that children will need more intensive and costly help at a later age (*Sandall, McLean, & Smith, 2000; Rolnick & Grunewald, 2003*).

There are a number of ways to assess public policies and impacts. State-level evaluation studies have assessed the readiness of children for school (*Minnesota Department of Education, 2003 & 2004a*). Other approaches provide ongoing assessment, such as the state-by-state profiles of child well-being prepared annually and reported in the Kids Count Data Book (*Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2004*).



**TO IMPROVE PUBLIC  
UNDERSTANDING OF  
APPROPRIATE EXPECTATIONS,  
ACCOUNTABILITY,  
AND RESPONSIBILITY**

The *Early Childhood Indicators of Progress* enhance understanding of widely held developmental expectations for young children from three to five years of age, along with the types of activities that provide meaningful learning experiences. Appropriate ways of documenting and assessing the performance and progress of young children should also be considered (Shore, Bodrova, & Leong, 2004). The document provides a comprehensive framework for shared accountability and responsibility for children's development.

**CONCLUSION**

Because a child's first and most important learning occurs in the context of the family, it is essential that families have the supports and resources needed to help their children develop in optimal ways. Families are better able to care for, nurture, and help their children succeed if early childhood teachers and caregivers, community members, and policymakers share in the collective commitment to foster healthy development of all young children.