

I n t r o d u c t i o n

Introduction

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Every day, thousands of preschool children in Canada and many other countries around the world spend a substantial part of their day in child care settings. Considering that these children are in the formative years of their development, the quality of the child care environment should be of utmost concern to parents, professionals, and governments. As researchers from the Canadian *You Bet I Care!* study on child care have noted, “Child care is the major educational and social service for young children and it serves them in their most vulnerable and developmentally sensitive years” (Doherty, Lero, Goelman, LaGrange & Tougas, 2000). The key to child well-being and development in child care settings is the quality and quantity of interactions between children and their caregivers. The responsibility then falls to the caregivers to ensure that their interactions with children are nurturing, engaging, and stimulating, thereby creating environments which promote children’s development. Child care providers’ knowledge of language facilitation strategies and their ability to apply these strategies effectively to their everyday interactions with the children in their care determine, to a large extent, the quality of the child care environment. Therefore, it is important for us to be familiar with the current research on language facilitation in child care and to use this knowledge to promote quality child care environments for young children.

With a grant from the Canadian Language and Literacy Research Network, research partners Luigi Girolametto, associate professor at the University of Toronto’s graduate department of speech-language pathology, and Elaine Weitzman, executive director of The Hanen Centre, hosted a research symposium in Toronto on October 18, 2002. The purpose of the symposium was two-fold:

- to provide a forum for experts in the field to share the most current research on language facilitation in child care environments
- to discuss how to implement the research's recommendations

Eight experts in the field of early language facilitation presented research on a variety of aspects of language facilitation in child care settings. The audience consisted of a small group of stakeholders, who participated in roundtable discussions following the presentations.

The chapters that follow in these proceedings provide written summaries of the research presented at the symposium.

In Chapter 1, Jessica Ball from the University of Victoria stresses the need for professionals to become culturally literate with respect to the diverse groups of parents and children that they serve. She provides a number of guiding principles for research and practice, drawn from partnerships with First Nations communities.

In Chapter 2, Hillel Goelman from the University of British Columbia reports on a series of research programs in Canada that have addressed questions about the relationship between the quality of child care programs and children's language development, and between the nature of language interactions in child care programs and children's language development. His findings provide insights into the important role of non-maternal child care in the child's development of language. Dr. Goelman also provides specific information on the types of individual teacher-child language interactions within child care environments that are critical for children's expressive and receptive language development.

In Chapter 3, Kathleen McCartney from Harvard's Graduate School of Education presents a large-scale longitudinal study, conducted in the United States, that examined "children's cognitive development, acquisition of school readiness skills, language production, and language functions as a function of quality, type, and amount of child care during the first three years of life." (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Early Child Care Research Network, 2000, p.963). The results of this study contribute significantly to our understanding of the relationship between child care and children's language and cognitive outcomes in the first three years of life. They also negate the longstanding notion that maternal care results in better cognitive and language outcomes than child care.

In Chapter 4, David Dickinson from Boston College discusses his research on the features of early childhood classrooms that support language and literacy development. An evaluation of teachers' verbal engagement of children during a variety of activities provides some interesting trends, particularly in relation to teachers' dom-

ination of topic determination and to the lack of extended discourse. His subsequent assessment of teachers' interactive behaviour following their attendance at an intensive language and literacy training program supports the significant value of such initiatives.

In Chapter 5, Luigi Girolametto and Elaine Weitzman, from the University of Toronto and The Hanen Centre respectively, report on a series of four studies investigating the language input of child care providers to children under the age of three. Their research confirms some informal assumptions such as variations in teacher responsiveness depending on the context of the activity (play dough versus book reading). Evaluation of teachers' responsiveness after their attendance at a language training program showed a significant positive relationship between their responsiveness and children's language productivity. This finding supports other studies' findings showing that caregivers' interactive behaviour has a significant impact on children's willingness to communicate.

In Chapter 6, Monique Sénéchal from Carleton University summarizes her research on the effects of repeated book reading on the development of language and vocabulary of young children in child care. Her studies provide concrete evidence of the critical importance of repeated book reading for expressive and receptive vocabulary development. The studies also clearly demonstrate the need for children to be actively engaged and participating during the reading process for vocabulary acquisition to be maximized.

In Chapter 7, Genese Warr-Leeper from the University of Western Ontario presents her findings on the short-term effects of training early childhood educators to enhance the social communication skills of children at risk for social failure. Since research has clearly demonstrated that simply exposing children with poor social skills to typically developing children does not improve their social skills, studies such as this one have important implications for the specific, intensive kind of training required to enable teachers to promote children's social skills.

In Chapter 8, M. Jeanne Wilcox and Kathleen M. Murphy from Arizona State University describe a partnership between researchers and practitioners involving an experimental investigation of classroom practices and procedures during a year-long project in preschool Head Start programs. The authors discuss the substantial changes in teachers' interactive behaviour after participating in this project, which included regular meetings to discuss language development, language teaching goals and practices, and the implementation of these practices. They also present discrepant language results for native English speaking children and for Spanish speaking children who were learning English as a second language.

These published proceedings conclude with a summary of the small group discussions that followed the symposium presentations. Recognizing the current challenges in the field of early childhood education, symposium participants identified the practical implications of the research presented, particularly with respect to the education of early childhood educators, to policy development, and to future research.

References

- Doherty, G, Lero, D., Goelman, H., LaGrange, A. & Tougas, J. (2000). *You Bet I Care! A Canada-wide study on wages, working conditions, and practices in child care centres*. Guelph, ON: University of Guelph Centre for Families, Work, and Well-Being.