

High-Quality Preschool Experiences

HCRC Fact Brief

Why preschool?

During the period from birth through age 5, children are developing the language, thinking, physical, and socio-emotional skills that they will use throughout their lives.¹ Preschool experiences, those educational experiences occurring in the years prior to kindergarten, can play a significant role in the development of these important skills. Preschool can also promote school readiness, reduce the need for later grade retention or placement in special education, and promote high school completion and career success in adulthood.²

The importance of quality

Not all preschool experiences produce similar results. Benefits are realized through preschool experiences that are considered to be high-quality.³ The quality of a child's preschool experiences can be a key predictor of their readiness for school. In one study, children who experienced higher-quality preschool settings demonstrated better academic skills in their first year of school.⁴ Research has also suggested that children who attended high-quality preschool programs performed better on cognitive tests than children in lower-quality settings.⁵

Low-quality experiences can be detrimental to children's development. Studies have shown that low-quality preschool can produce lower achievement, decreased learning engagement, and increased behavior problems.⁶

High-quality preschool experiences that show large short-term effects have also been found to produce long-term economic benefits to both the participants of the preschool programs and to the public. The economic benefits include cost savings from lower rates of participation in child welfare, the juvenile and adult justice systems, and public aid programs.^{7,8} Improved economic well-being of high-quality preschool participants also increases tax revenues to state and federal governments in the long-term.

Model, high-quality preschool programs that have been shown to demonstrate economic returns on investment share several indicators of quality. They are implemented by well-qualified teachers in classes with low child to staff ratios, have well-defined and responsive instructional approaches, and provide services to families.

How do we measure quality?

There are two dimensions of quality to consider when evaluating the quality of preschool experiences and programs: structure quality and process quality. Structure quality includes organizational features and teacher characteristics. Indicators include curriculum, physical space, and teacher qualifications. Structure quality is frequently regulated through state licensing requirements.

Process quality places an emphasis on the actual experiences that occur in a classroom. Components include teacher-child interactions, classroom climate, and professional development.³

How is high-quality preschool implemented in Child-Parent Centers?

High-quality preschool is part of effective learning experiences, one of the six key elements of the Child Parent Center preschool to 3rd grade (CPC P-3) program. Quality in the preschool portion of the CPC P-3 program has been implemented by nine components listed on the reverse side of this fact brief.

While there is no full consensus in the field on any one set of preschool quality components, the CPC P-3 model attempts to replicate the quality practices that have been most strongly and frequently associated with positive outcomes for children in prior research on CPC P-3 and similar model programs.

Nine Key Components of High-Quality Preschool in the CPC Program

1. Small Class-sizes and low child:teacher ratios	There should be a maximum class size of 17 students in the Pre-K year . CPC recommends a ratio of 17 students to 2 professionals
2. Qualified Teachers	Teachers with four-year degrees in early childhood show the highest quality teacher-child interactions. ⁹ Within the CPC program, Head Teachers and classroom teachers must be certified teachers, each with a bachelor's degree. All assistants must have an associate's degree or a CDA.
3. Balanced Curriculum	Curriculum should be a flexible, literacy-focused blend of child-initiated and teacher-directed activities. Multiple domains of child development should be addressed, including academic and social-emotional domains.
4. Parent Involvement & Engagement	A designated parent resource room should be set up near the preschool classrooms to foster parent involvement and engagement activities. Parents sign a School-Home Agreement , which states that they commit to bringing their child to and from the program, that they will participate in activities such as field trips and assemblies, and that they agree to participate in the parent program. CPC asks for parents to commit to participating 2.5 hours per week and should include a combination of both school events and involvement at home.
5. Intensity of Instruction	To provide appropriate educational intensity, instruction should be mostly conducted in individual and small group formats. Instructional content and activities should be of sufficient length to address learning needs adequately. When possible, CPC recommends a full-day preschool program.
6. Classroom Climate	Teachers should provide frequent feedback, positive reinforcement, and emphasize task orientation. ² Students' task orientation is promoted through interactive and energetic instructional styles. Children should be actively engaged in the learning process and transitions planned and smoothly executed.
7. Teacher-child Interactions	The quality of interactions between teacher and child influence early childhood social competence and academic achievement. ¹¹ Interactions should be positive and supportive. Teachers should use language-modeling techniques to promote language development and employ organizational strategies that effectively manage children's behavior and promote the development of self-regulatory skills. ¹²
8. Professional Development	Professional development involves staff at all levels. It is important that professional development occur within and across grade levels. The preschool teachers are trained with the kindergarten teachers to promote alignment and continuity. The content should include instructional practices, preschool-3 rd grade continuity, and strategies for engaging families.
9. Strong Accountability System	Programs should have well-documented learning standards, as well as formative assessments of children's progress on well-validated indicators.

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