

Family Life as Sources of Children's Learning Opportunities

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A national survey of more than 1700 parents and other caregivers was conducted to learn about family life as sources of children's learning opportunities. The study is part of research being done by staff of the Children's Learning Opportunities Early Childhood Research Institute. Survey participants were asked about where their children's learning took place in their homes and as part of family routines, rituals, celebrations, and other kinds of everyday family experiences and opportunities. The Institute goal is to identify, develop, and evaluate ways of using family and community life as sources of learning activities and opportunities promoting child abilities.

EVERYDAY FAMILY LEARNING ACTIVITIES

Everyday family life provides children many different kinds of learning experiences and opportunities. These experiences and opportunities happen in many different kinds of social and physical settings as part of daily living. These social and physical settings are called activity settings (Dunst & Bruder, 1999) and natural learning environments (Dunst, Bruder, et al, 2000). Desirable activity settings happen in places where children interact with people, materials, and objects, and involve experiences, opportunities, and events that encourage child behavior and

development. They include things like cuddling and talking to a baby, bath time, picking flowers from a garden, listening to stories, and eating meals. This report is about learning opportunities happening as part of family life. Learning activities happening as part of community life are described in Dunst and Hamby (1999).

APPROACH

Participants

Participants were parents and other caregivers of infants, toddlers, and preschoolers with disabilities and delays or children at-risk for having delays. The children were involved in early intervention programs, early childhood special education programs, Early Head Start and Head Start Programs, Even Start, Parents as Teachers, childcare programs, and other kinds of early childhood programs.

The parents and caregivers lived in 48 of the 50 United States, Puerto Rico, and Yap in the Federated States of Micronesia. The ethnic backgrounds of families included African Decent/African American, American Indian/Native Alaskan, Asian, Caucasian, Hispanic/Latino, and Pacific Islander/Hawaiian, and people from the Middle Eastern Region of the world and those who were biracial or multiracial. The families were quite diverse in both their financial situations and places of residence.

Survey

The survey included 50 different kinds of activity settings and learning opportunities selected from a larger list of more than 200 activities. Survey items were identified by examining both the published and unpublished literature. Care was taken to be sure the largest number of activities made sense in terms of ethnic and cultural backgrounds of families living in the United States and its jurisdictions. Respondents were asked to indicate

if the survey activities or settings were places where their children learned or did desired behavior. Each survey item was rated by the respondents on a five-point scale ranging from not-at-all to always an activity where their children's learning took place.

RESULTS

Several different procedures were used to group the survey responses into categories of learning opportunities. Findings showed that 11 different categories of activity settings and learning opportunities happened as part of family life. Examples of activity settings and learning opportunities are shown in the Table.

It is best to think of the 11 categories as different sources of children's learning opportunities, and the examples as only a sampling of the many kinds of activities that promote children's learning. The reader, we are sure, can come up with examples of other activities in each category.

Looking closer at the findings shows that family life provides children an interesting mix of learning opportunities.

TABLE

Categories of Family Activity Settings and Examples of Children's Learning Opportunities

<u>Family Routines</u>	<u>Family Celebrations</u>
· Cooking Meals	· Get Togethers
· Food Shopping	· Birthdays
<u>Parenting Routines</u>	<u>Physical Play</u>
· Child's Bathtime	· Roughhousing
· Child's Bedtime	· Playing Ball
<u>Child Routines</u>	<u>Family Rituals</u>
· Dressing	· Family Talks
· Brushing Teeth	· Saying Grace
<u>Literacy Activities</u>	<u>Socialization Activities</u>
· Storytelling	· Visiting Friends
· Looking at Books	· Family Gatherings
<u>Play Activities</u>	<u>Outdoor Activities</u>
· Drawing	· Garden Activities
· Parent/Child	· Yard Work
<u>Entertainment Activities</u>	
· Dancing	
· Music	

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Some are adult activities in which the child takes part like cooking meals and working outside in the yard. Many activities are ones parents do with and for their children each and every day like getting the child ready for bed and feeding the child breakfast. Other activities are ones that provide children opportunities to practice and learn specific abilities like dressing and undressing, and washing one's hands. Many activities involve contact with other children and adults like having friends over to play and a family picnic. Some encourage children to practice or learn different kinds of physical abilities like riding a tricycle or playing in a backyard wading pool. Other activities encourage children to express interests like dancing and singing, and learning and practicing different kinds of abilities as part of lap games (peek-a-boo, so-big, etc.). Parent/child activities like looking at pictures in a book and listening to stories provide children literacy experiences. Other activities are special family events like birthdays which provide children learning opportunities like waving hi and bye, and getting held and talked to by different family members. What we have learned from doing the family surveys is that family life is rich in many different children's learning activities happening as part of everyday living.

An even closer look at the kinds of activity settings and learning opportunities occurring as part of family life finds them to be a mix of both planned and unplanned, and structured and unstructured activities. A family picnic is an example of a planned activity. Planting flowers is an example of a structured activity. Many learning activities "just happen" and arise naturally. Saying hi or hello upon seeing someone while on a neighborhood walk is an example of an unplanned learning opportunity. A parent making up a story after she and her child see a baby rabbit while on a walk is an example of an unstructured learning activity. We are learning that unplanned and unstructured learning activities are very important for children's learning.

RESEARCH TO PRACTICE

- Increasing children's learning opportunities as part of everyday family life begins by having a better idea of where children's learning takes place. The 11 categories of learning activities listed in the Table are useful for getting started. Think about your own experiences as a parent or your experiences watching other parents with their children. Use this knowledge to begin making lists of activities that happen in each category. We call this process *Activity Mapping*. Don't worry if an activity can go in more than one category. Making the lists as complete as possible is more important than struggling with where an activity goes.

- After you have put your lists together, ask parents (individually or in a group) to look them over so they can add things you may not have thought about. Do the same with your colleagues or other people who work with young children and their families. Having more people add things to the lists will make them very complete.

- After the lists are finished, have a parent go through the lists and identify all the activities that happen in her family. Make a list that is specific for an individual child and family. We call this an *Activity Profile*. Parents in our studies have been surprised about how many learning activities occur when everything they do is put together in a list for them. Use the activity lists for increasing learning opportunities for children. Have parents go through the lists and pick new activities they want to do with their children. Activities work best when they are interesting and enjoyable to children, and build on what children already are good at doing. Go through the things a parent picks and narrow down the activities to ones a child most likely will find interesting and which bring out her best.

- Increasing opportunities for unplanned activities as part of everyday family life is important for children's learning. Think about the different things that make up a family's life, and identify activity settings that will provide lots of op-

portunities to do lots of different things. If a parent is up to it, letting a child explore a kitchen cabinet can be a wonderful opportunity for all kinds of learning to take place. Going for a walk around the yard or neighborhood can open up all kinds of opportunities for children's learning. Simply providing children opportunities to experience different kinds of people, things, and places can make a big difference in how much a child will learn about his world.

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