

Community Life as Sources of Children's Learning Opportunities

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A national survey of more than 1500 parents and other caregivers was conducted to learn about community 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 neighborhoods and as part of community routines, rituals, celebrations, and other kinds of everyday community 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 COMMUNITY LEARNING ACTIVITIES

Everyday community 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,

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opportunities, and events that encourage child development and behavior.

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 and Parents as Teachers, childcare programs, and other kinds of early childhood programs.

The parents and caregivers lived in 48 of the 50 United States and Puerto Rico. 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 community activity settings and learning opportunities selected from a larger list of more than 300 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 community activities or settings on the survey 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 community life. Examples of activity settings and learning opportunities are shown in the Table.

The 11 categories of community activities serving as different sources of children's learning opportunities and the examples are only a sampling of the many kinds of community activities where children's learning takes place.

The many different kinds of learning opportunities children experience as part of community life are an interesting mix. Some occur as part of everyday adult activity like car or bus rides to go food shopping. Many activities happen as part of family rituals like going to church or visiting grandparents every Sunday afternoon. Others happen as part of child participation in adult activities like camping, hiking, and water sports (e.g., boating). Still others happen as part of community

TABLE

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

<u>Family Excursions</u>	<u>Art/Entertainment</u>
· Car/Bus Rides	· Story Tellers
· Food Shopping	· Music Concerts
<u>Family Outings</u>	<u>Groups/Organizations</u>
· Eating Out	· Parent/Child Play
· Visiting Friends	· Movement Classes
<u>Play Activities</u>	<u>Church/Religious</u>
· Playground Slide	<u>Activities</u>
· Hiding Games	· Sunday School
<u>Community Activities</u>	· Spirit Dancing
· Libraries	<u>Sports Activities</u>
· Children's Festivals	· Tee Ball
<u>Recreation Activities</u>	· Soccer
· Swimming	<u>Outdoor Activities</u>
· Street Hockey	· Neighborhood
<u>Children's Attractions</u>	· Walks
· Petting Zoos	· Parades
· Children's Museums	

celebrations like parades, festivals, and county fairs. Different kinds of community activities provide children different kinds of opportunities to become part of community life.

Many other community activities are geared toward children themselves. Climbing on playground equipment and going to a play group at a community center are examples of these kinds of activities. Getting to pet baby animals at a pet store or on a farm are other kinds of children's learning opportunities. Hands-on science center activities, water play at a community park, feeding ducks at a duck pond, listening to stories at a library, and getting to dance and sing at a children's fair provide lots of child learning opportunities. "Going along" with older siblings to ball games, karate classes, music lessons, and the like open up all kinds of learning opportunities for young children. Going on errands with mom or dad, going fishing with grandpa, helping grandma with church activities, and playing with cousins at a family reunion also provide different kinds of opportunities for learning to take place.

From all the work we have done so far, we now know that community learning opportunities are a mix of both planned and unplanned, and structured and unstructured activities. Going to a parent/child play group every Wednesday morning is an example of a planned activity. Learning to swim by taking swimming lessons is an example of a structured activity. Picking flowers while on a walk through the woods is an example of an unplanned activity. Getting to throw stones in a creek or splash water with a stick are examples of unstructured learning activities. We know now that a combination of these different kinds of learning opportunities make up a child's everyday community life.

RESEARCH TO PRACTICE

- One of the best ways to use community activities as sources of children's learning opportunities is to compile as much information as you can about the

locations or places where learning can take place. We call this **Community Mapping**. The Table provides a way of organizing information about community learning opportunities. It's okay if an activity goes in more than one category. It's more important to have as complete information as possible.

- Talk to key informants about places where children's learning takes place. Key informants include children's librarians, parks and recreation staff, information and referral program staff, and parents who include their children in community activities. Sports leaders, children's group leaders (Scouts, 4-H, etc.), and science center staff are other people you will want to talk to. If a community member has anything to do with involving young children in community activities, you probably want to talk to them about learning opportunities.

- Start gathering written information about community activities. The blue and yellow pages of phone directories, visitor guides, brochure displays at motels and hotels, parks and recreation program calendars, and so forth are good sources of information. Realty companies often put together information packets about children's activities to help prospective buyers get an idea of "things to do" with children. You'll be surprised at how much information you can find by looking at these kinds of unusual sources.

- Compiling the information in a family-friendly format is a key to the information being useful. You need just enough information for a parent interested in a particular activity to be able to locate it in the community. Name of the program or place, address, and phone number, and type of activity or opportunity available is what you will need to compile. HINT: Use everyday parent language (not professional jargon) for naming the types of activities. We have learned that this is how most parents "think about" learning activities for their children.

- Involving children in community learning activities is best accomplished by using children's interests to choose learning opportunities. For example,

children's interests in playing with water can be used to go through your list of activities to locate water play opportunities (stream, lake, river, swimming pool, water park, etc.). Have parents pick the activities they think will "work best."

- We now know that lots of opportunities to participate in the same activity matters a great deal if the activity promotes learning. During any one activity, be sure a child gets lots of chances to do the same thing (e.g., feeding ducks bread crumbs at a community lake). Try to find activities that will happen at least three times during a day or on three different days a week.

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