

New learning intervention for kindergartners emphasizes parents' role

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(PhysOrg.com) -- Penn State researchers have developed an innovative intervention program for families who have kindergarten children at risk for poor school performance. The intervention emphasizes parental involvement in the at-home learning process, and resulted from a study funded with a \$3 million grant from the Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD).

"[Children](#) who enter grade school with cognitive and social-emotional delays are at an increased risk for reading problems, academic underachievement, and becoming disengaged or disinterested in school," said Janet Welsh, research associate, Prevention Research Center for the Promotion of Human Development. "Our goal in developing this intervention was to improve parent support for child learning at home, thereby fostering gains in child oral language skills, emergent literacy skills and adaptive approaches to learning."

The intervention, called Focus on Learning, integrates approaches that strengthen academic and behavioral skills in children. Past studies have shown that both sets of skills are important when it comes to doing well and staying engaged in school.

Families receive a laptop computer containing applications and [educational games](#) that build vocabulary and reading skills. Walsh and her colleagues found these applications for the laptop to be the best approach for building skills into a child's daily life.

"We tried to be mindful of what parents are or are not able to do when we designed the intervention," said Welsh. "Oftentimes what teachers can do differs from what parents can do. Many parents have low literacy themselves. To say they need to read to their kids is not always the most effective approach."

To address literacy issues, the researchers designed the program so that parents do not need to read word for word from the page. Instead, they use a technique known as "dialogic reading," which encourages parents to engage in a discussion with their children about what is happening on each page. This technique can also strengthen communication between parent and child. The intervention books -- designed specifically for the program -- contain important social themes, such as problems young children face at home and at school.

Because poor academic performance has been linked to aggressive behavior in some children, [parents](#) in the intervention will also receive coaching lessons on how to use positive discipline strategies, and manage noncompliant and aggressive behavior in children.

The researchers will monitor children's academic progress until they reach at least third grade, and also will assess parents' support and involvement in their children's learning. Nearly 300 kindergarten children from York, Juniata and Mifflin counties in Pennsylvania will participate in the randomized evaluation of the intervention, which will receive funding until 2014.

Other key Penn State faculty members involved in the study include Karen Bierman, distinguished professor of psychology, and Scott Gest, associate professor of human development and family studies.

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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