

Evidence-Based Practice Empowers Early Childhood Professionals and Families

THE PHRASE “EVIDENCE-BASED PRACTICE” is becoming standard vocabulary in the early childhood field, yet there is no consensus on its definition. The authors of a new book, *Evidence-Based Practice in the Early Childhood Field*, propose a definition of the concept and discuss how it can help early educators, special educators, child care professionals, and others to transform the services provided to children and families. A companion article in the fall 2006 issue of *Young Exceptional Children* also outlines the foundation of this new movement.



What is evidence-based practice?

Evidence-based practice means something different to practitioners, families, researchers, and policymakers. Each group has its own agenda and interests. Practitioners and families may look to evidence-based practice to help them solve day-to-day dilemmas. Researchers may look to evidence-based practice to identify the most pressing questions from the field. And policymakers may look to evidence-based research to make informed decisions about how to allocate limited resources.

With so many diverse groups turning to evidence-based practice, it is imperative that each have the same understanding of what the term means. The authors define evidence-based practice as “a decision-making process that integrates the best available research evidence with family and professional wisdom and values”—in other words, a balance of scientific proof and professional and family experience and values.

This definition empowers those directly connected to the child, parents and professionals alike, to tap into various sources of knowledge to make informed decisions. Most importantly, knowledge is not limited to research, allowing each child’s experiences to be considered independently.

What is the origin of evidence-based practice?

Evidence-based practice emerged as a result of the gap often seen between research and practice and gained momentum with the standards and accountability movement. Yet it originates in medicine. Healthcare professionals using evidence-based medicine determine a patient’s treatment based on an assessment of evidence from the literature and current studies as well as clinical judgment and the patient’s values.

Drawing from medicine, the authors recommend a five-step process for evidence-based practice decision-making for the early childhood field.

1. Pose the question.
2. Find the best available research evidence.
3. Appraise the evidence quality and relevance.
4. Integrate research with values and wisdom.
5. Evaluate.

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How will evidence-based practice impact young children and the early childhood field?

Decisions on how best to serve young children often create a false tension between research findings and the experiences of those closest to the child. In reality, practitioners typically have limited access to good data or they may follow the latest recommended practices even if that means discounting their own insights.

With evidence-based practice, the experience of the professional and the family receive consideration along with research findings and practice guidelines. Therefore, thorough implementation will require that research-based information is widely available and accessible in a manner that responds to immediate situations practitioners are facing. Those in the field will need to become critical consumers—knowing how to search, appraise, interpret, and understand the research.

To make decisions that are tailored to the needs and priorities of individual children and families, the research findings are not viewed in isolation, but integrated with wisdom and values. It is incumbent upon professionals and families to rely on their judgment and ability to think critically to make an informed recommendation.

Conclusion

Evidence-Based Practice in the Early Childhood Field seeks to engage the community in a dialogue on what is fast becoming a larger movement. The authors recognize that questions remain. How can we reach agreement as a field about what evidence-based practice means? Does research evidence trump professional and family wisdom and values? How can we make knowledge transparent and accessible to anyone who desires it? This book is intended to serve as a foundation for this larger discussion. ■

The Book

Written for anyone in the early childhood field, *Evidence-Based Practice in the Early Childhood Field* discusses:

- Evidence-Based Practice: How did it Emerge and What Does it Really Mean for the Early Childhood Field?
- Effects of Evidence-Based Practice on Research in Early Childhood
- The Evidence-Based Practice Movement and Its Effects on Knowledge Utilization
- Making the Case for Evidence-Based Policy
- Building the Evidence Base Through Communities of Practice
- Establishing the Evidence Base for an Emerging Early Childhood Practice: Recognition and Response
- Making Sense of Evidence-Based Practice: Reflections and Recommendations

Websites that provide information on early childhood intervention research:

- Center for Evidence-Based Practice
www.challengingbehavior.org
- Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning, <http://csefel.uiuc.edu>
- Research and Training Center on Early Childhood Development, www.researchtopractice.info
- The Campbell Collaboration, www.campbellcollaboration.org
- The Pathways mapping Initiative, www.pathwaystooutcomes.org
- The Promising Practices Network, www.promisingpractices.net

A Proposed Model for Applying Evidence to Inform Practice Decisions



To Learn More

Evidence-Based Practice in the Early Childhood Field is edited by Virginia Buysse and Patricia W. Wesley from the FPG Child Development Institute at The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. It is published by Zero to Three Press. Mary Ruth Coleman and Pamela Winton from FPG Child Development Institute contributed chapters.

“Evidence-Based Practice: What does it really mean for the early childhood field?” appears in the fall 2006 issue of *Young Exceptional Children*. Authors are Virginia Buysse, Patricia W. Wesley, and Pamela Winton from the FPG Child Development Institute and Patricia Snyder from Vanderbilt University.