

Effectiveness of Early Literacy Instruction: Summary of 20 Years of Research

Children entering kindergarten vary greatly in their language and literacy skills.¹ Therefore, up-to-date information about evidence-based practices is essential for early childhood educators as they support preschool children's language and literacy development. This study used a process modeled after the What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) review standards and procedures. It identified rigorous evidence from research conducted from 1997 to 2017 on the effectiveness of early childhood curricula, lesson packages, instructional practices, and technology programs that aim to improve students' language, phonological awareness, print knowledge, decoding, early writing, and general literacy performance. The study team identified 132 interventions evaluated by 109 studies that the study team determined were high-quality experimental or quasi-experimental studies. The WWC's evidence standards are used to assess the quality of an evaluation study and the strength of its claims about whether an intervention caused the observed effect of student achievement. The implementation characteristics (for example, group size) and instructional features specific to each instructional domain were coded for each of the 132 identified interventions in order to explore the characteristics or features related to effectiveness.

Key findings

- **Rigorous evidence exists on effective early literacy interventions.** Of the 132 studied interventions, 38 demonstrated effectiveness in at least one language or literacy outcome domain.
- **Early literacy interventions improved language and literacy performance in taught domains.** Interventions that taught language, phonological awareness, or decoding increased the likelihood of improving performance in the same domain. In addition, average weighted effect sizes for these domains were larger when the instructional domain and outcome domain were aligned than when they were not.
- **Among interventions that taught language exclusively, instruction conducted one-on-one or in small groups was likely to benefit language performance.** Language performance significantly improved when language instruction included some one-on-one or small-group configurations, whereas those that used exclusively large-group or whole-class configurations did not lead to improved language performance relative to the comparison group.
- **Teaching both phonological awareness and print knowledge improved print knowledge, decoding, and early writing performance.** Interventions that included instruction in print knowledge and phonological awareness significantly improved print knowledge performance. Teaching both domains improved decoding and early writing performance even when those domains were not taught.

1. Denton, C., Flanagan, K., & McPhee, C. (2009). *The children born in 2001 at kindergarten entry: First findings from the kindergarten data collections of the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study—Birth Cohort (ECLS-B)* (NCES No. 2010-005). U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics. Reardon, S. F., & Portilla, X. A. (2016). Recent trends in income, racial, and ethnic school readiness gaps at kindergarten entry. *AERA Open*, 1(4), 1–31.