

# Research Priorities for Early Intervention and Early Childhood Special Education

Submitted on October 4, 2006 by  
The Division for Early Childhood (DEC) Research Committee

**R**ECENT ADVANCES in the science of early childhood development, including the identification of complex physiological and behavioral mechanisms, suggest that the early years constitute a unique period in which to alter children's developmental trajectories. It is now widely accepted that investments in comprehensive and coordinated early intervention services will generate long-term benefits for children and families (Guralnick, 2005). On the basis of this knowledge, federal policy requires all states and localities to develop a coordinated system of services. Although federal legislation created separate infant-toddler (IDEA, Part C) and preschool programs (IDEA, Part B, Section 619), the major legislative goals of these programs are compatible. Both seek to: a) enhance children's development; b) reduce the need for, or amount of, special education services; and c) involve families to enhance their capacity as a means of improving children's outcomes.

Additional research is needed to continue to improve all aspects of service delivery in early intervention and early childhood special education, with a particular focus on conditions under the control of the system (e.g., assessment and intervention, the quality of the workforce, systems and policy). DEC, the single largest professional organization in the world devoted to early intervention and early childhood special education, promotes scientifically-based research that advances knowledge and the translation of knowledge for use in applied settings. The DEC Research Committee used a systematic process to identify the following research priorities as among the most pressing issues and questions that the early intervention and early childhood special education field faces in addressing the needs of children birth to 8 years and their families (See Attachments). These research priorities are organized into six major areas.



## Assessment and Intervention

- **Further develop and evaluate methods that promote early identification and timely intervention, and those that help practitioners link assessment and intervention practices as part of an integrated system.**

Within this area of research, there are several areas of need. Specifically, early childhood teachers and specialists need resources and expertise in administering 1) universal screening and evaluation for all children and 2) research-based interventions and progress monitoring for individual children who require additional support and focused interventions to access the general curriculum. There is a need to further develop and evaluate specific assessment approaches, such as curriculum-based measures and alternative assessments for children with disabilities, as well as specific interventions such as routines-based and embedded instructional practices in inclusive and natural settings. Research is needed with regard to assessments and interventions for young children from diverse cultural and linguistic groups and for those with particular types of disabilities (e.g., autism spectrum disorders, low-incidence conditions, children who have or are at-risk for learning disabilities or serious emotional disorders).

## Families

- **Identify and evaluate the most effective models of family support and collaboration, and the conditions under which these interventions are most effective.**

Early childhood is a distinct period in which children's learning and development is dependent on family relationships and environments that are embedded within a wide range of socio-cultural contexts. Specific areas of research include determining whether professional-family partnerships lead to enhanced capacity and other outcomes for children and families; and identifying which early education and intervention services, resources, and supports are most relevant and useful for families, and under what conditions.

## Diversity

- **Identify and evaluate research-based practices for addressing the needs of children and families from diverse groups, and for creating highly qualified personnel to work with these children and families.**

Given the changing demographics of the nation, early education and intervention professionals increasingly encounter children and families from diverse racial, cultural, economic, and linguistic groups. The growing proportion of children of color receiving early education and intervention services and the increasing number of Americans who speak a language other than English at home present an urgent need for research-based intervention and assessment approaches that are culturally and linguistically appropriate for diverse learners. There also is a need for research on how to recruit and maintain a diverse workforce as well as on professional development to address the need for practitioners who are highly qualified to work with children and families from diverse groups.

## Systems and Policy

- **Identify and evaluate the policy and organizational mechanisms that support effective services and practices.**

There is a need for a more coordinated, systematic approach to serving young children and their families. A smooth, coordinated learning experience for children birth to 8 years is important, but many children in this age range are served by multiple programs, making it difficult to provide a continuum of learning and to plan seamless transitions. Separate funding streams, eligibility criteria, and program goals and standards across various types

of early childhood programs serve as a barrier to communication and service integration. There is a particular need to focus research on policies and systemic issues related to effective models for implementing inclusion, home visiting, early intervening services, and comprehensive transition planning. There is a similar need to evaluate services organized around a coordinated point of access, and vendor-based versus program-based early intervention to determine effects on timely identification and access to various types of services.

## **Research Translation and Knowledge Utilization**

- **Identify effective mechanisms for supporting the adoption of an evidence-based approach in applied settings.**

In recent years, as part of the evidence-based practice movement, there has been a proliferation of initiatives, many of which are web-based and designed to organize and translate research-based knowledge. Little is known, however, about the process by which this information is used, diffused throughout the field, and adopted in practice by families and practitioners. To date, the emphasis has been on gathering and appraising empirical evidence, with randomized controlled trials as the centerpiece of this effort. Still undetermined is whether and how empirical evidence can be integrated with other forms of evidence, most notably, professional and family wisdom and values. As a result, there is a need to identify and evaluate methods for involving consumers as participants in establishing the evidence base and to identify strategies for strengthening partnerships between research and practice communities. There is a similar need for research that examines the impact of evidence-based practice on early education and intervention, and the practices, strategies, and future directions for implementing an evidence-based approach in applied settings. Although there is a new emphasis on improving the quality of personnel through innovations in professional development, these approaches remain largely untested through scientific research. In addition, research is needed to evaluate the unique contributions of various models of collaboration and change such as coaching, mentoring, consultation, and communities of practice that are designed to support professional development and knowledge utilization in practice settings.

## **Accountability and Standards**

- **Evaluate the effects of early education and intervention on child and family outcomes.**

The results of early education and intervention should be evaluated across a broad range of child outcomes that include physical health as well as all areas of development and learning, including social-emotional development and academic content areas. Research on family outcomes is equally important, not only for purposes of program planning and improvement, but also to provide accurate data as required by the U.S. Department of Education. Identifying or developing and validating appropriate tools to measure child and family outcomes also represent an important direction for future research. Furthermore, there is a need to evaluate factors that moderate various outcomes and to determine the extent to which services, supports, and family involvement lead to enhanced capacity and other important outcomes for children and families. More than forty states now have early learning standards and the remaining states are in the process of developing descriptions of desired results, outcomes, and expectations that outline what children should know and be able to do before beginning kindergarten. The early learning standards movement is part of the larger accountability movement in which federal and state programs are required to show measurable results for the services they provide to children and families. However, the existence of multiple accountability systems within the early childhood field has resulted in fragmentation, duplication, and a lack of alignment of outcomes and standards across different accountability initiatives. Of

particular concern is the need for alignment of outcomes developed for children with disabilities with other learning standards developed for the general population of young children. Because early learning standards generally have been developed on the basis of the field's collective wisdom rather than on empirical evidence, longitudinal research is needed to determine whether specific early learning benchmarks actually predict children's later academic success and developmental outcomes.

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# The Process of Developing the DEC Research Priorities

## Attachment 1

**T**HE DEC RESEARCH COMMITTEE used a systematic process to identify and gain consensus on the DEC Research Priorities. First, the DEC Committee identified goals or purposes for the use of a coherent set of priorities to advance research to improve services and outcomes for young children with disabilities and their families. The goals for developing research priorities included the following: a) to shape the research agenda for funding agencies with sponsored research programs; b) to influence federal and state policy makers who allocate resources for early education and intervention programs and services; c) to advocate for the importance of research and its implications for practice within professional organizations and among families, practitioners, and other consumers; and d) to create a comprehensive research agenda that responds to the field's most pressing issues and questions.

The DEC Research Committee Executive Work Group then conducted a two-stage identification and analysis process. As an initial strategy for identifying priority areas, 41 members of the DEC Research Committee in attendance at the DEC conference held in Portland, Oregon in October 2005 generated a total of 120 priorities by listing them on index cards (Range=1-6; Mean=2.93). One member of the Executive Work Group independently read each of the index cards and created broad categories and subcategories. A second member of the Executive Work Group also independently read the index cards and identified broad categories and subcategories. These data were arrayed in a word table, reviewed, and confirmed by the other members of the Executive Work Group, who represent diverse areas of research. The set of broad categories identified by this process included the following:

1. Personnel preparation and professional development (n=24)
2. Assessment (n=17)
3. Outcomes and standards (n=15)
4. Services and interventions (n=15)
5. Service delivery models (n=16)
6. Social-emotional development (n=12)
7. Families (n=15)
8. Policies and systems (n=5)
9. Other (n=1)

In the second stage of the analysis process, the Executive Work Group conferred to consider ways to refine the research priority categories generated by the broader Research Committee. In doing so, the Executive Work Group examined other important policy and literature sources (Guralnick, 2005; Meisels & Shonkoff, 2000). Relevant policy sources included the research priorities published by the Institute of Education Sciences (IES) and the Long

Range Plan of the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP). The final research priorities were reviewed by the DEC Research Committee and approved by the DEC Executive Board on October 18, 2006.

The DEC Research Committee, on behalf of DEC, used these priorities in providing comments on the Long-Term Research Priorities for IES (For more information on the DEC Comments, go to <http://www.dec-sped.org/publicpolicy.html#Recent>)

Guralnick, M. J. (2005). Early intervention for children with intellectual disabilities: Current knowledge and future prospects. *Journal of Applied Research in Intellectual Disabilities, 18*, 313-324.

Meisels, S. J., & Shonkoff, J. P. (2000). Early childhood intervention: A continuing evolution. In J. P. Shonkoff & S. J. Meisels (Eds.), *Handbook of early childhood intervention*, 2nd Ed. (pp. 3-31). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

# Comparison of DEC and IES Research Priorities

## Attachment 2

DEC	IES
<b>#1 Assessment and Intervention</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Universal screening</li> <li>• Research-based interventions</li> <li>• Progress monitoring</li> <li>• Linking assessment and intervention</li> <li>• Alternative assessments</li> <li>• Specific interventions (e.g., routines-based)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Curriculum, instruction, and assessment</li> </ul>
<b>#2 Families</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Models of collaborating with families</li> <li>• Relationship between family-professional partnerships and outcomes</li> <li>• Which services, under what conditions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Systems and policies</li> <li>• Policies that support the capacity of parents</li> <li>• Quality workforce</li> </ul>
<b>#3 Diversity</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Research-based intervention and assessment approaches for children and families from diverse cultural and linguistic groups</li> <li>• Professional development designed to ensure that practitioners are highly qualified to work with children and families from diverse groups</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Curriculum, instruction, and assessment</li> <li>• Quality workforce</li> </ul>
<b>#4 Systems and Policy</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Organizational infrastructure to support effective services</li> <li>• Coordinated service delivery – how to address categorical barriers in policy, funding, etc.</li> <li>• Policies and systemic issues related to effective models for inclusion, home visiting, early intervening, coordinated point of access, vendor-based services, and transition</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Systems and policies               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>— Delivery mechanisms</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<b>#5 Research Translation and Knowledge Utilization</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Involving consumers as participants in establishing an evidence-base</li> <li>• Evaluation of personnel development innovations</li> <li>• Contributions of models of collaboration and change (e.g., coaching, mentoring, consultation, communities of practice)</li> <li>• Impact of evidence-based practice on intervention and outcomes in applied settings</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Quality workforce</li> <li>• Access to findings</li> <li>• Outreach</li> </ul>
<b>#6 Accountability</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Measuring a broad range of child outcomes including social-emotional development and academic content</li> <li>• Alignment of outcomes for children with and without disabilities</li> <li>• Integration of multiple accountability systems and standards</li> <li>• Longitudinal research on relationship between early indicators of learning and later academic success</li> <li>• Measuring both child and family outcomes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Outcomes               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>— School readiness for pre-k</li> <li>— Developmental outcomes for infants and toddlers</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

