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**early developments** Frank Porter Graham Child Development Center

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*Child Care Policy*

From the Director's Office: Public Policy, Private Needs

From Policy to Practice

Center Stage: A Textbook Example of Research to Policy

NCEDL News: Doors of Perception

“We are great proponents of keeping the folks who are on the front lines at the table from the beginning to the end.”

That’s one reaction from a North Carolina state administrator and policy maker after her first few months as a member of a Constituents Advisory Board to the National Center for Early Development & Learning.

While research centers sometimes have advisory boards of citizens and constituents, NCEDL is trying to get the opinions and advice of constituents from the word go. Even as investigators design their projects, input is sought from practitioners, teachers, parents, policymakers, administrators, consumer advocacy groups, and professional organizations.

The advisor quoted above is Kathy Shepherd, a program coordinator and a policy administrator in the Division of Child Development of the North Carolina Department of Human Resources. As a program coordinator, she works in early childhood professional development, and as a member of the division’s policy unit, she helps write early childhood and early childcare policy.

Shepherd is used to working in a collaborative setting. For example, she and other administrators worked closely for months pulling together North Carolina’s original Smart Start program. She has worked in focus groups and with researchers before, but has never joined the workstream at such an early stage. “It’s working out well. It makes perfect sense,” she said. “We may not understand the methodology or all the terms, but it’s given me a better understanding of research. And it’s a two-way street. I think the researchers are learning from us about what the field needs in terms of information and how to share that information in effective ways.”

Pam Winton, who directs the Research to Practice Strand of NCEDL and who set up this particular advisory board, said the goals of constituent involvement are to:

- ensure that project activities reflect the needs and priorities of the groups who ultimately might use the information generated by the center’s research;
- enhance the contextual validity of the center’s efforts;
- create a shared sense of ownership and support of the center’s work; and
- provide guidance for mechanisms by which information can be disseminated to inform practice and policy.

This board has nine members, including a teacher, a mother, a father, three state administrators, a day care administrator, and



two day care consultants. Each NCEDL strand sets up its own advisory board, or in some cases, boards. This one organized by Winton acts not only as an overall advisory body to NCEDL, but also to the Research-to-Practice strand. The board has divided itself into several smaller groups to focus on such responsibilities as providing input on the context and format of policy briefs, developing guidelines for increasing constituent participation in NCEDL activities, and designing components of upcoming national surveys.

As more programs are established for early childhood and early child care, there is an increasing need for not only policy evaluation, but also for accurate ways to assess programs, and this is where constituent advisors can shine. Shepherd said,

“We’re outcomes oriented. We want to know if we’re really making a difference. Program people tend to be more subjective than objective, and we need the researchers to keep us on track. So that we have actual evidence and proof of something when we say it.” She said, “We welcome research. Research is the basis of everything if we are ever going to make a difference.”

**Constituent feedback allows researchers to get a feel for how practical and relevant their research can be.**

For example, North Carolina state government this year created a new licensing system designed to make it easier for parents to rate child-care centers. The system took into account research that shows well-trained staff make a difference; therefore, the new license emphasizes training.



## Researchers at National Center for Early Development & Learning open their doors to get opinions and advice from constituents

Sue Fleming-Hansen is another NCEDL advisory board member. She is executive director of Child Care Resource & Referral of Wake (NC) County, a private, non-profit United Way agency. It is her first time to work in an advisory capacity with a research group. She said, "It really helps someone out there in the field to see the process that research goes through to reach the outcomes they do."

Fleming-Hansen said she sees an increasing need for quality child care services and that is why collaboration between groups such as

hers and research centers such as NCEDL is of great importance. "I would absolutely recommend this type of advisory board to other research groups. Research is a long, difficult process, and it's nice for researchers to know that what they do is appreciated by those working in the field," she said.

She feels the ideas and suggestions from the advisory board are being taken seriously by NCEDL. In fact, Winton, who said she is pleased at the energy, the level of sophistication and the seriousness (see *DOORS*, page 15)

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### Recognizing dedication

Two strand directors for the National Center for Early Development and Learning have recently been honored for their contributions to children and families.



◀ Jim Gallagher, who directs the Policy Studies strand, has been named the 1997 recipient of the Distinguished Service Award given by the World Council for Gifted and Talented Children at the University of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa.

Gallagher, former director of the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Center, is receiving the award for his "distinguished service to the organization and to the needs of the gifted and talented children of the world for more than a decade."

Pam Winton, who directs the Research-to-Practice strand of NCEDL, has received the 1997 Distinguished Services Award from The Arc of Durham (NC) County for her "outstanding contributions to impact rights and services of persons with developmental disabilities." ▶



# Briefly speaking

## Policy briefs synthesize research and policy issues

Too often, policy makers, administrators, agency personnel, and practitioners must make decisions about practices without knowing the full range of research or policy issues. Timely reviews may not be available or easily accessed and traditional literature reviews are often long and written in academic prose. This results in few articles being read by practitioners or policy makers.

Recognizing the need for a shorter, clearer synthesis of research, the National Center for Early Development & Learning (NCEDL) has set in motion a series of *Early Childhood Research and Policy Briefs*. "Much of the information that decision makers read is from organizations with a focus on a particular age group, population, or type of service, or advocacy groups with particular philosophical orientations," says Don Bailey, director of NCEDL. "We feel an important role of a national center is the objective synthesis of research information and policy issues around topics of national importance, and the dissemination of those findings in an easily readable and accessible format."

NCEDL is publishing a policy brief each quarter. The first is "Quality in Child Care Centers" with John Love of Mathematica Inc. as the primary author. Love is also an NCEDL research partner. The four-page brief summarizes current quality care studies, recommends specific areas of needed research, and makes policy recommendations. A one-page "fact sheet" complements the brief for even quicker reading and easy dissemination.

Bailey said topics for the briefs are issues of national importance for which "we already have sufficient data or which are based on work recently done by national center investigators or affiliates, such as our research partners." The briefs are not advocacy documents, but rather are intended to be balanced descriptions of issues, what is known about them, and recommendations for both policy and research.

For example, the quality care brief makes these recommendations for policy changes:

- Strengthen standards and regulations for child care programs.
- Require initial and ongoing training for staff working in child care programs.
- Find ways to recruit and retain more highly educated and skilled staff.
- Continue efforts to inform parents about the importance of quality child care and its effects on children.
- Identify ways to support the costs of high quality child care.

The second policy brief is being written by Dick Clifford of the Frank Porter Graham Center and Gwen Morgan of Wheelock College. Clifford is also associate director of NCEDL. The brief is focusing on state regulation of child care, a hot topic in many states this year.

Upcoming topics include infant/toddler childcare practices and kindergarten transitions. Some briefs will be linked to NCEDL synthesis conferences and to the release of new NCEDL national survey data.

Each brief goes through a lengthy and careful review process to ensure an accurate synthesis of what is known about a topic and a balanced rendering of the issues. Drafts of each brief are reviewed by all NCEDL investigators, research partners, the Constitu-

ent Advisory Board, and staff of the Early Childhood Institute and the Office of Educational Research and Improvement (U.S. Department of Education).

Briefs are printed by the Early Childhood Institute and dissemination is by the institute and through NCEDL's own distribution system. Briefs are also posted on the NCEDL web site, which is <[www.fpg.unc.edu/ncedl/ncedl.html](http://www.fpg.unc.edu/ncedl/ncedl.html)>.



**A one-page Fact Sheet complements the Quality Care Brief providing key points for even quicker reading and easy dissemination**

**DOORS**

her board shows, routinely informs the group, in writing, about what has become of their ideas and if they are being used.

A constituent advisory board is also an opportunity to let researchers know they haven't missed some fine point in setting up their research. More importantly, having constituent feedback allows researchers to get a feel for how practical and relevant their research can be. As Fleming-Hansen said, "We've been there; we've done that. We know the kind of information that we need to be effective in making changes."

There has been another positive link established. Winton and NCEDL researcher Dick Clifford have been named board members of the NC Institute for Early Childhood Professional Development, an advisory body to the state. Shepherd said, "It became clear to us in the Division of Child Development that your center and your researchers are links that we want to maintain."

It is important that those links go both ways. Membership on state and local advisory boards provide researchers with yet another way to ground research in the everyday world of childcare practice.

There is growing interest across the country in learning more about constituent participation in the research process. An intensive half-day session on participatory action research has been planned for

the Annual Division of Early Childhood Conference this fall in New Orleans by NCEDL research partner Ann Turnbull and Winton in conjunction with Pat Snyder, DEC Research Committee chair.

This session includes researcher-constituent teams from around the country who have formed collaborative research partnerships in different contexts. Strategies and information about the costs and benefits of constituent participation in research are on the agenda. Panelists include Don Bailey, NCEDL director, and Naomi Karp, director of the U.S. Department of Education Early Childhood Institute. 

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**FPG WEBSITES**

The online version of this issue of *Early Developments* contains a list of selected child care policy publications by staff at the Frank Porter Graham Center. The FPG home page is located at [www.fpg.unc.edu](http://www.fpg.unc.edu).

In addition, four projects now have their own web sites, which may be of interest to early childhood policy makers, practitioners, parents, teachers, and administrators.

**NCEDL**

- [www.fpg.unc.edu/NCEDL/NCEDL.htm](http://www.fpg.unc.edu/NCEDL/NCEDL.htm)
- This is the home page of the National Center for Early Development & Learning.

**NEC\*TAS**

- [www.nectas.unc.edu/](http://www.nectas.unc.edu/)
- The National Early Childhood Technical Assistance System works with the U.S. Department of Education to help states, territories, and communities implement programs and develop services for young children with disabilities and their families.

**ECRI-SU**

- [www.unc.edu/depts/ecri/](http://www.unc.edu/depts/ecri/)
- An article about the Early Childhood Research Institute on Service Utilization begins on page 4.

**ECRII**

- [www.inform.umd.edu/EDUC/.WWW/Depts/ecrii](http://www.inform.umd.edu/EDUC/.WWW/Depts/ecrii)
- The Early Childhood Research Institute on Inclusion is a five-year project to study comprehensively the inclusion of preschool children with disabilities in settings with typically developing children.

# Research spotlight

Recent findings at FPG

## Developmental growth curves of preschool children with vision impairments

Deborah Hatton, Don Bailey, Margaret Burchinal, & Kay Alicyn Ferrell.

*Child Development*, 64(5), 788–806.

This study examined the extent to which etiology, amount of vision, and co-occurring disabilities affect the developments of young children with visual impairments. Growth curve analysis was based on 566 assessments with the Battelle Developmental Inventory (BDI) to describe the development of 186 children, ages 12–73 months, with vision impairments.

Developmental patterns varied markedly among the children, with part of that variability related to co-occurring disabilities and amount of functional vision. Children with co-occurring disabilities—in this case, mental retardation or developmental delay (MR/DD)—had lower developmental age scores and slower

rates of growth for overall development and in all domains—personal-social, adaptive, motor, communication, cognitive.

Visual function of 20/800 or worse was associated with significantly lower developmental ages across time on all domains measured by the BDI and with slower rates of growth in the personal-social and motor domains. The distinct divergence of developmental trajectories of children whose visual function was 20/500 or better from those of children with 20/800 or worse suggests that the level of visual function that inhibits typical development, as measured by the BDI, is in the 20/500 to 20/800 range. Amount of functional vision and MR/DD did not

interact, indicating that these 2 factors had additive, not multiplicative, effects on development during early childhood.

This article represents a comprehensive study of early development of children with vision impairment and is the first to identify the level of vision impairment that really begins to affect children's development. The study provides important baseline data against which future intervention efforts can be more appropriately evaluated.

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