

Committed to Sharing

1997 5 YEARS 2002

Academic institutions are not generally noted either for the widespread use of their scholarly articles or their ability to disseminate findings quickly. The National Center for Early Development & Learning (NCEDL) has broken that mold by sharing findings of their research on early childhood development through a diverse array of media. This practice has put key findings into the hands of practitioners and policymakers who can put them to work on a timely basis.

Comprised of a consortium of researchers at the University of California at Los Angeles, the University of Virginia, and the University of North Carolina, NCEDL is one of 12 centers funded under the US Department of Education's Office of Educational Research and Development. It is the only center devoted to research in early childhood development. Since its inception in 1996, NCEDL has sponsored dozens of studies whose findings expand the understanding of early childhood education and development. However, getting those findings out to the broad and amorphous target audience that works with or formulates policies for young children has been a major challenge.

NCEDL has approached this task by developing a comprehensive dissemination infrastructure for a diverse array of publications. The bedrock of NCEDL's publications are peer-reviewed articles on research conducted by the center, articles that are ultimately published in scholarly journals. These form a solid scientific base for other materials—press releases, technical briefs, brochures—that put key information into more readable and timely formats usable to a wider audience.

"In our original grant, the US Department of Education made a point of stressing that the results of our research need to reach a wide audience," says Pam Winton, who directs center dissemination. "We were not satisfied to communicate only with fellow researchers and academics. We sought to find ways to reach the teachers, administrators, parents, and policymakers who are the beneficiaries of our research."

A constituent advisory board, comprised of parents, teachers, state-level administrators, and childhood resource and referral agencies, played a key role in helping NCEDL shape the publications to suit the various audiences.

"At one point, we planned to release a technical report on child care quality with the intention of reaching an audience of administrators and policy makers," Winton says. "Our advisory board told us that the legislators needed something they could 'hold in one hand and read while they were talking on the phone and eating lunch at the same time.'

So, we ended up preparing a four-page brief for the legislative staff and a one-page fact sheet for legislators."



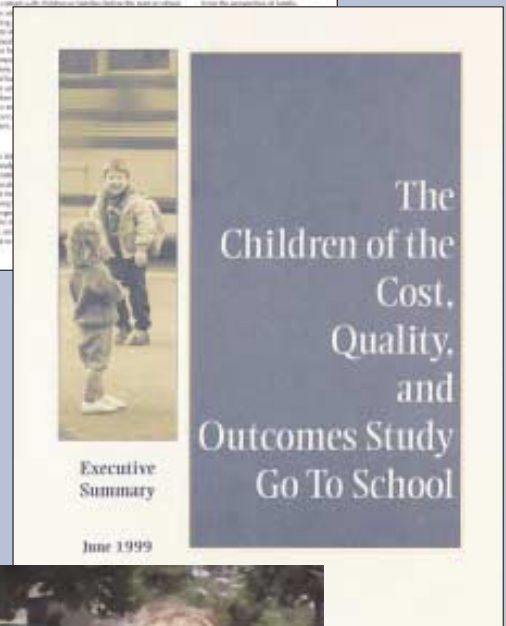
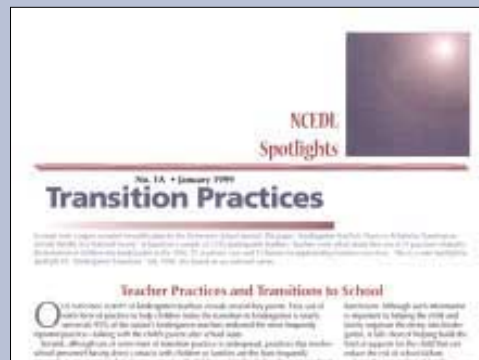
NCEDL has disseminated more than 425,000 copies of major products during its first five years.

To gain the widest audience for their research findings, NCEDL focuses on disseminating the information in ways that are easy for other organizations to customize and redistribute. Press releases are written following a "Swiss cheese" approach, whereby "holes" are left in the stories in which local publications can insert their own information. *Spotlights*, the center's one-page summaries of research findings and events, is disseminated to publishers of statewide, regional, and national newsletters, who are then encouraged to reproduce it in their own publications. NCEDL publishes an electronic newsletter (*Enews*) that is sent to various listservs, through which it is redistributed to other audiences. NCEDL also hosts a web site, www.ncedl.org, on which summaries of all NCEDL activities and projects are posted and available for download.

The versatility of NCEDL's information dissemination capabilities was demonstrated in the activities around the center's 1999 Cost, Quality, and Child Outcomes study. This study provided solid evidence that such factors as child-staff ratios, teacher qualifications, and staff training at child care centers affect children's sociability, language and cognitive development, and self-control. While the researchers prepared and submitted scholarly articles, they also developed a media plan to roll out key findings in advance. They wrote press releases and held a press conference in Washington, DC. A technical report, reviewed and approved by outside experts, was posted on the web site and made available in print. A *Spotlight* was prepared and sent out to interested organizations, as well as being posted on the web. An *Enews* report went out through *Enews* list and listservs.

NCEDL's web site has been particularly effective as an information dissemination tool. Along with summaries of NCEDL studies and activities, the web site also contains lists of related publications, issues of *Early Developments* (available for download), lists of experts and funding sources, and links to related sites. The web site averages over 1,000 hits per month, with users including students, parents, program administrators, teachers and policymakers. Usage has grown over time and peaks around key events, such as press conferences.

A large number of NCEDL's products are directly disseminated by center researchers and staff through presentations, meetings, electronic distribution, and mailings to individuals. NCEDL has also published a number of books summarizing



The web site averages over 1,000 hits/month, with users including students, parents, program administrators, teachers and policymakers.



presentations in major conferences synthesizing research on early childhood issues. Collectively, this information is making a difference according to policymakers.

"We have made progress toward full-day kindergarten in Indiana because we've been able to hold up the research that says children need stimulating early childhood environments to do well in school," says Jayma Ferguson, Early Childhood Specialist for the Indiana Department of Education. "We don't have the time or the money to do the research ourselves. That is why what NCEDL is doing is so important. They have responded by putting together the products we need."

Altogether, NCEDL has disseminated more than 425,000 copies of major products during its first five years. Winton credits this success to the center's partnerships with other groups

and its development of the web site. "Approximately 32% of our products were disseminated as a result of collaboration with other centers, agencies, or groups," she says. "Another 33% were downloaded from the web site. Thus, 65% of our product dissemination was quite cost effective and reached audiences that we would not have been able to had we relied solely on traditional methods."

Winton credits Loyd Little, NCEDL's communication specialist who has decades of experience as a working journalist. "Loyd understands the media and how to work with them," Winton says. "His contributions to the effort have been critical. At FPG we pride ourselves on our interdisciplinary work. Adding journalism to our mix of staff has yielded great benefits." | NCEDL |

Assessing Early Intervention

ITERS
ECERS-R
EISAS

Early intervention, the system of services providing support to infants and toddlers with disabilities and their families, has long been a focus of research at FPG. Much of this work has centered on enhancing the quality of intervention policy and practice. In the most recent (1997) reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Act, the federal government directed states to implement strategies to assess **quality** of services, in addition to monitoring for compliance with regulations. To address this need, researchers at FPG are working to develop and refine an instrument which they hope will become a widely-accepted measure for assessing early intervention programs nationwide.

Drawing upon well-established rating scales of child care environmental quality (e.g., ECERS-R, ITERS) developed by FPG researchers, the Early Intervention Services Assessment Scale (EISAS) defines high-quality practices across the broad spectrum of early intervention services. Principal investigator Lynette Aytch says a major challenge has been developing a tool that can effectively evaluate a complex system of services, people, and settings.

"We spent a lot of time looking at what the literature says about quality early intervention practice and combined this with a lot of dialogue with parents, service providers, program administrators, and other researchers," Aytch says. "This led to the design of an instrument that we believe reflects early intervention program quality."

To test the actual utility of EISAS in the "real world" of early intervention programs, researchers conducted a field study involving 29 early intervention programs across 8 states.



Lynette Aytch
Principal Investigator

"In this study, we were able to collect EISAS data from 155 early intervention staff and 450 parents of children served by these programs," Aytch says. "We are now in the process on analyzing and reporting our findings."

Preliminary findings from the field suggest that overall, the EISAS has good content validity. That is, the content of the instrument adequately represents the range of intervention services and quality practices. However, the field study also indicates that program self-assessment has significant limitations.

"Our findings suggest that programs tended to rate themselves as high, despite data which suggest that the programs varied widely in quality," Aytch says.

Researchers are currently refining the instrument and will conduct more studies with early intervention programs across the country.

| NCEDL |

To learn more

Defining and assessing quality in early intervention programs for infants and toddlers with disabilities and their families: Challenges and unresolved issues. Aytch, L.S., Cryer, D., Bailey, D.B., & Selz, L. (1999). *Early Education and Development*, 10 (1), 7-23.