

Module: **Communication and Emergent Literacy:  
Early Intervention Issues**

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## **Session 1: Overview of Communication and Literacy**

### **Handout D: Quality of Life and Emergent Literacy**

Smith, M., & Bishop, V. (2005). *Quality of life and emergent literacy*. Chapel Hill, NC: Early Intervention Training Center for Infants and Toddlers With Visual Impairments, FPG Child Development Institute, UNC-CH.

Adapted from EIVI Training Center. (2004). Millie Smith—Quality of life and emergent literacy [Video clip]. (Available from Early Intervention Training Center for Infants and Toddlers With Visual Impairments, FPG Child Development Institute, CB #8040, UNC, Chapel Hill, NC 27599-8040)

Literacy starts at birth, because literacy is built on a foundation of social skills. And one of the ways that I like to think about literacy is from the point of view of quality of life. Quality of life is an essential issue for all human beings at every stage of development, but it doesn't receive a lot of attention in the first weeks, months, or years of a person's existence.

The issue my colleagues and I were trying to answer was, What are the skills we need to teach early in life related to quality of life? What sets people up to have the social and communication skills they need to become literate and competent? We didn't know what skills to address because we couldn't find a definition of *quality of life*. So we formed a study group and searched the literature in the fields of education, special education, sensory loss, and sensory impairments for a definition of *quality of life*.

Finally we found a definition, in the work of a psychologist, Dr. Daniel Stern. In his book *The Interpersonal World of the Infant: A View From Psychoanalysis and Developmental Psychology*, Dr. Stern proposes an extremely cogent and simple definition of *quality of life* that everybody can relate to pretty easily. According to Dr. Stern, there are essentially three things that every human being needs in order to have a high quality of life. These three things are agency, anticipation, and participation.

*Agency* is the ability to control some people and some things. If young children, as soon as possible in their development, can come to understand that their behavior controls some people and some events, then they will become more confident and have more agency; and they'll be more willing to reach out to and interact with the people and the objects in their environments.

*Anticipation* is having something to look forward to with pleasure. Nobody is capable of having a high quality of life without something pleasurable to look forward to. Anticipation is an integral part of the experience of all young children. Their initial awareness of being in the world consists of anticipation of the next pleasurable thing—being comforted, being fed, whatever. Pleasurable things have to be available to children on a pretty consistent basis in order for them to be able to anticipate that they're going to happen. Something wonderful might happen, but it doesn't add to children's quality of life unless they know it's going to happen and they're looking forward to it. That's the quality-of-life issue.

*Participation* is simply doing things with someone else. And that's an interesting one, because there are probably more individual differences related to participation than there are to the other two. It seems as though individuals come into the world with different needs for social contact, and nobody knows whether the differences are innate or not. But certainly by the first few months of life, some of us need more social interaction than others do. And knowing what the need for participation is for a given young child or infant is very, very crucial to their early quality of life.

An easy way to understand and appreciate how important agency, anticipation, and participation are to human beings is to think about how we punish people. To lower a person's quality of life, we typically take away agency, anticipation, and participation. The first thing we do to people who are in jail is take away much of their agency. They no longer control who they share their room with, when they eat, when they shower, what they eat. We take away their control of events and people. We take away their agency, and people find that very, very difficult to handle.

Children are always at risk for not having enough agency, by virtue of the fact that they're little. People can physically make them do anything they want to for long periods of time. A simple example of giving agency to an infant would be to offer a bottle and wait for the child to look at it, then respond by giving it to him. That gives the infant agency. Compare that to picking up the child, taking the bottle, and just pushing it into his mouth.

Another way of punishing a person is by taking away anticipation. We do this with schoolchildren and teenagers by withholding privileges. Having what you look forward to taken away from you is a punishment. You look forward to something, you really want it, and it's very difficult not to get at least some of what you're looking forward to. What's horrible is when people are in situations where nobody is going to the trouble to make sure they have something to look forward to. Unfortunately, there are children in this situation in schools. For example, there may be a very rigid curriculum, and some students really desperately want to learn about one thing but the teacher has decided they're going to learn about something else. And the students can't look forward to and anticipate with pleasure the things they most want to participate in and be involved with. We have to make sure that that doesn't happen, that children have what I call the two-

and-two rule—that they have, at the very minimum, two absolutely wonderful things to look forward to every morning and every afternoon. And hopefully a whole lot more than that.

Probably the most severe punishment any human being can experience related to participation is solitary confinement—lack of participation. Isolation. Caregivers of young children with sensory loss may assume that if another person is in the house—somewhere in the room, somewhere around—that’s close enough. That’s enough proximity, that’s enough closeness. It usually isn’t. It usually isn’t for any child, but especially not for a child with a sensory loss. Participation doesn’t just mean the physical presence of another person. Participation means the presence of another person who is doing something with you, who is sharing something with you, who is interacting with you. Of course, nobody can pull that off 100% of the time. Parents have to go off and cook and vacuum and wash clothes and do all of the other things they have to do. But if they can do those things and come back and spend 5 or 10 minutes playing and sharing and interacting with the child, that’s usually enough. Without direct interaction, quality of life is impaired.

The complete reference for the book discussed by Millie Smith is listed below.

Stern, D.N. (2000). *The interpersonal world of the infant: A view from psychoanalysis and developmental psychology*. New York: Basic Books.

## **Reference**

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