

## Setting a Strong Foundation for Learning

*A parent cuddles a crying newborn. A grandparent plays peek-a-boo with an 8-month-old baby. A caregiver reads a story to a toddler. Instantly, thousands of cells in these children's brains respond.*

**Parents are their children's first and most important teachers.** Over thirty years of research has confirmed the impact that parents and families have on their children's development and learning. The earliest years, from birth to five, are when the foundation for future learning is set. They are also the time when children start to form their own sense of their ability to learn. How many parents truly understand the profound difference they can make at this time?

There's no question about it: the things families do during their children's earliest years have a profound influence on the rest of their lives. This *Bulletin* gives suggestions for how families can help lay a strong foundation for their children's success.

### The Power of High Expectations

Babies are born ready to learn. All young children are capable of learning. From the moment they are born, families play a crucial role in their children's learning and how they feel about themselves as learners. Parents start their youngsters on a path to success when they:

- Tell their children that they believe in them
- Express high, yet reasonable, expectations
- Celebrate their children's learning and ability to learn, and place a high value on education

Over many years, studies have shown that parents' expectations and dreams for their children have the greatest beneficial impact on their children's academic achievement. The dramatic difference parents' high expectations make holds true over time, and for families from all backgrounds.

## Caution: Babies at Work!

Children discover their world through play. In fact, play is some of the most important work children will ever do. When youngsters hear stories, play with words and sounds, scribble words and pictures, clap to the rhythm of a poem or song, they are building the foundations for reading and writing.

Math learning begins early, too. Matching objects, putting objects in an egg carton or pegs in a pegboard—these everyday games help children begin to understand numbers and patterns. When children play with blocks, they learn about



sizes, shapes, and colors. They begin to recognize how things are related to each other. Even understanding physics begins with play! Through playing with their tricycles or wheelchairs, they learn about motion and balance. These everyday activities help children form the basic concepts behind algebra, geometry, and physics.

## It's never too early to begin reading to your child!

Reading is an area where research has shown that families can make a tremendous difference at home. Early childhood is the critical time when children build the foundation for reading and writing. Reading and writing are keys to children's later academic success.

Here are some things that can make a big difference:

- Keep books and printed materials around the house. Give your child lots of chances to handle them and turn pages.
- Read with your child everyday. It's not always important to finish the book. Point out things, ask questions, and hear from your child as you go along.
- Think and talk out loud a lot. Name everything and talk about the names.
- Say and show how much you love to read. You are a powerful role model.
- Be dramatic. When you read, use different voices and lots of expression.
- Read it over and over again. Kids don't get tired of their favorite books.
- Point out words and letters everywhere. Notice and read signs at the store, when driving, taking a walk, or even on TV.
- Stop while it's still fun.

*(Adapted and reprinted with permission from "Tips for Parents of Preschool," by Reading Rockets, a project of public television station WETA. Online at [www.ReadingRockets.org](http://www.ReadingRockets.org).)*

# Building a Learning Community

Home is the first learning center. With all the demands that come with raising babies and toddlers, school can seem a long way off—something to think about much later. Yet, because the child's earliest years are critical to their lifelong learning, preschool, Head Start, child care, and other early education settings have grown in importance.

As the child's world expands to other settings, the family begins to build a network of relationships. We encourage families to think of these caregivers and teachers as true partners, committed to helping you

give your children the very best start in life.

Begin to build these partnerships by:

- Talking regularly with caregivers and teachers, sharing concerns and information
- Learning about your child's program by visiting the program and speaking with the teachers and caregivers
- Attending parent conferences, family nights, and other program events

## Connecting Play to Learning

Massachusetts is one of several states that have set learning standards for the early childhood years. "Standards" are the skills and knowledge that children should gain as a result of their education. The Massachusetts Department of Education has gathered the early childhood learning standards for each subject for children ages 3–5 into a single document, "Guidelines for Preschool Learning Experiences."

These early childhood standards give lots of examples of simple steps youngsters can take to build up to more complex learning. They are lots of fun to read and give many concrete examples of ways parents and families can help their youngest members learn.

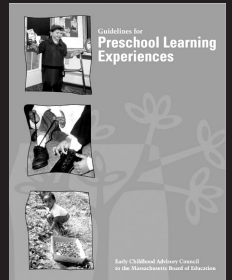
## Families are their children's first and most influential teachers.

When families and schools join together to support learning, children tend to succeed in school and in life. Research has found that the best predictors of students' achievement in school are when families:

- Create homes that encourage learning
- Express high yet realistic expectations for their children
- Become involved in their children's education at school and in the community

Massachusetts PIRC is eager to support families in their efforts to participate in their children's learning. If this *Bulletin* raises any questions or need for further information, please be sure to contact us.

You can now get a free copy of "**Guidelines for Preschool Learning Experiences**," from the Massachusetts Department of Early Education and Care. Just call (617) 988-6600 and ask for one. They can also be downloaded at [www.eec.state.ma.us](http://www.eec.state.ma.us). Under Key Resources in the left column, click on Technical Assistance Papers, then scroll down to **Guidelines for Preschool Learning Experiences**.



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