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Inside the Content of Infant-Toddler Early Learning Guidelines:

Results from Analyses, Issues to Consider, and Recommendations

RESEARCH BRIEF

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Inside the Content of Infant-Toddler Early Learning Guidelines:

Results from Analyses, Issues to Consider, and Recommendations¹

The content of infant-toddler Early Learning Guidelines is important because they can affect the quality of care infants and toddlers receive.

Recently, states have begun to write early learning guidelines (ELGs) for infants and toddlers—documents that describe the knowledge, skills, and characteristics that caregivers should seek to facilitate. These documents are important because they can focus attention on the learning and development that takes place during the infant-toddler period, serve as a basis for infant-toddler policy initiatives, and provide a foundation or “starting point” for professional development that targets infant-toddler providers. Given the importance of these documents and the fact that states often use the early learning guidelines developed by other states as examples or models when writing ELGs, it is important to examine the content of the first infant-toddler ELGs that have been published. This brief summarizes a report from the first research conducted on the content of infant-toddler ELGs and provides recommendations to improve the content of infant-toddler ELGs.

How Were the Analyses Conducted?

In order to analyze the content of infant-toddler ELGs, a coding system was developed. Based on an extensive review of infant-toddler research and an analysis of infant-toddler ELGs, the research team devised a system that has 75 indicators of learning and development divided into five developmental domains—physical, social-emotional, approaches toward learning, language and communication, and cognitive development—and a set of rules to make sure the ELGs were coded reliably.

We conducted an extensive search to locate ELG documents published as of July 2007 and then read and coded the infant-toddler ELG documents from 21 states—Alaska, Arkansas, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maine, Maryland, Michigan, Minnesota, Nebraska, New Hampshire, Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, and Washington. We noted how the documents were organized and calculated the percentage of each state’s documents that addressed each of the five developmental domains (this is called the “breadth” percentage), and the percentage of ELGs that addressed each individual indicator within a domain (this is called the “depth” percentage).

¹The authors gratefully acknowledge the A. L. Mailman Family Foundation’s support for this project. For additional information about the project, please see the full report which is available at http://www.uncg.edu/hdf/hdfs_faculty/catherine_scott-little/csl_info.htm or by e-mailing mcscottl@uncg.edu

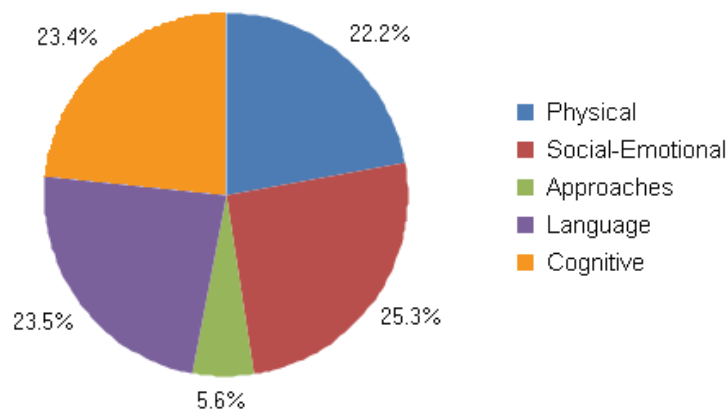
What Were the Findings?

Age Levels in the Documents. The infant-toddler period includes the period from birth to 36 months of age. States differed in how they organized their ELGs across this age range. Eight of the 21 states wrote ELGs that encompassed the full age period within one category. Other states organized their ELGs in smaller age brackets, ranging from two age categories (birth-18 months and 19-36 months) to seven categories. Sixteen of the 21 states used three or fewer age categories.

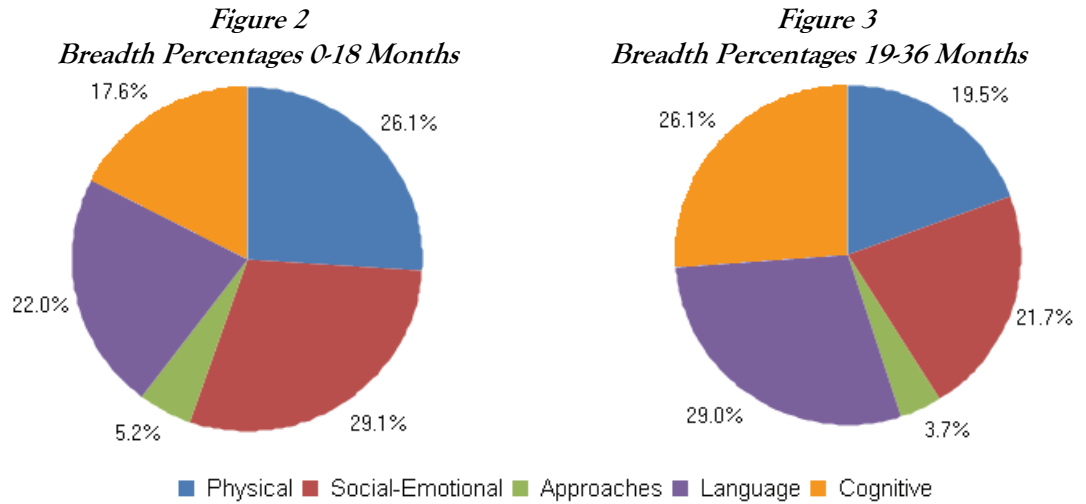
Headings or Subcategories. The vast majority of the states used some variation of the domains described by the National Educational Goals (NEGP) panel as headings or subcategories to organize their ELGs. Twenty states used physical, social-emotional, and language/communication domain categories within their document. Fewer states ($n = 13$) included a section that specifically addressed children’s cognitive development and general knowledge, and only nine states used a domain titled “approaches toward learning.” One state—Michigan—used headings that were markedly different from the NEGP domains. Five states included at least one section with an academic subject area title such as language arts, mathematics, and social science.

Content of the ELGs. When the content of each individual ELG was coded or categorized, it was evident that the infant-toddler ELGs have addressed four of the five domains relatively evenly (see Figure 1). Approaches toward learning has been addressed less frequently.

Figure 1. Breadth Percentages Across All Age Levels



When we compared the content of the ELGs written for young infants and toddlers (birth to 18 months) with the content of ELGs written for older toddlers (19 to 36 months), we noted that ELGs for the younger age range tended to address Physical and Social-Emotional Development more often, while ELGs written for older toddlers more frequently addressed the Language and Communication and Cognitive Development domains. (See Figures 2 and 3 for details.)



We also analyzed which specific indicators within each domain were addressed more often. Data presented in Table 1 show the most frequently and least frequently addressed indicators for each domain, along with the depth percentage for the indicator.

Table 1. Most- and Least- Addressed Indicators within Each Domain*		
Domain	Indicators Most Often Addressed	Indicators Least Often Addressed
Physical Development and Motor Skills	Gross motor (24.8%) Self-help skills (17.0%) Fine motor (14.2%)	Physical fitness (1.5%) Nutrition (2.0%) Health (3.2%)
Social and Emotional Development	Emotional expression (14.1%) Social skills with adults (10.9%) Self-concept (10.2%)	Relationships with peers (0.9%) Shared peer activities (3.2%) Self-control (3.5%) Self-esteem (3.8%)
Approaches Toward Learning	Interest & exploration (57.0%) Concentration/attention control (12.2%) Invention & creativity (11.7%)	Cooperative approach to learning (1.3%) Willingness to try (4.5%) Persistence/mastery motivation (5.8%)
Language and Communication Development	Expressive verbal communication (18.4%) Receptive verbal communication (14.9%) Participation in language/literacy activities (11.5%) Vocabulary (10.2%)	Alphabet awareness (0.4%) Communicating in second language (0.7%) Comprehension (0.9%) Motivation to write (1.8%) Narrative & story sense (1.9%) Book awareness (1.9%)
Cognitive Development and General Knowledge	Mathematics (13.6%) Cause & effect (10.8%) Memory (9.5%) Arts (9.0%)	Metacognition (0.0%) Social conventions (0.0%) Representation (0.1%) Perspective taking (0.2%) Conjecture hypothesizing, guessing (0.2%) Representational thought (0.5%)

* Across all age categories

Within the Physical Development domain, the ELGs tended to address motor and self-help skills most often, and addressed indicators related to children's general health and nutrition least often. ELGs within the Social and Emotional Development domain often addressed emotional expression, interactions with adults, and children's self-concept or knowledge about themselves. In this domain, ELGs infrequently addressed children's interactions and relationships with peers. Interest and exploration was clearly the indicator most often addressed within approaches toward learning ELGs, while states less frequently included ELGs to address children's cooperative approach toward learning, willingness to try, or persistence/mastery motivation in the approaches toward learning domain.



ELGs within the Language and Communication domain most often addressed children's verbal communication skills (expressive and receptive), participation in language and literacy activities, and vocabulary. ELGs that addressed early literacy skills, such as alphabet awareness, and ELGs related to children learning a second language were included relatively infrequently. Some ELGs considered more appropriate for older children were noted, particularly in ELGs related to early literacy skills. In the cognitive domain, states tended to emphasize mathematics-related content (such as recognizing shapes) and skills related to the arts, as well as two basic cognitive processes—understanding of cause and effect and memory. ELGs related to higher-order thinking skills such as symbolic thought were relatively rare.

What Are the Implications and Recommendations from the Findings?

The infant-toddler period is qualitatively different from later stages of learning and development, with rapid and interrelated developmental advances that are highly dependent on children's relationships and experiences. It is important that infant-toddler ELGs reflect the important accomplishments of this age period. Although the fact that states have frequently addressed the physical, social-emotional, language, and cognitive domains within the ELGs is a positive finding, the lack of attention to the approaches toward learning is troubling. Without ELGs that focus on children's approaches toward learning, will caregivers be less likely to intentionally cultivate these characteristics?

Similarly, the lack of attention to how the learning and development of English Language Learners and dual-language learners are reflected within the ELGs has important implications—it is a missed opportunity to inform caregivers about second- and dual-language learners.

Finally, in the effort to demonstrate alignment with preschool early learning standards for older children, some states have organized their infant-toddler ELGs within academic subject areas and occasionally have included ELGs that research suggests are not appropriate for this age.

The content of infant-toddler ELGs is particularly important given that the vast majority of infants and toddlers are cared for by persons with limited education and expertise in early childhood development. The indicators of learning and development included in the ELGs are likely to become the basis for future caregiver-training initiatives and to guide caregivers' interactions with babies and toddlers and, therefore, have important implications for the quality of care children receive. Furthermore, these documents can serve as the basis for determining how well programs have benefited infants and toddlers by defining the areas of development and learning such programs should seek to foster. Therefore, it is imperative that the content of the ELGs are consistent with the field's best knowledge about development and learning that takes place at this age.

We have given considerable thought to the observations and findings from our content analyses and the implications the findings have for the development of ELGs. Our goal is to offer recommendations that will be helpful to states as they write infant-toddler ELGs.

As part of the process for developing infant-toddler ELGs, we recommend that states:

1. Ensure that the ELGs communicate the concepts that are important for the infant-toddler period by using research and best practices as a guide for identifying constructs to address within the ELGs, and conduct formal analyses on the content of the ELGs before they are finalized.
2. Write ELGs that explicitly support the development of infants and toddlers from families who are culturally diverse and who do not speak English as their primary language.
3. Carefully examine the alignment between infant-toddler ELGs and ELGs/standards for older children to ensure that the content of infant-toddler ELGs supports children in their ability to learn what is expected at older ages but reflects the unique developmental and learning accomplishments of the infant-toddler period, rather than a simplified or "backmapped" version of expectations for older children.
4. Plan carefully for professional development that will accompany the ELGs in order to help caregivers use the ELGs effectively.

We also recognize that additional research is needed to support states in their efforts to write and implement infant-toddler ELGs. Specifically, we recommend that a national panel be convened to synthesize the infant-toddler research literature so it will be easier for states to use research as they write their ELGs. Additional research and resources are needed to provide states with guidance on how to write ELGs that are sensitive to and supportive of children from culturally and linguistically diverse families. Finally, additional analyses should be conducted on the content of infant-toddler ELGs to examine how the content relates to early learning standards for older children, and data on how states are implementing infant-toddler ELGs are needed to support states in their efforts to introduce the ELGs to the field.



Inside the Content of Infant-Toddler Early Learning Guidelines

Key Findings

Infant-toddler Early Learning Guidelines:

- Addressed the physical, social-emotional, language, and cognitive domains relatively frequently.
- Included more ELGs related to language and cognitive development in the guidelines written for toddlers compared to those written for infants.
- Addressed the approaches toward learning domains less frequently.
- Rarely included ELGs that reflected second- and dual-language learners.
- Sometimes included guidelines more appropriate for older children, particularly in guidelines related to academic subject areas.

Key Recommendations

When writing or revising infant-toddler ELGs, states should:

- Address the content that research and best practice suggest is important and age-appropriate.
- Ensure that the ELGs reflect the development and learning of children who are culturally diverse and are learning languages other than English.
- Develop ELGs that demonstrate alignment with early learning standards for older children but reflect the unique learning and developmental accomplishments of the infant-toddler period.
- Plan carefully for professional development that will support the use of the ELGs.



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