

National Center for Early Education Excellence at Bright Horizons

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Bridging the Gap Between Research and Practice in ECE Classrooms and Settings

It's probably not a surprise that there is a big gap between research and practice in the early childhood education field, with a wide variation between those who don't use any research to inform their work and those that have professional teams dedicated to ensuring their work is aligned with the most consequential and validated research. Yet, it's quite understandable why this gap exists. Terms like research-based or science-backed aren't

regulated. There aren't any voluntary or required national review or recognition system for reviewing things like curriculum, teaching methods, or professional development to ensure it is aligned with the science of early learning (1). The early childhood education field is fragmented and, in many cases, driven by the market. Access to research is often limited to those with pricey subscriptions to academic journals and written in ways that are hard to understand for non-researchers. Keeping up with research requires ongoing adaptation and change, which can be quite difficult and sometimes feels counter-intuitive to lived experience. And, maybe most importantly, those providing direct care and service have very little time to regularly cull through

complex research and determine what matters to their work. In 2023, we launched the National Center of Early Education Excellence at Bright Horizons to serve as a part of the solution to this problem. As the name indicates, this isn't about child development in general, but specifically to the work of early childhood education. We ourselves have an education and development department that works to ensure everything we do is informed by scientific findings relevant to child development, teaching methodologies, and professional development.

We also have an Early Childhood Education Advisory Network that reviews and informs our work and priorities.

But, it is part of our organizational mission to impact the lives of children, families, and educators beyond the walls of our own programs and we saw the opportunity to not simply connect research to practice, but to make research practical. This means going beyond simply getting research into the hands of practitioners, families, and decision-makers, but translating this research into easily applicable formats and suggestions that engage, equip, and empower those making consequential decisions and having daily interactions with young children.

To help us determine where to focus our attention, we conducted an informal survey at the 2023 NAEYC conference, we asked a few questions.

Recognizing the quantity of language development that happens in the first years of life and the sensitivity of this developmental period, we wanted to find out **which research-based language development practice do participants think educators LEAST understand/apply**. There were four choices and they're listed below according to the practice that received the most votes to the fewest votes. (174 votes total)

Serve and Return/ Conversational Turns – 30%
Contextual Use of New Vocabulary – 24%
Interactive Storytelling – 24%
Parentese – 22%

This was a forced choice, so while serve and return/conversational turns ranked highest, we suspect all of these research-based methods need significantly more support in ensuring they make their way into daily practice with young children.

Next, we asked **which early childhood research-based practices were most understood in early childhood classrooms**. This was not specific to a domain of development but focused on some of the most widely mentioned aspects of early childhood programs in both research and practice. This question received 547 votes. Participants were asked to only vote once. The choices are listed below in order of most votes to least.

SOURCES

(1) Accreditation systems somewhat do this, but don't specifically rate programs, tools, or products used by an ECE center, school, or setting.



Like any good researcher, these answers provide us with additional wonderings and questions, such as – is learning through play the most widely understood, or would “most commonly applied whether fully understood or not” be more accurate? And why is there such a big drop off after “learning through play”? What are the most common professional development topics and are they designed in a way that limits or enhances putting research into practice?

We could go on. And we will! What questions do you have? Comment below. Stay tuned for more opportunities to contribute to and learn from both informal and formal research. In the meantime, check out our Spark Summit where we invite researchers to share their work and then discuss practical ways to implement that research into practice, including a number of sessions directly related to the topics mentioned above.



*This article is relevant to the United States specifically

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