

WHAT YOUNG CHILDREN LEARN

(Adapted from Head Start's "Learning about Learning" handout)

Families teach their children most simply by the behavior they model since children learn best from observing and imitating. There are four important areas of learning (LG Katz, 1994) parents impact the most, not by direct teaching but through everyday interaction:

Skills. Young children want to do the skills they see their caregivers and older siblings doing. While they can't have the skill mastery older family member have, they can develop skills in areas such as: self-help (for example, dressing), family life (setting the table), problem solving (starting to take turns), and literacy (storytelling). These skills are taught and reinforced in the home.

Knowledge. Young children gain their knowledge about the world through their experiences with people and things. For example, children learn very early to name objects and to understand their functions (for example, keys open doors). Children build on this background knowledge to learn new things and to acquire more knowledge. Families are important in expanding a child's understanding of the world.

Attitudes about learning. Children naturally want to do things they see their family members doing and enjoying (such as reading or taking on a new task.) The attitudes modeled by family, and their responses to children's efforts to learn, shape views towards learning. For example, the child who is scolded for scribbling on the wall learns that scribbling is bad. The same child who is redirected to a piece of paper learns that scribbling is good, but writing on walls is not.

Learned feelings. Closely associated with attitudes, these are the emotional associations children make with learning. For example, many young children pretend to read, mimicking the voice their parents or teachers use when reading and using pictures to tell the story. A child is more likely to develop feelings of confidence as a reader if adults comment positively. On the other hand, if the child is criticized or teased, s/he may associate feelings of inadequacy with attempts at trying new tasks.

Families set the stage for children's social and academic success by giving them basic skills, knowledge, attitudes, and feelings about themselves as learners. The quality of the home environment in the early years of a child's life has a powerful and long-lasting impact on how and what children should learn.