

Ready! Set! School!

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Focus Groups--1st Interim Report

Session 1: Groups U, R, & L

The first focus group sessions for the three pilot testing groups as part of the Ready! Set! School project took place on February 23, 2006 in Murray (2 groups) and March 1, 2006 in Price, Utah.

The three groups were comprised of parents of 3-5 year old children who are not yet in kindergarten. In order to include the far edges of the age group we accepted a few parents who's child is currently two, but who will turn three before the one-month pilot review period begins in late April.

A total of 38 parents participated in the three groups. Two additional parents (spouses) attended but were not official participants.

General demographic characteristics of each of the groups are included in the transcripts/reports from each of the groups. This summary of the three Session 1 groups is intended to point out a few consistent themes and draw a few conclusions that may help as the project continues. However, demographically it is important to note that two of the groups are urban and one is from Carbon County and designed to represent rural Utah.

Common areas among the groups:

1. Parents with older children (about 80 percent of these participants) find it a little easier to prepare their preschool aged child for kindergarten. There are several common reasons for this, including:
 - a. Parents now know what their child should know going into kindergarten because of the older children.
 - b. Older children can help the younger children learn
 - c. Parents with older children still in school are exposed to more resources such as flyers coming home with their older children.
2. They all seem to understand the need and value of reading to and with their children.
3. Parents who's preschool aged child is the oldest or only child (about 20 percent of these participants) seem more in need of resources and less certain that they are doing the right things to prepare their children for school than those who have older children.

What are they doing?

1. Preschool. Most children, especially the four and five year olds are in some sort of preschool.
2. More children of parents in the LIMMELL group and the rural group are in Head Start than in the urban mixed group. This makes sense demographically because, generally speaking, the income levels of the LIMMELL and rural populations skew somewhat lower. Exact income information was not collected during recruitment. Parents were given income ranges only.
3. About 10 percent of parents from the groups have their child with a grand parent when they work. One of these mothers will put her son in preschool part time this coming fall. Another mom had her daughter in preschool a year ago but had her with grandma during the day every week day now.
4. Only about half of the rural group participants use the computer on a regular basis. Nearly all of the urban mixed and LIMMELL participants use the computer with and/or for their children regularly.
 - a. Most computer use is directly for activities for their children, rather than for educational resources for them to help them teach their children.
 - b. Common sites where parents go with and/or for their children include www.crayola.com , www.disney.com , and www.sesamestreet.org.
5. The types of activities they engage in to teach numbers, letters, colors and shapes are fairly similar. Flashcards and books are used a lot. Cooking is used by many parents to teach size and shapes, as well as counting.
6. Many parents teach through the daily course of their lives. For example, one parent and her daughter will count the number of stairs in the home as they need to go up or down for some reason. Another mom will point out things while driving. "I see a green tree," she will say. Her son responds by telling her he sees a red car, etc.
7. Most of the parents who have children in preschool or Head Start try to do similar activities at home as they learn in their school situation.
8. Social interaction ranges from playing with cousin and going to church classes with similar aged children, to formal play groups, the park and preschool.

What additional information do they need?

1. To know if their child is on target developmentally and educationally.
2. Some parents want to know if they are teaching the right things and on the right level.
3. At least one parent believes that preschool teachers should do a better job of letting parents know what they should be teaching their children. She also doesn't believe that all preschool teachers are equally aware themselves of what children need to know for kindergarten.
4. Information on how to teach their children to read.
5. Flashcards or other teaching devices that teach upper and lower case writing.

Conclusions:

Most parents are “shooting from the hip,” so to speak when it comes to kindergarten readiness—especially when it’s their first.

Parents learn a lot from one another. Sharing and networking is always a good tool.

Developmental levels are so different between children—even of the same age but especially between barely three years old and five plus—that parents need to understand up front with these activities that not every child will get the same out of every activity. Some children may be too advanced for some of the activities.

Sight reading and other visual learning style activities seem to be very helpful for the special needs populations represented in the groups. While not every special needs population could be represented, represented groups included: high functioning autism, hearing impairment, speech impairments and dyslexia. There were no parents of sight impaired children in any of our groups.

Even those parents who teach in a more experiential and less formal and structured manner seems to be anxiously awaiting these activities.

Regardless of location, ethnicity, socio-economic level or age of child, the parents in these group all appear to be genuinely interested in the success of their children.

Next Steps:

Prior to Session 2 in late April, I will sit down with our evaluator, Jan Tyler, and our grant manager, Kari Cutler, to create a simple tracking sheet for parents to use as they test the Ready! Set! School materials with their children. The tracking sheet will provide the evaluator with some hard data to go along with the verbal anecdotal data we will receive from the Session 3 focus groups.

I will also meet with Family Center staff to review participant rosters and develop an agenda and a presenters list for the next session. Because we will spend much of each two hour meeting during Session 2 unveiling the website, DVDs and print activities cards to each group, I believe it appropriate to have Family Center staff and/or product developers participate with me in the Session 2 meetings.