

United Way Suncoast - Young Children Learning through Literacy Scope of Work

Background

“The ability to read fluently and for understanding...is perhaps the most important foundational skill for U.S. adult citizens' health, well-being, and social and economic advancement. It is a gateway to lifelong learning, education, and training” (Sabatini, 2015). However, studies indicate disturbingly low literacy rates for children and adults in the US. The most recent National Assessment of Educational Process (NAEP) revealed that only 35% of 4th graders and 34% of 8th graders read proficiently (USDOE, 2019). The link between poverty and low literacy rates is well documented. Unfortunately, a longstanding upward trajectory of the prevalence of children in poverty has now resulted in low-income students comprising the majority of students in our nation's public schools (A. E. Casey, 2018).

The difficulties in language and literacy that some children encounter begin at a very early age and often persist. Hart and Risley's (1995) landmark study of interactions with young children highlighted the linguistic disadvantage experienced by children growing up in poverty. In their study, socioeconomically disadvantaged children were exposed to about one fourth of the number of words during their first years of life as children from affluent families. Studies conducted since Hart and Risley's have continued to document the lack of literacy experiences for young children in poverty. Researchers have found lower rates of children in poverty being read to by family members. For example, “While 59% of children from families with incomes of 400% FPL [federal poverty level] or greater were read to every day, only 36% children from families with incomes less than 100% FPL were reported to be read to daily.”

These differences in exposure to language and print put children from low-income families at serious and long-term risk for a host of difficulties. For example, in follow-up studies conducted 29 years after measuring British preschoolers' vocabularies, it was found that many of the children with weak receptive language in preschool continued to experience academic problems throughout school. These children were also more likely to experience persistent social, emotional, and behavioral problems. However, many of these effects were diminished by high quality preschool and primary school instruction. Effective early intervention that targets children with low levels of language and literacy development is critical, but too many teachers are poorly equipped to provide such intervention to the children who need it.

United Way Suncoast - Young Children Learning Through Literacy Initiative

The Learning Through Literacy Initiative will focus on improving outcomes for children and ensuring they have a smooth transition into formal schooling. Children in infant-toddler and preschool classrooms and community childcare settings will benefit from (a) increased quality and quantity of language interaction at school and at home and (b) improved implementation of scientifically-based early language and literacy instruction. In partnership with United Way Suncoast, a cohort of directors, coaches, teachers and associate teachers will participate in high quality professional development through an Initial Kick-off Institute, Early Learning Literacy Courses, and Early Literacy Professional Learning Sessions.

Initial Kick-off Institute: Young Children Learning Through Literacy

A cohort of educators will participate in a professional development institute to deepen their understanding of the reading process. Specifically, the institute will focus on the Science of Reading, theories of language and literacy development, using assessment to inform instruction, and creating learning environments for early learners that are language and literacy ready. The content can be adjusted to meet the specific learning needs of the specific educator audience: infant-toddlers or children ages 4 and 5. The institute builds the foundational knowledge of participants in preparation for their engagement in the early learning coursework and ongoing professional learning sessions.

Flamingo Early Learning Courses

In addition to the institute, the participating cohort of educators will engage in 3 Flamingo Early Learning Courses. The Lastinger Center's Flamingo Early Learning Professional Development courses develop early childhood educators' foundational knowledge through custom-built Early Learning courses. Courses are competency/mastery-based and designed for practical learning, application, collaboration, and reflection. The Early Learning Courses included in the Professional Learning Plans below are recommended for early learning educators in home-based and center-based Pinellas Early Learning Coalition centers based on their professional learning needs as communicated by United Way Suncoast. A description of each recommended Early Learning Course and its learning outcomes is in the Appendix of this document. Participating educators have access to help desk support for the Flamingo Learning Management System via a Learning Support Team that operates in windows that cover 7am to 8pm EST Monday through Friday. The Support Team provides the following support channels to support learners, instructors, and program staff: