
Introduction to Early Reading First

The ultimate goal of Early Reading First is to close the achievement gap by preventing reading difficulties.

U.S. Department of Education (2006, p. 1)

When I think about my early reading experiences, I think about my visits to my grandmother's house. I could hardly wait to go to the basement and sit on her love seat and go through her basket of books. In the basket were many I Can Read! books. What I liked about this experience was that the book selections were ones that fit my reading ability—simple picture books. I also liked the ability to choose my own books. Even though I could not read the words, this early reading experience stands out in my mind as being positive and helped guide me to becoming a reader.

Susan E. Israel

What is Early Reading First (ERF)? The U.S. Department of Education's No Child Left Behind (NCLB) act has helped decrease the achievement gap by focusing on increasing literacy so all children can be highly literate. NCLB is built on four guiding principles: accountability for results, more choices for parents, greater local control and flexibility, and an emphasis on scientific research. NCLB established Reading First as a literacy policy and national program of excellence for all primary-age children in America (Block & Israel, 2005). NCLB's primary emphasis is increasing literacy so all children can have the opportunity to obtain and have access to resources to become

highly literate. With the goal in mind of increasing literacy for all, the U.S. Department of Education, in conjunction with Reading First, launched a plan for the prevention of early reading difficulties called Early Reading First. ERF is aligned with NCLB. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2005), the ultimate goal of the ERF is

to improve the school readiness of our nation's young children, especially those from low-income families, by providing support for early childhood education programs serving preschool-age children so they may become centers of educational excellence. (p. 2)

The purpose of this book is to summarize the ERF initiatives and scientific research in order to provide early childhood educators with a road map on teaching of excellence for all preschool-age children and discover how to integrate ERF components into instruction at the preschool level. This chapter answers the following questions:

- What is ERF?
- What do teachers need to know?
- What are the goals of ERF?

Early Reading First and Beyond: A Guide to Building Early Literacy Skills is written to assist preschool teachers, administrators, early literacy coaches, school district administrative staff, and parents in understanding ERF legislative initiatives and in enhancing early language and emergent literacy skills of *all* preschool-age children. This book can be used in the following ways:

1. It can be used as a professional development tool for learning about scientific reading research based on ERF legislation.
2. It can be used by early literacy educational schools that wish to improve prereading skills and more effectively collaborate with parents and caregivers of preschool-age children.
3. It can be used by educators and parents who want to learn new strategies about how to enrich all aspects of early reading experiences.

RESEARCH THAT EARLY CHILDHOOD TEACHERS CAN USE ABOUT EARLY READING FIRST

ERF is an initiative that responds to the report from the National Reading Panels (NRP) published in the fall of 2000 (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development [NICHD], 2000). ERF was created to address the growing concern that many children enter kindergarten without the necessary foundation to develop in the area of reading and literacy.

In the following paragraphs, ERF will be defined with background information about how ERF legislation began and the overall goals of the program.

The U.S. Department of Education (2002a) defines ERF as follows:

Early Reading First, part of the President’s “Good Start, Grow Smart” initiative, is designed to transform existing early education programs into centers of excellence that provide high-quality, early education to young children, especially those from low-income families. The overall purpose of the Early Reading First Program is to prepare young children to enter kindergarten with the necessary language, cognitive, and early reading skills to prevent reading difficulties and ensure school success. (n.p.)

The Early Reading First initiative supports educational initiatives in the following ways:

1. Provides funding for low-income organizations
2. Guides preschool integration curriculums with emphasis on ERF goals
3. Offers support through government programs and resources

The U.S. Department of Education provides free resources to help increase teacher and parent knowledge on ERF. Some free titles to request are the following:

Healthy Start, Grow Smart Series (U.S. Department of Education, 2002b). Information booklets from newborn through 12 months old.

No Child Left Behind: What Parents Need to Know (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). An information booklet on how parents can increase literacy skills in the home environment.

From Risk to Opportunity: Fulfilling the Educational Needs of Hispanic Americans in the 21st Century (U.S. President’s Advisory Commission on Educational Excellence for Hispanic Americans, 2003). This teacher resource explains the crisis in America and instructional strategies for intervention.

Early Reading First Goals

- Goal #1 Support:

Support efforts to enhance early language, literacy, and prereading development of preschool-age children.

- Goal #2 Cognitive Learning Opportunities:

Provide preschool-age children with cognitive learning opportunities in high-quality language and literature-rich environments so children can attain fundamental knowledge and skills necessary for optimal reading development in kindergarten and beyond.

- Goal #3 Research-Based and Age-Appropriate Instruction:

Instruction must be research based and developmentally appropriate as well as focus on oral language, phonological awareness, print awareness, and alphabetic knowledge.

- Goal #4 Assess and Identify At-Risk Preschool-Age Children:

Use screening assessments to identify preschool-age children who may be at risk for reading failure.

Preschool children are an important population and should not be overlooked in the future development of a literate America. The NCLB reform initiatives have forced educators to reflect on practice. NCLB is summarized in *Reading First and Beyond* (Block & Israel, 2005):

NCLB is the historic, bipartisan education reform effort that President Bush proposed his first week in office and that Congress passed into law on January 8, 2002. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)—the main federal law affecting education from kindergarten through high school. (p. 4)

In order to achieve the goals of ERF, the federal government has made available competitive awards for up to six years to support efforts that enhance early literacy reading development, especially in underresourced communities in the United States with low-income families and at-risk preschool-age children. Grants will be awarded based on the recommendation of a federal peer review panel. The panel must include experts in early reading development and early childhood education. The U.S. Department of Education awarded over \$75 million to 175 preschool centers that wish to become centers of excellence. The estimated range for each grant is between \$250,000 and \$1.5 million. According to the U.S. Department of Education, a “center” is defined as a classroom or multiple classrooms within a building or campus, or multiple buildings. For example, it may be a Head Start center with one or more classrooms. For information about funding ideas and recommendations on the application process, see Chapter 6 in this book. An overview of how the allocated funding for ERF grants can be used is as follows:

- Professional development (knowledge of subject, classroom management, high-quality instruction, recruiting, hiring, evaluation of teacher performance, and instruction to work more effectively with parents)
- Salaries for new teachers, stipends, bonuses, scholarships, and for specialist teachers to reduce class size
- Support for parents and families
- Additional space if required to meet the purpose of the ERF
- Books and in-home literacy resources

Early childhood is a profound period for early literacy development, and prior to kindergarten, robust physical, emotional, and cognitive development occurs in preschool children. Students who enter kindergarten need to be ready for the academic challenges ahead. The difference between higher socioeconomic families when compared to lower socioeconomic families by age four is significant. Children living in impoverished areas are exposed to only 13 million words as compared to 45 million words for children living in higher socioeconomic areas. The research available on parental involvement demonstrates that parents more involved with literacy growth during the preschool years contribute to reading readiness in direct ways; this is a goal of ERF. ERF instructional initiatives do not deemphasize *play* or ignore *emotional* and *health* concerns of young children. The key word for ERF initiatives is *prevention*. Since an important part of prevention is identification of at-risk readers at the preschool level, assessment plays a critical role even prior to kindergarten.

Components to Assess Learning in Early Reading First Legislation

Identification of at-risk readers prior to the entry into kindergarten is critical to prevention of at-risk readers. Each of the chapters in this book outlines assessments that can be used to identify early literacy strengths and weaknesses and that follow characteristics supported by ERF. That is, assessments should be measures based on scientific research, should be developmentally appropriate, and should be easy to use and administer to individuals as diagnostic measures.

SUMMARY

In summary, prevention, not remediation, is the overall goal for early childhood educators. A major supporter of the ERF initiative is First Lady Laura Bush. She states, “The years from the crib to the classroom represent a period of intense language and cognitive growth. Armed with the right information, we can make sure every child learns to read and reads to learn” (U.S. Department of Education, 2001, n.p.). I invite you to begin the journey to help preschool children prepare for school success.