In This Issue:
Bridging the Digital Divide
Educational Media at Home
Early Childhood and Healthy Adults
Immigrant Children & Pre-K
Pre-K'4: San Antonio
Meet the SECA Presidential Candidates
Bridging the Digital Divide
Early Education Can Play a Role

Technology and early childhood education are not always thought to be complementary, but a new report from the Rand Corporation outlines issues of using technology more effectively to help “bridge the gap” between children of low-income communities and their more advantaged peers.

The report, Using Early Childhood Education to Bridge the Digital Divide, is based on the theory that “technology literacy plays an important role in a child’s ability to succeed in school and later life. “We know that technology use has grown exponentially in the last few years and we’ve all seen children occupied with phones and tablets; however, many low-income children are not able to access and use technology in the same way that other children may. This is particularly true in many of the rural areas of our Southern states where access to broadband technology is limited or non-existent and computers are available only through schools or libraries. Because of limited access, these children “have fewer opportunities to learn, explore, and communicate digitally, and fewer chances to develop the workforce skills they will need to succeed later in life.”

We can hear the thoughts coming our way……let’s step back a minute. Technology and early childhood education aren’t always compatible!

Although the report talks about helping children to compete by providing the same opportunity to become “tech literate”, it also provides some insights into what early childhood education can do to support this literacy and poses questions that must be answered before technology becomes a feature of the early childhood classroom.

These Key Findings are included in the report:

- **“Early childhood education prepares children for school and provides an opportunity to address disparities.”** Children who participate in early childhood education achieve better education and life outcomes, with the strongest impacts for children from low-income families. Early childhood is an important time to build foundational skills in traditional academic areas and may play a similar role for technology.

- **Technology literacy opens the door to many of life’s opportunities.** Those who use technology in the workplace earn 14-27% more than those who do not, and projections indicate that much of the country’s future job growth will be concentrated in areas that require use of information and communications technology on the job.

- **Technology can also open the door to new learning opportunities for young children.** Studies have shown that ICT (Information Communication Technology) can build motor skills, socio-emotional skills, and cognitive skills, helping to reduce skill gaps in important foundational areas for disadvantaged young children. However, there is debate over the impact of technology on young children, and many continue to feel that the role of technology should remain limited.

- **Supports are needed to realize the benefits of technology in early childhood education.** High-quality Internet connectivity, developmentally appropriate software, and smart and portable devices are helpful in supporting educational technology efforts, as well as family support. Even if the most up-to-date software-device-connection combination is present, it may not be usable if there is no one to guide the child. The real value is derived from the presence of a high-quality knowledge facilitator.”

The report goes on to recommend the exploration of these **five questions**:

1. “What is the goal for information and communication technology in early childhood education?
2. How do we define appropriate use of technology in ECE?
3. Once defined, how do we support effective use through devices, connectivity, software, and other components of ICT infrastructure?
4. How do we ensure that ECE providers are prepared to address the digital divide?
5. What relationship should parents and families have to the integration of technology into ECE?”


This debate won’t be settled quickly and the challenge will be to find that “balance” between what the field knows about how young children learn and the reality that technology is now an integral part of our culture and society. The report concludes that knowledgeable and skilled teachers who can guide students and their families as they learn to use technology are just as important as updated technology and software.

If you’d like to read the report, go to *Using Early Childhood Education to Bridge the Digital Divide.*

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**Educational Media:**
**Using It at Home**

We’ve just talked about the report from the Rand Corporation that takes a look at using early childhood education programs and technology as a way to “bridge the opportunity gap” for low-income children. With this report from the Joan Ganz Cooney Center at Sesame Street, we’re taking a look at how the new technology is being utilized as an “educational tool” at home by families.

*Learning at Home: Families’ Educational Media Use* is a study conducted by the Center to see how parents engage with their children in media viewing and interactive play. It includes a look at early reading as households begin to transition from “print to digital literacy” experiences and also answers questions about media use across income and ethnically diverse populations.

It’s interesting to note that the report cites research from Common Sense Media (2013) that states “due in large part to the falling costs of electronics, lower-income and minority families are catching up to their middle-class and White counterparts in device ownership.” It also notes that “as the access gap narrows, there is evidence of an emerging participation gap demarcating more and less enriching uses of media.” (p 5) Dr. Michael Levine, Executive Director of the Center, also notes in the preface to the report that “the study raises key concerns about whether our nation is focused clearly on production of media for low-income families, especially those from Hispanic-Latino heritage, and how best to get essential family engagement in the rapid transition from print books to digital reading technologies.” The preface also states that “the study findings make the case for new investments in better content, especially for underserved children, and for new research so that we can
more reliably understand what children are doing now—and will soon be doing—and which media choices might best promote their academic performance and healthy development.” (p 3)

We’ve gone beyond the television and computer. Children now have access to e-readers, tablets, and smartphones, Wris, Xboxes, Leapsters, and DSes, just to name a few. The report seeks to answer this question: “With young children spending hours a day with these screen media, one question has never been answered: How much of this content is educational?”

The study concerns media use in the home by children ages 2-10. (The American Academy of Pediatrics has recommended that children under the age of 2 not utilize media.) It asks these questions:

- “How much of a child’s media time is devoted to educational content?”
- Which subjects do parents feel their children are learning the most about from media?
- Which platforms do they perceive as being most effective?
- What are the reasons some children don’t use educational media?
- Why do some parents support e-reading and others do not?”

We think you’ll find the statistics interesting, informative and sometimes challenging. It’s a given that parents are utilizing the newest technology as an educational tool. Our challenge: How can early childhood educators influence how parents utilize this media and ensure that young children are accessing software and media that’s developmentally appropriate and supportive of their growth?

Source: Learning at Home: Families’ Educational Media Use in America, Joan Ganz Cooney Center at Sesame Street, Victoria Rideout, January 2014

Key Findings

- Nearly half (44%) of the screen media that 2-to-10-year-olds use is considered educational by their parents.
- Most parents think that their child has learned from educational media.
- Educational media use occurs most frequently among very young children (1 in 16 a day among 2-4-year-olds).
- Children spend far more time with educational TV than they do with educational content on other platforms such as mobile devices.
- Parents don’t believe their children learn as much from educational media about science as they do about other subject areas.
- Across every platform and almost all subject areas studied, Hispanic-Latino parents are the least likely to say their child has learned from educational media. For example, among Hispanic-Latino parents of weekly educational media users, 63% say their child has learned a lot or some about math from computers, compared to 91% of Black and 70% of White parents.
- Many children have access to and are using electronic reading devices. Nearly two-thirds (62%) of 2-to-10-year-olds now have access to either an e-reader or a tablet device.

Source: Learning at Home: Families’ Educational Media Use in America, Joan Ganz Cooney Center at Sesame Street, Victoria Rideout, January 2014
Preventing Diabetes and Stroke: Early Childhood, Really?

We’re given credit for many things but we don’t necessarily expect to get a report that says participation in an early childhood program can mean better health in later years, including the prevention of chronic diseases.

That’s just what we learned when famed economist James Heckman published research that tied the two together. The research was conducted by Dr. Heckman and colleagues at the University of Chicago, University College of London and the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute at the University of North Carolina--certainly a more familiar entity to those of us in the early childhood field!

The research focused on children who participated in the Abecedarian Project in North Carolina, following them for three decades beyond the early childhood program. The Abecedarian Project combined high-quality early childhood educational components with health and nutrition services for disadvantaged children. Thirty years later, the researchers found that men in the treatment group were found to have lower blood pressure and were less likely to develop stage 1 hypertension. They also had significantly higher levels of “good” HDL cholesterol and none manifested metabolic syndrome—co-occurring hypertension, central obesity and dyslipidemia, which dramatically increases the risk of heart disease, stroke and diabetes. Women in the treatment group were less likely to have abdominal obesity and less likely to develop pre-hypertension. Both men and women were significantly lower risk than their non-participating peers for coronary artery disease.

The researchers drew these conclusions.

- Quality early childhood development improves adult physical health.
- Quality early childhood development increases healthy behaviors.
- Physical development is improved by quality early childhood development.
- Quality early childhood development can prevent gaps in achievement and health.

**Overall Conclusion:** The findings show the potential of early life programs to prevent disease and promote health.

Who knew that what we’re doing today would have such a dramatic effect three decades from now? Let’s get them started right! It will pay off for many years to come.

*Source: Abecedarian & Health: Improve adult health outcomes with quality early childhood programs that include health and nutrition, The Heckman Equation, March 27, 2014*
Immigrant Children and Prekindergarten

Why Aren’t More Children Enrolling?

With a steadily growing population of immigrant children in the South, attracting these children to participate in early childhood/prekindergarten programs is taking on a significance that we haven’t experienced before. Evidence suggests that the developmental and educational effects of prekindergarten may be larger for children of immigrants than for other children. The programs assist with English language acquisition, help children to acclimate to community cultural norms and provide a structure in which to introduce children to the formal education system in their community and state.

FIGURE 1: PERCENT OF 4-YEAR-OLDS SERVED IN STATE PRE-K

Children of immigrants, who represent about a quarter of the children in the United States, have significantly lower rates of pre-K enrollment, on average, than children with U.S. born parents. Issues which contribute to this trend include:

- Lack of awareness about programs.
- Language barriers.
- Logistical barriers to enrollment.
- Lack of parental comfort with institutional programs.
- A lack of sensitivity about the needs of immigrant families.

The Urban Institute recently published a report, Supporting Immigrant Families’ Access to Prekindergarten, that outlines the basic issues, provides the rationale for addressing the problem and offers a series of three fact sheets (Building Relationships, Outreach, and Enrollment Strategies) that give suggestions and recommendations on addressing the problem.

**Tips To Improve Access to Prekindergarten for Children of Immigrants**

**Fact Sheet #1**

**Identifying Who to Reach & Reaching Out**

- Analyze census data.
- Look at the characteristics of kindergarteners.
- Build on Head Start’s *Community Needs Assessment*.
- Participate in community events.
- Go door to door.
- Reach parents where they already go.
- Encourage parents of enrolled children to recruit other parents.
- Use mass media.

**Fact Sheet #2**

**Enrollment Strategies**

- Help parents meet paperwork requirements. Identify alternative verification documents that can meet the criteria required for eligibility determination.
- Streamline application forms and enrollment processes. Eliminate the language barrier as much as possible by providing documents in a variety of languages. Provide enrollment assistance by program personnel. Offer multiple ways to enroll and conduct enrollments at times and places that can meet the family’s schedule.

**Fact Sheet #3**

**Building Relationships**

- Have a welcoming attitude.
- Work with trusted community partners.
- Proactively engage and include immigrant parents.
- Build capacity for communicating with immigrant parents.
- Address logistical barriers.
- Build cultural competency for pre-K instruction.

In 2012, the city of San Antonio approved an 1/8 cent sales tax designed to provide quality pre-K for 22,400 four-year-olds over an eight-year period. The measure was an initiative of Mayor Julián Castro and supported by many other business leaders in the city. The city gained national acclaim and attention as the ballot measure passed and education leaders in the city moved to implement the program quickly.

In August of 2013, the city wasn’t where it hoped to be with its new pre-K program. Student openings were allocated to districts in proportion to the expected enrollment and all had spots available after the school year had begun.

- SAISD enrolled 124 of 208 allotted.
- Edgewood ISD, approximately 22 of 45 spots.
- South San ISD, approximately 20 of 37.
- Southwest ISD 24 of 25.

The best guess as to why? Transportation was an issue for many parents, particularly in the larger districts, and the city was adjusting its sliding fee scale to accommodate many families on waiting lists who wanted to enroll. (Participation was free to students that were eligible for free and reduced lunch, were classified as ELL and some additional criteria. Families who did not meet the criteria were able to participate by paying tuition on a sliding fee scale.)

Several city organizations banded together to get the word out. A campaign, “Why Pre-K?” was developed between Avance, an organization dedicated to programs that serve Latino families, NOWCastSA, the local public television on the Internet, and P16Plus, a group formed in Bexar County to “convene and facilitate educational enhancing efforts to inspire and prepare our communities’ families and students for success.”

NOWCastSA produced a series of mobile-friendly bilingual YouTube videos that explained how “quality pre-K helps children succeed in school today and sets them on a lifetime path toward better physical and financial health.” The manager of NOWCastSA, Charlotte-Anne Lucas, theorized that “…..young parents in San Antonio don’t have enough information to understand the benefits of Pre-K. We’re going to get that information in their hands by distributing these mobile-friendly videos in places where young parents get their news, including YouTube and Facebook.”

Click here, Why Pre-K Now?, to view a video from the campaign.

Our 2014 SECA Presidential Candidates: What Value Do They See in SECA Membership?

This fall we will vote for the next SECA President. During the next few months, we’ll share information about the candidates and their views on the future of the Association through articles in Dimensions of Early Childhood and the SECA Reporter.

The first article shared their biographical information and appeared in the winter 2014 edition of Dimensions of Early Childhood (Vol. 42: 1). You’ll find that information located on pages 24 & 25 of that issue. The second article answered questions about their individual leadership styles and experience and you’ll find that information on pages 8-10 of The SECA Reporter/ Spring 2014. This issue of the SECA Reporter will share their responses to the following questions:

• Question #1: Give a specific example of how SECA has had a positive impact on you as an early childhood professional.

• Question #2: How would you answer a college student’s question, “Why should I join SECA?”

• Question #3: How would you answer an early childhood teacher’s question, “I’m a teacher in an early childhood program. What benefits can I gain by joining SECA?”

Beth Parr of Georgia

Question #1: Through my participation in the Southern Early Childhood Association, I have had the opportunity to meet many people who have the same concerns I do about the children who are growing up in the southern part of our country. Through interaction with these people and participation in Leadership Trainings and the SECA Board, I have grown tremendously in my active advocacy relating to the issues that are so vital to children, such as poverty, age-appropriate education, qualified teachers, and compensation for early childhood teachers. SECA has given me the confidence to speak up and address these issues with legislators, state administrators, and other officials in a way that I hope will make a difference. One vital part of the support from SECA has been up-to-date and easily usable and accessible information about these issues. As things change and laws are proposed and enacted, SECA has provided me with the best information for where I live and the people with whom I work.

continued on next page
Question #2: I would tell a college student that SECA is an organization that will nurture your growth as an early childhood professional. It will connect with many people, young and old, who are working in the early childhood field and who are faced with the same challenges you face. It is an organization in which you will have opportunities for face-to-face interaction. Through this organization, you can learn about the multiple opportunities to serve young children in traditional and non-traditional settings. You will be encouraged to grow as a leader. It will provide you with a safe environment for becoming grounded in the early childhood profession and the wings to encourage change.

Question #3: If I were asked by anyone who is working in early childhood, “What benefits can I gain by joining SECA?” some of my answers would be similar to the ones I would give a college student. I would also stress that SECA is an organization that values your participation. You will be connected with people who are as passionate about quality care and learning for young children as you are. You’ll have the chance to laugh and cry with others who “have been there.” SECA will provide you access to up-to-date policy, trends, and practices in the early childhood field, particularly as it relates to issues for the child in the South. The resources, such as our journal, public policy newsletter, leadership newsletter, are priceless. Last, I would probably say, “Let me introduce you to some people.”

Carol Montealegre of Florida

Question #1: For six years, I had the opportunity to serve as a Member-at-Large (the function of which is to represent the diversity of the early childhood communities in the South) on the SECA Board. I was able to experience how an effective board of a professional volunteer organization is organized and functions. During my personal and professional life in the United States and in Latin America I have served in various leadership positions, including President, on many boards of volunteer organizations. By far, my two term (2008-2013) service on the SECA Board has been the most memorable, having an extremely positive impact on my understanding of how effective professional associations operate.

“Lessons learned” have been many, beginning with the basic structure and operation of the SECA board, to the respect and honoring of past board members through the creation of a group called the “Fossils”. As a Member-at-Large, I represented and worked to serve the needs of the Spanish speaking early childhood communities that reside in the South.

The working climate of the Board is one of respect, openness, and fellowship. I found this to be inspirational. I also noted that much work is accomplished in a short period of time. What I have learned at SECA I have taken back to share with my local board and state board in Florida. Many of the ideas have been implemented strengthening the associations and improving their effectiveness.

Question #2: I would answer the student by first stating and explaining that SECA is a very special and unique early childhood professional organization that welcomes, nurtures and supports all members, in particular students, as they enter the profession of early childhood education.

Through SECA’s various publications, members are kept abreast of research, trends, policies and mandates in the field with a special emphasis on what is occurring in the Southern states: Dimensions of Early Childhood, The SECA Reporter, The Leadership Letter, and Public Policy Notes. These publications and the SECA website can serve as excellent resources for students who seek current information to complete course assignments.

Another reason for becoming a member of SECA is the many opportunities for networking with others in the field. The encounters can result in lifelong friendships with colleagues who share common values, traditions, goals and interests.
Question #3: I would respond to the early childhood teacher that the benefits for joining SECA are many. It is a regional professional early childhood association comprised of the Southern states. SECA welcomes and nurtures its members in the gracious style of its Southern traditions and values. In this spirit of fellowship, SECA is able to bring people together around the profession of Early Childhood Education. There are many, many testimonials about lifelong friendships developed through SECA!

As a member of SECA, not only will you feel a sense of belonging, you will also further your professional growth. SECA offers a conference each year in one of the Southern states. The conferences offer sessions on “hot” topics and cutting-edge research in the field. The warm and welcoming climate and knowledge gained at the conference makes it a truly memorable experience.

Another benefit of SECA membership is the wide range of publications available to members. The SECA website is a hub of resources, including a section for Spanish speakers. The ongoing information maintains professionals abreast of all current research, mandates, trends and policies, especially those occurring in the South.

For all early childhood professionals and future professionals, the Southern Early Childhood Association (SECA) is a very special association in which everyone feels like a valued member. It is an organization that nurtures you personally and professionally!

Linda Novak of North Carolina

Question #1: My example of how SECA has had a positive impact on you as an early childhood professional is all about the relationships I have formed. Each SECA conference I have attended and my interactions with the SECA leadership as President of the West Virginia Association for Young Children, has allowed me to grow and learn from the interactions with a dedicated group of early childhood professionals. I have learned how to participate on a Board and all the hard work that occurs. Each conference provided me with opportunities to meet other professionals and learn from their experiences and share my personal experiences. Many of these opportunities happened during a session or the equally important conversations after the session ended. I have learned what other institutions of higher education do with their student teaching classes. I have learned how other states handle internal processes with their boards. I have met the other state leaders and heard their stories. To me, the most important positive impact has been the continual learning and growth shared with me by other professionals. We never stop learning and growing as individuals and as professionals. I hope to continue to learn and grow through the relationships I have formed through SECA.

Question #2: I have spent the last two years doing just that. Our students at Fayetteville Technical Community College have asked this question of me and my colleagues. The response is simple. What other organization will allow you to meet professionals in your field? What other organization has a focus on issues specific to southern states? What other conference will always be held in the south to allow your participation? The answer is simple – SECA. Several of our students had the privilege of attending their first SECA conference this past January at Williamsburg, VA, and they are hooked. They are now fund raising to attend the upcoming conference in New Orleans. Now I can share their comments with our new students. “The people were so friendly!” “I learned this in our classes but now I understand it in a different context.” “The sessions we attended were interactive and fun, the time flew by.” They understand the importance of being a part of a professional organization and they can continue to learn even after they graduate. The publications and resources provided by SECA are wonderful and appropriate for individuals entering our field. My first response to our students is now, “Being a member of SECA is like coming home.”
Question # 3: I have answered early childhood teachers’ questions about being a member of SECA by saying, “Do you want to stay current in your field?” “Do you want to learn about teaching southern children and working with southern families and their specific issues and challenges?” “Do you want to form long lasting relationships with others in the field?” If you answered yes, then SECA is for you. The opportunities to gain from SECA resources and publications as a member are directly related to your work in the classroom. Dimensions of Early Childhood contains timely and relevant articles from your peers and you can also share your experiences if you choose to submit an article. I have told them it is like coming home. You can visit with friends who share your experiences and eventually they become like family…a family that promotes lifelong learning in a friendly, safe and welcoming environment. Finally, your SECA membership allows you to be a part of a professional organization, indicating that you are truly a dedicated member of the early childhood profession.

Don’t forget to view the candidate video on the SECA website. You’ll get to know the candidates personally!
Join us in New Orleans, Louisiana for the 66th Annual Conference of the Southern Early Childhood Association!

January 15-17, 2015
Astor Crowne Plaza in the French Quarter

THE WORLD FROM OUR FRONT PORCH: COMMUNITY & CULTURE
Other Resources from SECA on the Topics in this Newsletter


SECA Reporter (Summer 2013): “Streaming Books to the iPad for Children”

SECA Reporter (Winter 2012): “Transforming Teaching for Today’s Tech Savvy Children”


To access copies of these articles, go to http://www.southerneverlychildhood.org/ and log in as a SECA member. For non-members, contact the SECA office at 1-800-305-SECA to determine availability.

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SECA serves the interests of early childhood educators concerned with child development, including university researchers and teacher educators; early childhood, kindergarten and primary-grade teachers; and early childhood program administrators and proprietors. The association has affiliates in 13 Southern states. Non-affiliate memberships are available to anyone living outside the 13 affiliate states.

For information about joining SECA, contact the executive offices at P.O. Box 55930, Little Rock, AR 72215-5930, (800) 305-7322 or on the web at www.southerneverlychildhood.org

Members receive a variety of publications throughout the year, discounts in the SECA Store and conference registration fees.

The SECA Reporter is produced by Glenda Bean, Executive Director. Design by RB Fine Art (www.rbfineart.com)

Cover photo by Elisabeth Nichols.