

## Technical Assistance Providers' Evaluation of the Center for Early Literacy Learning Practice Guides

Carl J. Dunst  
Tracy Masiello  
Diana Meter  
Jennifer Swanson  
Ellen Gorman

Part C early intervention and Part B (619) preschool special education technical assistance providers (N = 26) were interviewed to obtain their social validity appraisals of the *Center for Early Literacy Learning* parent practice guides. Participants were also asked to rate the extent to which they would conduct training on how to use the practices. Results showed that the practice guides were judged as both important and acceptable, but that variations in the participants' social validity ratings predicted the likelihood that technical assistance providers would train parents or practitioners to use the practices. Implications for training technical assistance providers are described.

The likelihood that any kind of early childhood intervention practice will be used by parents or practitioners is influenced by their beliefs about the social validity of the practice (Dunst, Pace, & Hamby, 2007; Trivette, Dunst, Hamby, & Pace, 2007). Social validity refers to consumer and end-user judgments of the importance and acceptability of an intervention and the intended outcomes of the intervention (Foster & Mash, 1999; Miltenberger, 1990; Wolf, 1978). The more socially valid a practice is viewed by consumers and end-users, the more the practice will likely be adopted and used (Trivette, Dunst, Masiello, Gorman, & Hamby, 2009).

The study described in this *CELLpaper* had three purposes. The first was to determine the social validity judgments of the *Center for Early Literacy Learning* (CELL) practice guides by Part C early intervention and Part B (619) preschool special education technical assistance providers. The second was to determine if the social validity judgments differed between Part C and Part B (619) technical assistance providers. The third was to assess whether variations in social validity were related to the technical assistance providers' judgments about the likelihood of them training parents or practitioners to use the practice guides. Based on findings showing that parents' and practitioners' social validity ratings are related to their use of early childhood intervention practices (e.g., Dunst, Pace, & Hamby, 2007; Trivette, Dunst, Masiello, Gorman, & Hamby, 2009), we expected social validity to be related to the technical assistance providers' judgments

of whether they would train others to use the *CELL* early literacy learning practices.

### METHOD

#### *Participants*

The participants were 26 early childhood technical assistance providers selected randomly from a list of more than 100 trainers according to type of program (early intervention, preschool special education) and geographic region (northeast, southeast, central, west). The list of technical assistance providers was compiled from information on States' Part C and Part B (619) websites and state technical assistance programs mailing lists as well as other sources (e.g., NECTAC). The participants included 15 Part C and 8 Part B (619) technical assistance providers and 3 technical assistance providers who conducted training with both Part C

*CELLpapers* is a publication of the Center for Early Literacy Learning (CELL) funded by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs (Grant #H326B060010). CELL is a collaboration among the Orelena Hawks Puckett Institute, the American Institutes for Research, the PACER Center, and the A.J. Papanikou Center for Developmental Disabilities at the University of Connecticut Health Center. © Copyright 2010. Orelena Hawks Puckett Institute. All rights reserved.

and Part B (619) practitioners. There were 5 to 8 participants in each region of the country.

### Procedure

Participants were sent 15 *CELL* parent practice guides to review before a telephone interview was conducted 2 to 3 weeks after the practice guides were mailed. There were five practice guides for infants, five practice guides for toddlers, and five practice guides for preschoolers. The practice guides in each set included procedures and guidelines for literary rich environments, engaging children in book reading and story telling, rhyming and sound awareness, talking and listening, and drawing and writing. Table 1 includes the list of practices used in the study for each of these areas. The practice guides can be viewed at [www.earlyliteracylearning.org](http://www.earlyliteracylearning.org).

A letter accompanying the practice guides explained that the interview would focus on the technical assistance providers' judgments of the usefulness and acceptability of the practice guides and ask for their input about how to improve the practice guides or make them more useful for training either or both parents and practitioners to use the practices.

### Interview Protocol

The interview protocol included 4 questions. The first included four social validity items each rated on a 5-point scale ranging from *not-at-all* to *a great deal*. The second included one question asking the extent to which the technical

assistance providers would consider using the practice guides as part of training on literacy practices, rated on a 5-point scale ranging from *not-at-all* to *almost all the time*. The third included an open-ended question asking for suggestions, comments, and feedback about any aspect of the practice guides (content, coverage, format, etc.).

## RESULTS

### Quantitative Findings

A rating of 4 or 5 on the 5-point scale was used as the criterion for considering an indicator socially valid. The number and percentage of participants who gave these ratings on the four social validity items is shown in Table 2. The majority of participants judged the practice guides as socially valid. Participants indicated that the practice guides included activities that were important for early literacy learning and that end-users (either or both practitioners and parents) would find the practices easy to understand. The technical assistance providers also agreed that it would be worthwhile to train others to use the practices and that end-users would find the practices useful.

The extent to which the social validity ratings differed by technical assistance provider (Part C vs. Part B (619)) was determined by a between group nonparametric Wald-Wolfowitz test with the sum of the four social validity ratings as the dependent measure. There was a significant between group difference,  $Z = 2.13, p < .05$ . The means and stan-

Table 1  
*CELL Parent Practice Guides That Were the Focus of Analysis*

Literacy Area	Parent Practice Guides <sup>a</sup>		
	Infants	Toddlers	Preschoolers
Literary Rich Experiences	<i>World of Words</i>	<i>A Book of One's Own</i>	<i>Adventures in a Box</i>
Book Reading	<i>Baby's First Picture Books</i>	<i>I Wanna Be a Storyteller</i>	<i>Read it Again!</i>
Rhyming/Sound Awareness	<i>Prime Time Nursery Rhymes</i>	<i>Movin' and Groovin' Nursery Rhymes</i>	<i>Fun Finger Games</i>
Talking and Listening	<i>Babble On</i>	<i>Listen Up!</i>	<i>Talking Time</i>
Drawing and Writing	<i>Scribble Scribble</i>	<i>Get Write On It!</i>	<i>Write Right</i>

<sup>a</sup>The practice guides can be viewed at [www.earlyliteracylearning.org](http://www.earlyliteracylearning.org)

Table 2  
*Number and Percent of Technical Assistance Providers Rating the Practice Guides Socially Valid (N = 26)*

Social Validity Indicators	Number	Percent
Would be useful to those trained to use the practices	19	73
Worthwhile training others to use the practices	20	77
Trainees would find the practices easy to understand	23	88
Practices are important for promoting early literacy leaning	24	92
Total Social Validity Score	26	83

standard deviations for the Part C and Part B (619) technical assistance providers were, respectively, 17.44 (SD = 2.31) and 18.40 (SD = 2.51). The Cohen's *d* effect sizes for the between group difference was 0.40, indicating that the Part B (619) technical assistance providers judged the practice guides as more socially valid compared to the Part C technical assistance providers.

Table 3 shows the means, standard deviations, and Cohen's *d* effect sizes for the individual social validity terms for both the Part C and Part B (619) technical assistance providers. Follow-up analyses of the four social validity item scores showed that the average ratings for the two groups of technical assistance providers differed for only one item. The Part B (619) technical assistance providers indicated that the practice guides were more important for promoting early literacy learning compared to the Part C technical assistance providers,  $Z = 4.53, p < .01$ , Cohen's  $d = 0.60$ . Despite this difference, the mean ratings by both groups were quite high.

Whether variations in the social validity ratings influenced participants' likelihood of providing training on the *CELL* practices was assessed by (a) computing a total social validity rating score for each participant, (b) dividing the participants into high ( $N = 13$ ) and low ( $N = 13$ ) social validity groups using a median split, and (c) computing a nonparametric between group statistic and a Cohen's *d* effect size for the differences in the participants' scores in response to the question: "To what extent would you use the *CELL* practice guides as part of any technical assistance or training on early literacy learning?" The means and standard deviations were 4.29 (SD = 0.73) for the high social validity group and 3.42 (SD = 1.00) for the low social validity group. A between group nonparametric Wald-Wolfowitz test was significant,  $Z = 3.80, p < .001$ . The Cohen's *d* effect size for the between group difference was 1.00. The results showed that the more the practices were judged socially valid, the more the technical assistance providers indicated that they would provide technical assistance to or conduct training with others on how to use the *CELL* practices.

### Qualitative Findings

Examination of the participants' responses to the open-

ended question provides hints as to why the practice guides were considered socially valid and why some technical assistance providers indicated they might not offer training to parents or practitioners on how to use the practices. The responses also highlight the need to be clear about how the practice guides are intended to be used.

The things the participants liked the most were: (1) consistent format of the different practice guides, (2) examples illustrating the use of the practices, (3) cultural diversity represented in the practice guides, and (4) inclusion of children with disabilities. Most of the participants also indicated that the lay-out of the practice guides was user-friendly. The participants who had the highest social validity ratings almost uniformly commented that they liked the practice guide format.

A number of things were noted as concerns by some participants. The first was their perceptions that the practice guides were written at too high a reading level. The second was the perception that parents would not be able to use the practice guides without professional guidance. The versions of the practice guides the technical assistance providers reviewed were written at a 7<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> grade level. The practice guides are now written at a 4<sup>th</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> grade level (Dunst, Meter, Trivette, & Masiello, 2010). DVDs, Podcasts, and PowerPoint Presentations are being prepared to illustrate the practices for parents who may have difficulty reading the guides. It should be emphasized that the practice guides are intended to be used as part of practitioners and parents jointly planning and implementing the practices, although many parents report using the practice guides as posted on the *CELL* website (Trivette, Dunst, Masiello, Gorman, & Hamby, 2009).

A number of participants suggested that the practice guides be translated into Spanish. This is currently being done for most of the practice guides in both a written format and as Podcasts.

Several technical assistance providers remarked that they wanted more examples of practices for children with disabilities. The practice guides the participants reviewed are from one of three sets of practices being developed at *CELL*. A second set of practice guides with adaptations have been prepared to make it easier for young children with disabilities to participate in and benefit from early literacy learning

Table 3  
*C and Part B (619) Technical Assistance (TA) Providers Mean Ratings of the Social Validity of the Parent Practice Guides*

Social Validity Indicators	Part C TA Providers		Part B (619) TA Providers		Cohen's <i>d</i> Effect Size
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
Would be useful to those trained to use the practices	4.06	0.72	4.13	0.99	0.08
Worthwhile training others to use the practices	4.22	0.81	4.25	1.16	0.03
Trainees would find the practices easy to understand	4.50	0.86	4.38	0.74	0.15
Practices are important for promoting early literacy learning	4.67	0.69	5.00	0.00	0.60

activities. The third set of practice guides are ones for children with specific kinds of disabilities that involve alternative types of literacy skills (e.g., Braille, Sign Language).

## DISCUSSION

The findings reported in this *CELLpaper* extend findings from other social validity studies by showing that the likelihood of Part C early intervention and Part B (619) preschool special education technical assistance providers training parents and practitioners to use the *CELL* practice guides was related to how socially valid they judged the practices. The findings add to our understanding of factors that influence technical assistance providers' provision of training to parents and practitioners. In a previous *CELL* study, we found that technical assistance providers thought early literacy practices were important for young children with disabilities, but they did not provide training on how to use those practices (Trivette, Morgan, Masiello, Robyak, & Dunst, 2007). At least one reason for this is that early childhood professionals often do not see themselves as having the knowledge or skills to implement early literacy practices (Dunst & Bruder, 2007).

As part of training technical assistance providers to train parents and practitioners to use *CELL* practices (Dunst, Trivette, Masiello, & McInerney, 2006), a number of things have emerged that make clear the conditions under which training is likely to be successful. The extent to which the technical assistance providers consider early literacy learning practices appropriate for young children with disabilities influences their commitment to training. Another factor is their understanding of what literacy learning means for infants, toddlers, and preschoolers. If they interpret literacy to mean more traditional reading and writing instruction, they are less likely to "buy into" training others to use early literacy learning practices. A third factor is the technical assistance providers' judgments of the social validity of early literacy practices as found in the study described in this *CELLpaper*.

A lesson learned from *CELL* research and practice is that enough time needs to be spent "up front" with technical assistance providers to obtain information about their beliefs and attitudes about early literacy learning and their knowledge and skills in implementing early literacy practices. This kind of information provides a good foundation for where to begin working with the providers and, armed with that information, training can proceed in an individualized and responsive manner.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Appreciation is extended to the technical assistance providers who participated in the study and provided feedback and comments on the *CELL* practice guides.

## AUTHORS

Carl J. Dunst, Ph.D., is Co-Principal Investigator at *CELL* and Co-Director of the Orelena Hawks Puckett Institute in Asheville and Morganton, North Carolina. Tracy Masiello, Ph.D., and Jennifer Swanson, Ph.D., are Research Scientists, and Diana Meter, B.A., and Ellen Gorman, M.Ed., are Research Assistants at the Puckett Institute.

## REFERENCES

- Dunst, C. J., & Bruder, M. B. (2007). Practitioner confidence and competence in early literacy learning practices. *CELLpapers*, 2(1). Available at [http://www.earlyliteracylearning.org/cellpapers/cellpapers\\_v2\\_n1.pdf](http://www.earlyliteracylearning.org/cellpapers/cellpapers_v2_n1.pdf).
- Dunst, C. J., Meter, D., Trivette, C. M., & Masiello, T. L. (2010). Development and readability of the Center for Early Literacy Learning parent practice guides. *CELLpapers*, 5(2).
- Dunst, C. J., Pace, J., & Hamby, D. W. (2007). *Evaluation of the Games for Growing tool kit for promoting early contingency learning* (Winterberry Research Perspectives Vol. 1, No. 6). Asheville, NC: Winterberry Press.
- Dunst, C. J., Trivette, C. M., Masiello, T., & McInerney, M. (2006). Scaling up early childhood intervention literacy learning practices. *CELLpapers*, 1(2), 1-10. Available at [http://www.earlyliteracylearning.org/cellpapers/cellpapers\\_v1\\_n2.pdf](http://www.earlyliteracylearning.org/cellpapers/cellpapers_v1_n2.pdf).
- Foster, S. L., & Mash, E. J. (1999). Assessing social validity in clinical treatment research issues and procedures. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 67, 308-319.
- Miltenberger, R. G. (1990). Assessment of treatment acceptability: A review of the literature. *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education*, 10(3), 24-38.
- Trivette, C. M., Dunst, C. J., Hamby, D. W., & Pace, J. (2007). *Evaluation of the Tune In and Respond tool kit for promoting child cognitive and social-emotional development* (Winterberry Research Perspectives Vol. 1, No. 7). Asheville, NC: Winterberry Press.
- Trivette, C. M., Dunst, C. J., Masiello, T., Gorman, E., & Hamby, D. W. (2009). Social validity of the Center for Early Literacy Learning parent practice guides. *CELLpapers*, 4(1), 1-4.
- Trivette, C. M., Morgan, K., Masiello, T., Robyak, A., & Dunst, C. J. (2007). Desired versus actual literacy learning practices in early intervention and preschool special education. *CELLpapers*, 2(2). Available at [http://www.earlyliteracylearning.org/cellpapers/cellpapers\\_v2\\_n2.pdf](http://www.earlyliteracylearning.org/cellpapers/cellpapers_v2_n2.pdf).
- Wolf, M. M. (1978). Social validity: The case for subjective measurement, or how applied behavior analysis is finding its heart. *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis*, 11, 203-214.