

Washington Office of Superintendent of
PUBLIC INSTRUCTION

Washington State Transition to Kindergarten and Kindergarten Guide



TRANSITION TO KINDERGARTEN AND KINDERGARTEN GUIDE

Learning All Day Through Play

--- A Guide for Educators and Administrators

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Please find all acknowledgements at the end of this document.



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Executive Summary	7
Introduction	8
How to Use This Guide	9
Kindergarten	11
Transition to Kindergarten	12
CHAPTER 1: DEVELOPMENTALLY APPROPRIATE PRACTICE (DAP)	14
Chapter One Key Objectives	14
Developmentally Appropriate Practice	15
• DAP Informs Every Aspect of Our Work	17
DAP and Equity	18
DAP and Child Development	20
DAP and Washington State Early Learning and Development Guidelines	21
Learning and Developmental Standards	29
DAP and How Children Learn.....	31
DAP and Relevant and Meaningful Learning Experiences	31
DAP and Social Interactions	32
DAP and Language Development	33
DAP and Integrating Content	34
DAP and The Importance and Benefits of Play	35
DAP Reflection Questions	39
CHAPTER 2: LEARNING ENVIRONMENT	40
Part One: Classroom Community, Child Guidance	40
Classroom Community Key Objectives	40
Classroom Community	41
• Developing Relationships	41
• Student Autonomy	42
• Self-Motivation	43
• Social-Emotional Learning	44
• Friendship Skills	44
• Emotional Literacy	45
• Emotional Regulation and Calming Down	46
• Problem Solving	47
• Child Guidance	48
• Behavior Expectations and Classroom Rules	50
• Handling Disruptions	52
• Anti-Bias Education and Classroom Community	54

Part Two: Physical Space	56
Physical Space Key Objectives	56
Classroom Layout	57
• Large Group Meeting Area	58
• Centers	59
• Block Area	61
• Literacy Area	63
• Dramatic Play Area	65
• Math and Manipulative Area	67
• Art Area	68
• Science/Discovery Area	70
• Water/Sensory Area	71
• Break Area	72
Managing Centers	72
Visuals	74
• Classroom Decor and Wall Space	74
• Language-Rich Environment	76
Materials	77
• Open-Ended Materials	77
Outdoor Play	78
Reflection Questions	79
<u>CHAPTER 3 INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICES</u>	80
Chapter Three Key Objectives	80
Teacher's Role	81
• Intentional Teaching	81
• Implicit Bias and Teaching	83
• Language and Teacher-Child Interactions	83
Strategies for Increasing Language Experiences	84
• Model Conversations with Rich Vocabulary	84
• Ask Open-Ended Questions	84
• Plan Peer Conversations	85
Learning Experiences	85
• Purposeful Play	86
• Teacher's Role in Play	88
• Indicators of Playful Learning	89
Play in the Classroom	91
• Plan, Do, Reflect	92
• Stations and Centers	95
• Stations	96
• Centers (aka Free Choice or Free Play Centers)	99
• Small Group	100

Whole Group	100
Direct and Explicit Instruction.....	101
• Direct Instruction.....	101
• Explicit Instruction.....	102
Reflection Questions.....	104
<u>CHAPTER 4: CLASSROOM STRUCTURES</u>	106
Chapter 4 Key Objectives	106
Schedules	108
Visual Prompts	111
• TK and Kindergarten Schedules	112
• Next Steps	112
• Sample Schedules	114
Routines	119
• Next Steps	120
Transitions	121
Reflection Questions	123
<u>CHAPTER 5: INCLUSIONARY PRACTICES</u>	124
Chapter 5 Key Objectives	124
High-Quality Inclusion in the Classroom	128
Inclusion Reflection Questions	129
Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT)	129
• Individualist and Collectivist Perspectives	132
CRT Reflection Questions	133
Universal Design for Learning (UDL)	134
• Learner Variability	134
UDL Reflection Questions	137
Multi-Tiered Systems of Support	137
• The Pyramid Model and MTSS	138
• UDL and MTSS	139
Multilingual Education	140
• Supporting Multilingual Learners (MLL)	140
• WIDA	141
• Dual Language Education	141
MLL Reflection Questions.....	142
<u>CHAPTER 6: INTENTIONAL FAMILY ENGAGEMENT</u>	143
Chapter 6 Key Objectives	143
What is Family Engagement?	145
Building Relationships	146
• Conferences.....	147

Moving Toward Intentional Family Engagement Strategies	148
Family Volunteers	151
Families of Children with Disabilities	152
Multilingual Learners	153
Funds of Knowledge	153
Communication	153
• Methods of Communication	154
• Communication Missteps	156
• Communication Apps	157
Learning at Home	157
• Homework	158
Reflection Questions	159
<u>CHAPTER 7: ASSESSMENT, OBSERVATION AND DOCUMENTATION</u>	160
Chapter 7 Key Objectives	160
Washington Kindergarten Inventory of Developing Skills (WaKIDS)	161
• Why WaKIDS	163
High-Quality Observation and Documentation	163
• Objective Observations	164
• Subjective Documentation	164
• Context and Details	164
Observation, Documentation, and You	166
Observation Basics	167
• When and Where	167
• What	167
• Types of Documentation	168
• Documentation Storage	169
• Portfolios	169
Using Data to Inform Instruction	170
Reflection Questions	171
Acknowledgments	172
References	174
Legal Notice	188

Executive Summary

A strong start to school sets the stage for a child's lifelong success. In Washington state, Transition to Kindergarten (TK) programs and high-quality kindergarten experiences are essential strategies to close opportunity gaps, support early learning, and strengthen family engagement from the outset of a child's education journey.

Research consistently shows that early education investments yield significant returns in student achievement, graduation rates, and lifetime earnings, while reducing costs associated with remediation, social services, and the justice system. Washington's TK programs serve children who have been identified through a screening process to be in need of additional preparation to be successful kindergarten students in the following school year. These programs provide a bridge for children who may face barriers to traditional preschool access, ensuring they enter kindergarten prepared to thrive. Kindergarten itself—particularly when it is developmentally appropriate, culturally responsive, and aligned with early learning standards—is a critical year for reinforcing foundational skills in literacy, numeracy, and social-emotional development. Access to full-day kindergarten, now universal in Washington, enhances equity across communities and supports working families.

Continued investment and implementation of TK programs and strengthening the kindergarten experience are vital to Washington's broader educational goals, including improving third-grade reading outcomes, promoting equitable access to high-quality early learning, and ultimately preparing a skilled, resilient future workforce.

Washington's commitment to early learning, beginning with robust transition supports and quality kindergarten programs, is essential to ensuring every child—regardless of background—has the opportunity to succeed.



Introduction

In the continually evolving field of early childhood education, the pursuit of optimal practices in early learning through kindergarten education remains a dynamic and ongoing endeavor. Within this context, we present the updated edition of the Washington State Transition to Kindergarten and Kindergarten Guide: Learning All Day Through Play Guide for Educators and Administrators. Conceived in 2016 and originally named the Washington State Full-day Kindergarten Guide, it served as a foundational resource to assist Local Education Agencies (LEAs) in establishing their inaugural full-day kindergarten programs when LEAs embarked on the ambitious journey of transitioning from half-day to full-day kindergarten.

Presently, the educational landscape has transformed. Full-day kindergarten is now a reality in all LEAs, and Transition to Kindergarten (TK) classrooms have become an integral part of the P–3 system. New teaching methods and curricular changes underscore the importance of high-quality early education.

Considering these transformative developments, the Washington State Transition to Kindergarten and Kindergarten Guide for Educators and Administrators has undergone revisions and updates to align with the evolving needs and aspirations of educators, administrators, and policymakers. This volume is a comprehensive guide to both kindergarten and TK classrooms, integrating research and practical insights into each respective grade.

This revised edition can be utilized as a tool for educators, administrators, and all stakeholders committed to nurturing our youngest learners' intellectual and social development. Together, we continue to shape the future of kindergarten and TK education, establishing the groundwork for a lifetime of learning and success for the children entrusted to our care.



How to Use this Guide



This guide's primary purpose is to delineate and promote evidence-based practices for effectively implementing developmentally appropriate and high-quality TK and kindergarten programs. In addition to serving as a comprehensive guide, it may also facilitate professional learning community (PLC) discussions, and act as a catalyst for actions aimed at ensuring both TK and kindergarten classrooms provide conducive environments for teaching and learning. Educators and administrators may opt to study and leverage individual chapters, one-at-a-time, as guides for facilitating PLC discussions and general program improvement.

The primary intended audience are TK and kindergarten teachers, specialists, paraprofessionals, support staff, instructional coaches, and educational administrators. It aims to assist a diverse range of users by providing evidence-based practices applicable to various roles. This guide does not address specific curriculum selections. Each LEA has the autonomy to determine its own guaranteed and viable curriculum, while this guide focuses on highlighting research based, best practices within TK and kindergarten programs.

Call-out boxes are throughout this guidebook:

Also embedded throughout each chapter are links to resources and videos to extend learning and deepen practice.

At the end of each chapter, find reflection questions.



Administrators:

Tips, resources, and suggestions for LEA/building administrators.



Classroom Tips:

Strategies and ideas to implement in the classroom.



Think About It:

Ideas or research that may expand previous understandings.



WaKIDS Connection:

Direct correlation between practice and WaKIDS.

Definitions:

- **Local Education Agency (LEA):** As defined by [WAC 392-172A-01115](#), is a local entity responsible for education, encompassing entities such as school districts, county offices of education, tribal schools, and charter schools.
- **P-3 system, or Preschool through Third Grade alignment:** is a comprehensive approach to early childhood education that emphasizes the importance of aligning policies and practices from **preschool through third grade**, aiming to improve the quality and coherence of children's learning experiences and support their transitions.

TK programs utilizing Title I funds or implementing blended ECEAP/TK classrooms:

TK programs utilizing Title I funds - ESEA section 1112(c)(7) requires that early education services provided prior to kindergarten entry and funded using Title I funds must comply with the Head Start Program Performance Standards (HSPPS). This guidance includes practices that satisfy these requirements. There are specific call outs regarding professional development and the screening and assessing of children with disabilities. Please find more information in:

- [Supporting High-Quality Preschool with Title I Funds: Guidance to Local Educational Agencies and Schools on Implementing the Required Head Start Program Performance Standards for Title I-Funded Preschool Programs](#)

- [Head Start Performance Program Standards](#)
- [Serving Preschool Children Through Title I, Part A of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, as Amended \(Title I Preschool Guidance\)](#)

TK programs blended with the Early Childhood Education Assistance Program (ECEAP) must adhere to the [ECEAP Performance Standards](#). Please note, ECEAP funds may never be consolidated in schoolwide programs. ECEAP funds may only be used for ECEAP enrolled students.

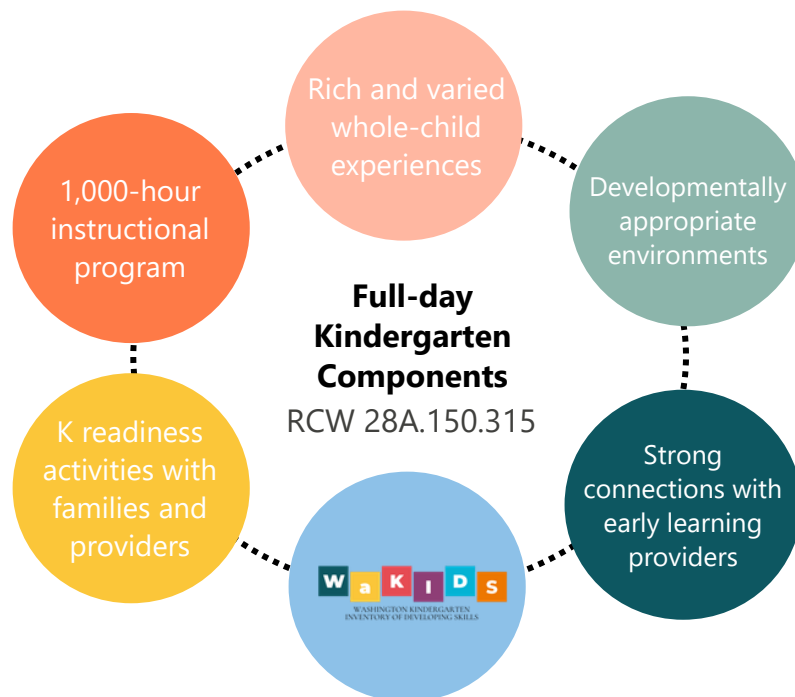
Programs utilizing both funding streams should strive to meet the highest standards of the two programs.



Kindergarten

In 2007, the Washington State Legislature funded full-day kindergarten for all children, establishing statutory requirements ([RCW 28A.150.315](#)) to ensure high-quality programs. Key components include:

- At least 1,000 hours of instruction.
- A rich curriculum covering academics, communication, arts, science, physical education, social-emotional skills, and hands-on experiences.
- Developmentally appropriate, creative learning environments.
- Strong connections with early learning providers and families.
- Participation in readiness activities and administration of the Washington Kindergarten Inventory of Developing Skills (WaKIDS). [RCW 28A.655.080](#) requires schools replace administration of other assessments required by LEAs with WaKIDS. Other assessments may only be administered if seeking information not covered by the WaKIDS.



This legislation marked a major milestone in providing equitable, comprehensive kindergarten education across Washington.



Transition to Kindergarten

In May 2023, the Washington State Legislature passed [HB 1550](#), legislatively establishing and authorizing the Transition to Kindergarten (TK) program for children who are at least 4 years old by August 31 and have been identified through a screening process to need additional preparation to be successful kindergarten students in the following school year. LEAs implementing TK programs must adhere to the [TK Minimum Standards and Requirements](#).

Program Goals and Objectives

In partnership with community-based early learning programs, LEAs offer TK to provide early intervention for children with complex learning and developmental needs shaped by multiple, overlapping factors (e.g., disability, language background, and access to early learning). LEAs may design TK programs that are responsive to community priorities identified through a local needs assessment. Examples include:

- Supporting the development of social, emotional, and academic skills for children who, based on LEA data, would benefit from an additional year of learning before kindergarten entry.
- Expanding access to a continuum of inclusive placement options for children with disabilities.
- Implementing dual language programs to provide multilingual learners with an early foundation prior to entering kindergarten.
- Serving children whose families may have limited access to affordable early learning opportunities, including those not eligible for [Working Connections Child Care](#) (WCCC), [ECEAP](#), or [Head Start](#).
- Responding to community needs and family preferences.
- Attracting and retaining families within the LEA, contributing to stable or increased student enrollment. This can be particularly important when facing declining enrollment.



- Providing an integrated early learning environment for future students. LEAs that use braided funding may create blended classrooms, including ECEAP and Head Start students, resulting in more socioeconomically diverse learning environments where children can build positive relationships.



Learn More: Transition to Kindergarten

Visit the [OSPI Transition to Kindergarten website](#).

Subsequent chapters will explore specific strategies and techniques to enhance the TK and kindergarten experience for educators, students, and families, striving to create a foundation for lifelong learning and success.



CHAPTER

1

Chapter One Key Learning Objectives

After completing this chapter, readers will be able to:

1. **Describe** the concept of Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP) and its role in early childhood education.
2. **Explain** how knowledge of child development, evidence-based practices, and family and cultural context inform developmentally appropriate teaching.
3. **Identify** the three core considerations of DAP: understanding child development, recognizing what is individually appropriate, and considering what is contextually meaningful.
4. **Recognize** key principles of DAP, including the integrated nature of development, the importance of all developmental domains, and the role of play in learning.
5. **Explain** how DAP supports equity by addressing barriers and ensuring each child receives the supports needed to reach their full potential.
6. **Describe** how play-based learning supports children's exploration, problem-solving, social development, and engagement with classroom routines and materials.



RCW 28A.150.315 Requirement: Provide a curriculum that offers a rich, varied set of experiences that assist students in acquiring social and emotional skills, including successful participation in learning activities as an individual and as part of a group.

Establish learning environments that are developmentally appropriate and promote creativity.

TPEP Criteria Centering instruction on high expectations for student achievement.

Recognizing individual student learning needs and developing strategies to address those needs.

Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP)

DAP is a cornerstone of early childhood education, promoting high-quality learning through a strengths-based, play-based approach. Defined by NAEYC as methods supporting each child's optimal development (2020), DAP is foundational to Washington's kindergarten and TK programs. Rooted in teachers' expertise, it integrates knowledge of child development, evidence-based practices, and the value of culture and family. This guide expands on these principles throughout.

Why DAP is important

DAP fosters a shared understanding of best practices among educators, emphasizing the uniqueness of each child within their family, community, and cultural context. Teachers using DAP create responsive, play-based learning environments that actively engage children. These classrooms promote exploration and interaction to support social-emotional, physical, language, cognitive, literacy, scientific, and mathematical development.



Administrators:

For more on DAP, review the [NAEYC DAP Position Statement](#) and [The Power of Playful Learning in the Early Childhood Setting](#) for core considerations, guidelines, and implementation recommendations. Additionally, [A Principal's Guide to Early Learning and the Early Grades \(Pre-K–3rd Grade\)](#), published by the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) and the National P3 Center, provides foundational information and six leadership competencies for early learning. Adjusting teacher evaluation materials to reflect these indicators may be beneficial. Start with the Executive Summary to strengthen your P–3 program. Also see NAESP's article [Promoting Purposeful Play](#).

The practices outlined in this guide stem from extensive research spanning decades on child development, ensuring a well-informed approach. These findings culminate in NAEYC's (2022) three core considerations of DAP to inform teacher decision-making:



1. **Knowing about child development and how this understanding applies in multiple contexts.**
2. **Knowing what is individually appropriate**
3. **Knowing what is contextually meaningful.**

The following table is an excerpt from [NAEYC's Principles of Child Development and Learning and Implications that Inform Practice](#). For a deeper dive, consider reading the [NAEYC DAP Position Statement](#) (2020).



NAEYC Principles of Child Development and Learning and Implications That Inform Practice

Principle 1	Development and learning are dynamic processes that reflect the complex interplay between a child's biological characteristics and the environment, each shaping the other as well as future patterns of growth.
Principle 2	All domains of child development—physical development, cognitive development, social and emotional development, and linguistic development (including bilingual and multilingual development), as well as approaches to learning—are important: each domain supports and is supported by others.
Principle 3	Play promotes joyful learning that fosters self-regulation, language, cognitive and social competencies, and content knowledge across disciplines. Play is essential for all children, from birth through age 8.
Principle 4	Although general progressions of development and learning can be identified, variations due to cultural contexts, experiences, and individual differences must also be considered.
Principle 5	Children are active learners from birth, constantly taking in and organizing information to create meaning through their relationships, their interactions with their environment, and their overall experiences.
Principle 6	Children's motivation to learn increases when their learning environment fosters their sense of belonging, purpose, and agency. Curricula and teaching methods build on each child's assets by connecting their experiences in the school or learning environment to their home and community settings.



Principle 7

Children learn in an integrated fashion that cuts across academic disciplines or subject areas. Because the foundations of subject-area knowledge are established in early childhood, educators need subject-area knowledge, an understanding of the learning progressions within each subject area, and pedagogical knowledge about teaching each subject area's content effectively.

Principle 8

Development and learning advance when children are challenged to achieve at a level beyond their current mastery and when they have many opportunities to reflect on and practice newly acquired skills.

Principle 9

Used responsibly and intentionally, technology and interactive media can be valuable tools for supporting children's development and learning.

DAP Informs Every Aspect of Our Work

DAP guides what and how we teach, our interactions with children and their families, the classroom environment, the materials we use, the schedule and routines, and how we

monitor and assess children's progress. Please read on to see how DAP influences the educational journey of young children.





DAP and Equity

The [National Equity Project](#) describes educational equity as ensuring that each student receives what they need to reach their full academic and social potential. Similarly, the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) defines equity as the development, strengthening, and support of

fairness in procedures, systems, and resource distribution to create equitable opportunities for everyone. Equity also focuses on addressing the barriers that historically and currently marginalized groups have encountered in pursuing education.

EQUALITY:

Everyone gets the same – regardless if it's needed or right for them.



EQUITY:

Everyone gets what they need – understanding the barriers, circumstances, and conditions.



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OSPI's Equity Statement

Each student, family, and community possess strengths and cultural knowledge that benefits their peers, educators, and schools.

Ensuring educational equity:

- Goes beyond equality; it requires education leaders to examine the ways current policies and practices result in disparate outcomes for our students of color, students living in poverty, students receiving special education and English Learner services, students who identify as LGBTQ+, and highly mobile student populations.
- Requires education leaders to develop an understanding of historical contexts; engage students, families, and community representatives as partners in decision-making; and actively dismantle systemic barriers, replacing them with policies and practices that ensure all students have access to the instruction and support they need to succeed in our schools.



To support equity in the classroom, teachers should engage in ongoing reflection on their instructional practices and the experiences children bring with them to learning environments. Reflective practice helps educators recognize how classroom structures, expectations, and interactions may shape children's opportunities to learn across differences such as ability, language, culture, gender, and socioeconomic background.

Before creating inclusive and equitable learning environments, teachers should engage in thoughtful reflection on their own culture, beliefs, and values. This process supports an appreciation of diversity and strengthens educators' ability to design learning experiences that honor each child's individuality and promote a sense of belonging (NAEYC, 2019).



Administrators:

In pursuit of equity in schools, the National Equity Project outlines the following three actions:

1. Ensuring equally high outcomes for all participants in our educational system; removing the predictability of success or failures that currently correlates with any social or cultural factor.
2. Interrupting inequitable practices, examining biases, and creating inclusive multicultural school environments for adults and children.
3. Discovering and cultivating every human's unique gifts, talents, and interests.

Learn more by exploring [Five Equity Practices for Principals](#) (Gooden, 2021), [School Leaders as Equity Leaders](#), and [OSPI Equity and Civil Rights Resources](#).

Achieving educational equity means removing barriers and increasing access. To enroll in kindergarten, a child must be five years old by August 31, **with no additional requirements**. Schools must be ready to welcome all children and support them in their educational journey.

The following resources come from the [Pyramid Model Equity Coaching Guide](#) (The National Center for Pyramid Model Innovation, 2022). Early learning staff can find questions and tips to reflect upon their practice, address implicit bias, and develop culturally responsive practices:

Self-Reflection

- [Every individual is rooted in culture](#)
- [Culturally Relevant and Diverse Programming Examines and Challenges Institutional and Personal Biases.](#)
- [Mindful Reflection as a Process for Developing Culturally Responsive Practices.](#)
- [Harvard Implicit Bias Test and FAQ.](#)
- [NPR Discussion of Implicit Bias in ECE.](#)
- [Yale Study: Implicit Bias May Explain High Suspension and Expulsion Rates in Preschool.](#)

For TK students, eligibility involves screening to identify those needing extra preparation for kindergarten.



Watch and Learn

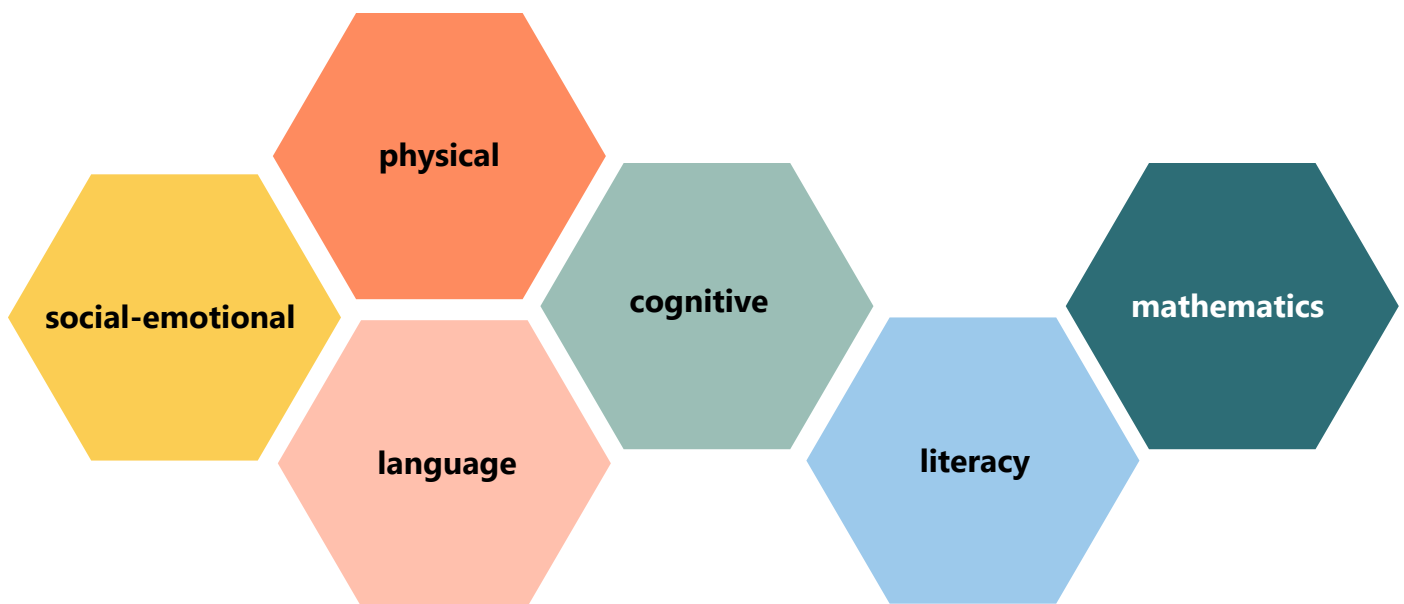
Watch Rita Pierson's inspirational Ted Talk, [Every Child Needs a Champion](#) (7:44 minutes). As you watch, think about the role you play in a child's life.

DAP and Child Development

Child development varies, with each child being unique. Educators should know developmental milestones and understand the children they teach. These elements should inform classroom planning, schedules, curriculum, and teaching methods. A child-centered approach and knowledge of these milestones help promote

optimal growth and learning.

This guide explores six areas of child development and learning that include stages of skills, knowledge, and behavior through which children progress. The six areas of development and learning are:



These areas of learning and development are also used in the WaKIDS Whole-Child Assessment.

Children in kindergarten and TK, aged 4–7, undergo significant growth and development. This critical period sees diverse progress among children in the same classroom, as each brings unique experiences to their learning environment. Specific practices and systems to support this are found later in the guide.

A child's development is influenced by their social, cultural, familial, economic, and environmental contexts. Factors like parenting styles, socioeconomic status, and family dynamics affect their security and emotional regulation. Cultural norms shape children's beliefs and behaviors, while community resources and educational opportunities impact cognitive development and social skills. Understanding these factors is crucial for supporting child development.



WaKIDS Connection:

The six areas of development and learning are the same areas observed in the WaKIDS Whole-child Assessment. Additionally, the GOLD® progressions are excellent visuals of child development. Use the progression to scaffold skills, knowledge, and abilities up and down.



DAP and Washington State Early Learning and Development Guidelines

The [Washington Early Learning and Developmental Guidelines](#) help families and educators understand child development from birth to third grade. The guidelines cover areas such as relationships, health, literacy, and learning, while recognizing individual differences among children. They also highlight common characteristics of TK and kindergarten students, supporting teachers in tailoring instruction. Because developmental milestones vary, educators are encouraged to support interconnected areas of growth to enhance learning.



Social-Emotional Domain

Ages 4 to 5 (Transition to Kindergarten)

- Take pride in own family composition and interest in others. Understand that families are diverse.
- Recognize and respect similarities and differences between self and other people, such as gender, race, special needs, cultures, languages, communities, and family structures.
- Describe their interests and likes.
- Choose activities to do alone or with others.
- Release emotional tensions in the arms or presence of a caring adult.
- Associate emotions with words and facial expressions.
- Express one or two feelings in role-playing life experiences.
- Anticipate consequences of own behavior. With help, consider possibilities and plan effective approaches to problems.
- Begin to enjoy games where the child must change behavior in response to changing directions.
- Be curious and interested in trying things out.
- Stay with a task for more than five minutes and attempt to solve problems that arise.
- Use imagination to create a variety of ideas.
- Enjoy pretend play.
- Use play to explore and understand life experiences and roles.
- Recognize when making mistakes and fix these errors during a task.
- Seek emotional support from caregivers.

Age 5 to 6 (Kindergarten)

- Take pride in and know own ethnic/cultural heritage. Recognize different ethnic/cultural groups.
- Identify family customs and traditions. Help younger children do things they cannot yet do by themselves.
- Enjoy joining friends in music and activities from their cultural traditions.
- Identify and express their own preferences, thoughts, and feelings, if appropriate for the child's culture.
- Be aware of gender.
- Express what they like and do not like.
- Identify emotions and use words to describe them.
- Express a range of emotions appropriately, such as excitement, happiness, sadness, and fear.
- Resist impulses and choose appropriate behavior with little adult direction.
- Make and follow, some of the time, multi-step plans for completing a task.
- Be able to wait for a turn, a treat, etc.
- Adapt to new environments by behaving and displaying emotions in expected ways.
- Change actions to meet what is expected in different settings and conditions, such as taking shoes off at home, leaving them on at school, and putting boots on in the rain.
- Apply familiar accepted behaviors in new but similar situations, such as using a quiet voice indoors.
- Begin to recognize how their own actions affect others.
- Be eager to learn about and talk about a range of topics, ideas, and tasks.
- Be curious and seek new information.
- Be flexible and inventive in approaching tasks and activities.

Social-Emotional Domain

Ages 4 to 5 (Transition to Kindergarten)

- Understand that adults may want the child to do something different than what the child wants to do.
- Play with children the same and of different ages.
- Initiate an activity with another child.
- Invite other children to join groups or other activities.
- Make and follow plans for games with other children.
- Adjust behavior to different settings, sometimes with reminders.
- Be able to think about behavior, being cooperative and non-hurtful. Able to talk about the best ways to do things.
- Cooperate with other children, share, and take turns.
- Connect emotions with facial expressions.
- Care about other children when they are hurt or upset. Describe other children's thoughtful behaviors.
- Listen to what other children want and make plans that take these desires into account.
- Wait for a turn without getting angry or grabbing. May lose interest in the object or activity before getting a turn.
- Ask for help from another child or an adult to solve a problem.
- Make decisions and solve problems with other children, with adult help.
- Observe that others may have ideas or feelings that differ from the child's own.
- Be able to talk about ways to solve a problem or help another child, and keep in mind the personality and preferences of that child.

Age 5 to 6 (Kindergarten)

- Stay focused on an activity, even when facing challenges.
- Return to activities after interruptions, including after several days.
- Find more than one way to complete a task.
- Make plans and follow through.
- Develop ways to remember information.
- Join with other children in shared interests.
- Able to express themselves in new settings.
- Able to adapt to a larger group environment.
- Accept new people who are trusted adults.
- Make connections with other children in different settings.
- Share suggestions for what to do in play.
- Develop relationships with other children and with adults.
- Show understanding of others' feelings.
- Listen to the viewpoints of others.
- Able to allow for personal space and respect for others' space.
- Help, share, take turns, and cooperate in a group.
- Include children who are of a different gender or ethnic background, speak a different language, or have different needs.
- Accept the consequences of their own actions.
- Behave in accepted ways in different settings.
- Make decisions and solve problems with other children.
- Resolve some conflicts with peers without adult help.
- Listen to others' ideas and wants, share own ideas and wants, consider what is fair, and make suggestions for different ways to resolve conflicts.
- Understand the concept that sometimes they are the leader and sometimes they are the follower.

Physical Motor and Movement Domain

Ages 4 to 5 (Transition to Kindergarten)

- Move with purpose from one place to another using the whole body. This might include walking, running, marching, jumping, hopping, or climbing. For children using mobility devices, skills might include steering into different spaces.
- Use both hands and/or body to catch or trap an object. Throw with purpose. Kick an object.
- Show good balance and coordination, such as walking on a wide beam or line.
- Enjoy challenging themselves to try new and increasingly difficult activities.
- Open and close blunt scissors with one hand and cut a straight line.
- Show increasing skill with small materials. Screw and unscrew jar lids and turn door handles. Use zippers, buttons, and snaps. String large beads; fold paper; open and close containers.
- Work puzzles of up to 10 pieces.
- Write some letters or numbers.
- Spend time practicing skills that are difficult. Be aware of what they find difficult and try to do better.
- Delight in playing with materials of different textures (such as sand, water, fabric) and conditions (wet, dry, warm, cold).

Age 5 to 6 (Kindergarten)

- Show continuous growth in movement skills, including jumping, galloping, and skipping.
- Play safely in group and individual movement settings.
- Recognize basics about how the human body works, such as the five senses and main body parts.
- Understand how to respect others when playing active games and follow rules.
- Enjoy activities that require attention to form, such as yoga, karate, sports, gymnastics, or dance.
- Throw with aim. Catch an object with both hands.
- Help prepare meals and with tasks such as stirring and kneading.
- Use the hands and fingers in a variety of ways, such as stringing beads, holding writing utensils effectively, connecting blocks, and working puzzles.
- Roll clay or dough into "snakes."
- Be interested in working to do things "right" and will practice skills for short periods of time.
- Use all the senses to observe and explore.

Cognitive Domain

Ages 4 to 5 (Transition to Kindergarten)

- Ask adults questions to get information (as appropriate to the family's culture).
- Describe likes and interests.
- Apply new information or words to an activity or interaction.
- Build on and adapt to what the child learned before.
- Be able to explain what they have done and why, including any changes made to their plans.
- Seek to understand cause and effect.
- Understand the ideas of "same" and "different."
- Recognize objects, places, and ideas by symbols.
- Name more than three colors.
- Group some everyday objects that go together.
- Predict what comes next in the day when there is a consistent schedule.
- Ask questions and identify ways to find answers. Try out these activities and think about what to do next to learn more.
- Predict what will happen. Consider whether the predictions were right and explain why or why not.

Age 5 to 6 (Kindergarten)

- Learn best through active exploration of concrete materials (blocks, paint, etc.).
- Make plans for this exploration. Talk about what they have learned from the activity and what they would like to do next.
- Understand that things are not always what they appear to be (for example, a sponge may look like a rock).
- Explore different environments inside and outside.
- Make observations and ask questions. Identify different ways to find answers. Try out these activities and think about what to do next to learn more.

Language Domain

Ages 4 to 5 (Transition to Kindergarten)

- Know and use several hundred words in their home language. Use new words on their own.
- Use words to describe actions and emotions.
- Talk in sentences of five or six words.
- Know when it is appropriate to ask questions and whom to ask. Ask questions to get information and clarification.
- Remember and follow directions involving two or three steps, including steps that are not related.
- Remember all parts and respond correctly to a request.
- Tell some details of a recent event in sequence.
- Tell a short make-believe story with adult help.
- Listen to others and respond in a group discussion for a short period.
- Remember what was said and gain information through listening.
- State their own point of view, likes and dislikes, using words, gestures, and/or pictures.
- Join in and make up songs, chants, rhymes, and games that play with the sounds of language.
- Sing a song or say a poem from memory.

Age 5 to 6 (Kindergarten)

- Listen attentively and observe carefully.
- Understand, remember, and follow multi-step directions.
- Share their own ideas.
- Speak clearly in complete sentences.
- Retell familiar stories.
- Take part in classroom conversations and follow rules for discussions.
- Speak clearly to express thoughts, feelings, and ideas, including descriptions of familiar people, places, things, and events.
- Ask and answer questions about key details in stories or other information read or presented aloud.
- Understand and use question words in discussions.
- Take turns speaking and listening in conversations. Remember and respond to what is said.
- Have a tough time, when excited, waiting for a turn in conversation, or staying with someone else's topic.
- Increase vocabulary.

Literacy Domain

Ages 4 to 5 (Transition to Kindergarten)

- Know some basic rules of grammar (such as correctly using “me” and “I”).
- Understand that alphabet letters are a special kind of picture and that they have names. Begin to identify individual letters of the alphabet (or characters of their home language) in text.
- Understand which symbols are letters and which are numbers.
- Identify three or more letters with their sound at the beginning of a word.
- Recognize some signs and symbols in the classroom and community and use them for information.
- Begin to recite some words in familiar books from memory.
- Know that print has meaning.
- Recognize their own name in print.
- Begin to understand the order in which a page is read.
- Tell what is going to happen next in a story. Make up an ending.
- Identify a variety of printed materials.
- Use actions to show ideas from stories, signs, pictures, etc.
- Retell more complicated, familiar stories from memory.
- Make marks, scribbles, or letter-like shapes and identify them as words. Use pretend writing activities during play.
- Use letter-like symbols to make lists, letters, and stories or to label pictures.
- Attempt to copy one or more letters of the alphabet.
- Begin to print or copy their own name and identify at least some of the letters.
- Explore writing letters in different languages.

Age 5 to 6 (Kindergarten)

- Understand and apply concepts of print.
- Show awareness of language sounds.
- Associate letters with their sounds.
- Understand that signs and labels convey information.
- Recognize some names and words in context.
- Begin to read their own writing.
- Memorize or participate in reading poems and familiar books.
- Makes personal connections with books and stories.
- Show interest in a variety of books.
- Retell familiar stories using the beginning, middle, and end.
- Use illustrations to tell stories or convey meaning.
- Understand that we can communicate ideas and thoughts with symbols.
- Form letters and show increasing knowledge of letters and sounds.
- Name upper and lower-case letters, matching letters with their sounds, and printing them.
- Copy signs, labels, names, and words. Talk about what they mean.
- Write simple sentences. Write lists, cards, letters, etc.

Mathematics Domain

Ages 4 to 5 (Transition to Kindergarten)

- Count to 20 and beyond. Count 10 or more objects accurately.
- Give the next number in the sequence 1 through 10.
- Count out 10 items; may use fingers, body parts, or other counters, as used in the child's home culture. Count and group things by number.
- Compare groups of up to 10 objects.
- Find the sum when joining two sets of up to five objects.
- Identify by sight how many objects are in a small group of objects, up to four.
- Use measuring tools in play.
- Match and sort simple shapes (circles, squares, triangles).
- Compare size. Describe objects using size words (big, small, tall, short).
- Compare two objects using comparison words such as smaller, faster, and heavier.
- Order three objects by one characteristic (such as from smallest to largest).
- Work puzzles with up to 10 pieces.
- Create their own patterns with a variety of materials. Describe the pattern.
- Follow simple directions for position (beside, next to, between, etc.).

Age 5 to 6 (Kindergarten)

- Count to 100 (end of K).
- Count up to 20 objects to understand how many objects there are.
- Recognize by sight and name the number of items in a group, up to five.
- Compare two groups of objects to decide which is more or less, or if they are equal.
- Remember and write numbers up to 20.
- Add and subtract numbers up to 10 using objects or drawings.
- Name shapes and recognize shapes in the environment.
- Sort and classify objects by more than one factor (such as shape and color, or size and shape).
- Correctly use position words (such as beside, inside, under, etc.) to describe objects.



Learning and Development Standards

Learning and development standards for TK and kindergarten come from a variety of sources.

Sources of Development and Learning Outcomes

Transition to Kindergarten

- [GOLD® Objectives and Dimensions for WaKIDS.](#)
- [Washington Early Learning and Development Guidelines.](#)
- [Head Start Learning Outcomes](#)
(dependent upon LEAs braiding federal funding for TK)
- [Social Emotional Learning Standards, Benchmarks and Indicators.](#)
- [Washington TK Learning Expectations](#)

Kindergarten

- [GOLD® Objectives and Dimensions for WaKIDS.](#)
- [Washington Kindergarten State Standards.](#)
- [Washington Early Learning and Development Guidelines.](#)
- [Social Emotional Learning Standards, Benchmarks and Indicators.](#)
- [WIDA English Language Development Standards](#)

The following table provides additional information and resources regarding development and learning outcomes for various content areas. These resources are relevant to both TK and kindergarten classrooms. Refer to the [Head Start learning outcomes](#) in the table above, for information targeted specifically at four-year-olds.

Resources for TK and Kindergarten Development and Learning Outcomes

Literacy and Language

[English/Language Arts State Standards](#)
[TK English/Language Arts Learning Expectations](#)
[K–4 ELA Menu of Best Practices](#)
[K–2 Foundational Skills](#)
[Essential Practices](#)
[Early Literacy Pathways \(P–3rd\).](#)

Mathematics

[Mathematics State Standards](#)
[TK Math Learning Expectations](#)
[Math Educator Resources from OSPI](#)
[Mathematics Menu of Best Practices](#)
[Achieve the Core](#)
[Learning Pathways in Numeracy \(P–3rd\).](#)
[Research Brief: Early Math Instruction – CELS Center](#)

Science	<u>Science K–12 Learning Standards</u> <u>TK Science Learning Expectations</u> <u>Next Generation Science Standards</u> <u>Course Design and Instructional Materials</u>
Environmental and Sustainability	<u>Outdoor Nature-Based Child Care Programs</u> Washington State Department of Children, Youth, and Families Early Childhood Since Time Immemorial: <u>Early Learning Curriculum</u> Environmental Education: <u>Early Childhood Environmental Education Programs: Guidelines for Excellence</u> <u>eePRO</u>
Social Studies	<u>OSPI Social Studies Standards</u>
Health and Physical Education	<u>Health and Physical Education</u>
Arts	<u>OSPI Arts K–12 Learning Standards</u> <u>Arts in Kindergarten Resources</u>
Social Emotional Development	<u>OSPI Social Emotional Learning (P-3rd) Benchmarks</u> <u>Social Emotional Learning Pathways</u> <u>Trauma-Informed SEL Resources</u>
World Languages	<u>World Languages</u>: Washington schools that receive state funding for kindergarten are required to provide experiences in a world language other than English. Explore these resources from <u>PBS</u> and <u>OSPI</u> for bringing world languages into the kindergarten classroom. <u>American Sign Language</u> <u>Free Online Spanish Program</u> <u>Resources for Learning Japanese</u>



DAP and How Children Learn

Young children thrive in an engaging, developmentally appropriate classroom where teaching fosters active, play-based, hands-on learning. Through exploration, peer and adult interactions, and collaboration, students construct understanding, develop critical thinking, and enhance problem-solving and communication skills. This approach nurtures creativity, ownership of learning, and a strong foundation for lifelong growth.



Administrators:

Support kindergarten and TK teachers in developing a strong understanding of child development principles. The DCYF [Core Competencies for Early Care and Education Professionals](#) outline the essential knowledge and skills that inform effective teaching practice. Administrators can foster collaboration through professional learning opportunities and structured discussions that deepen shared understanding and support high-quality instruction.

DAP and Relevant, Meaningful Learning Experiences

Ensuring young children's learning experiences are relevant and meaningful fosters engagement, retention, intrinsic motivation, and overall development. Tailoring activities to their lives and interests encourages active participation and lifelong learning:

- **Engagement:** Children engage more when learning relates to their lives and interests. Their natural curiosity drives active participation when they see meaningful connections to their experiences.



Watch and Learn

Watch [Michelle Thompson's 10:16 minute TEDx Talk on Education Reimagined Through Constructivism](#) to explore how children learn.



Administrators:

Ensure that all educators receive support and professional development on DAP for early learners, including:

- New teachers and paraeducators;
- Teachers and paras new to TK or kindergarten (including those moved from other grade levels); and
- Specialists who support early learners.

Identify and promote relevant professional learning opportunities, including courses on DAP, and DAP for specialists available through PdEnroller.

- **Retention:** Children remember and apply learning better when it connects to what they already know, building a strong foundation for future growth.
- **Intrinsic Motivation:** Meaningful learning fosters a love for learning, driving deeper engagement, persistence, and self-directed growth.
- **Cognitive Development:** Relevant learning experiences enhance problem-solving, critical thinking, communication, and creativity, building essential lifelong skills.
- **Social and Emotional Development:** Meaningful learning fosters relationships, collaboration, empathy, and self-awareness, promoting a sense of belonging and well-being.

Learning experiences that are relevant and meaningful for young children are essential for engaging them in the learning process, promoting retention and transfer of knowledge, supporting their overall development, fostering intrinsic motivation, and laying the foundation for lifelong learning.

DAP and Social Interactions

Engaging with both peers and teachers supports cognitive development through exploration, collaboration, and problem-solving. Group activities foster critical thinking, reasoning, and adaptability, while teacher interactions provide guidance, scaffolding, and personalized support. These experiences enhance attention, memory, and executive function, laying the foundation for lifelong learning. Find more information and strategies for building these skills in Chapter 2.





DAP and Language Development

Educators play a key role in creating environments that encourage language development and meaningful conversation. Language development supports children's overall growth, including cognitive and social-emotional development. Language-rich environments, both at home and in the classroom, provide essential opportunities for children to engage in conversations with adults and peers, strengthening early language skills that are predictive of later academic success.

Research shows significant language skill differences in children from low-income families compared to their affluent peers, starting as early as 18 months (Attig and Weinert, 2020). This difference increases during early childhood unless the adults in their lives work to increase the language they hear and engage them in more conversations.



Administrators:

Support DAP by ensuring teachers have the flexibility and resources to integrate language-rich experiences into every part of the day, from dramatic play and outdoor exploration to snack time. Look for "environmental print" that reflects student work and home languages, signaling that every space in the building is a site for language development.



WaKIDS Connection:

With the exception of a few literacy objectives, children do not need to be assessed in English. It is important to honor a child's knowledge, skills, and abilities in their home language. Learn more in the WaKIDS section.



Classroom Tip:

Do you know how Early Learning Community Programs include home languages within their practices? How will you include home languages in your communication with families?



Watch and Learn

Watch this [McGovern Institute at MIT](#) video to learn more about how language exposure and conversations impact children's brain development.



DAP and Integrating Content

Integrated learning is fundamental because it provides holistic and meaningful educational experiences, emphasizing deeper understanding and critical thinking. By blending various subjects, it helps children see connections between different areas of knowledge, promoting problem-solving and real-world application.

Teachers can design engaging and relevant learning experiences by integrating reading, writing, math, and social-emotional skills into all curriculum areas, especially in TK and kindergarten. Science, social studies, health, world languages, and art can be incorporated through literature, hands-on activities, and thematic studies. An interdisciplinary approach is typically more meaningful than teaching content areas separately.



Examples of integrated learning:

- **Weather Exploration:** Make weather observations and notice patterns (science), create weather graphs (math), read weather-themed stories (language arts), and discuss how different weather conditions affect people in their community (social studies).
- **Garden Project:** Children plant seeds in the classroom, observe their growth over time (science), chart the days on a calendar (math), write stories about their plants (language arts), and learn about diverse types of vegetables grown in their community (social studies).
- **Music and Movement:** Sing songs about different body parts while engaging in movement activities (physical development), learning about different musical instruments from various cultures (social studies), and create rhythms with instruments (music).



Find More Resources and Ideas:

- [The Benefits of Interdisciplinary Learning in Early Childhood](#)
- [Interdisciplinary Connections in Pre-K Curriculum and Instruction](#)
- [Powering Up: Interdisciplinary Project-Based Learning for Young Engaged Citizens](#)



Administrators:

As educators and administrators, it is imperative that we recognize the inherent value of play in promoting well-rounded, resilient learners. By embracing play-based approaches, we create inclusive, enriching classroom environments where every child can thrive. Purposeful play leads to rigor and student choice leads to ownership. When children experience ownership over their learning and self-direct their play, they are safe to explore their learning deeper and with more freedom. Ultimately, play self-differentiates and caters to the children's current needs.

What kind of play materials do TK and kindergarten teachers have in their classrooms? How can you help teachers incorporate play into their daily schedules?

DAP and The Importance and Benefits of Play

Decades of research highlights the benefits of play-based learning in child development. Contemporary research (Hirsh-Pasek and Hadani, 2020; Weisberg et al., 2013) reveals that play-based learning not only facilitates academic achievement but also fosters critical thinking skills, executive functions, and social-emotional competencies.

Play provides a means for children to learn and express themselves, especially in the early months of TK and kindergarten. Many children will be new to school routines and tools, making purposeful play crucial for familiarizing them with these concepts. Play allows children to naturally demonstrate their knowledge and skills, offering a true reflection of their abilities.

The approach, type, and schema of play differ with children's interests and ages, but all play demonstrates common characteristics. According to play researchers (Hirsh-Pasek and Hadani, 2020; Weisberg et al., 2013), play typically involves the following:

- **Activities are fun and meaningful to children**
- **Children engage voluntarily**
- **Children are actively engaged**
- **Activities have no extrinsic goals**



Play Helps Support the Following for Early Learners:

- **Cognitive Development:** Through play, children engage in a journey of exploration, problem-solving, and imaginative creation, weaving together abstract concepts with the vibrant colors of their imagination.
- **Social Emotional Development:** Through play, children develop essential social-emotional skills such as cooperation, negotiation, and conflict resolution.
- **Motor Skills:** Play benefits both gross motor and fine motor development. Running on the playground, building with large blocks, or dancing during a brain break enhances coordination, balance, strength, and spatial awareness, while also promoting proprioceptive (sense of self-movement, force, and body position) abilities. Through exploration and experimentation with various materials, like scissors, clay, or beads, play nurtures the development of fine motor control.
- **Language and Literacy:** Play is crucial for language and literacy development. Through activities like storytelling and role-playing, children expand their vocabulary and grammar skills. Play-based experiences also involve interaction with written language, helping children decode symbols and understand literacy mechanics. These environments promote vocabulary acquisition, syntax comprehension, and overall literacy skills.
- **Mathematics:** Play provides a rich and engaging context for children to explore and internalize mathematical concepts. It fosters a positive attitude towards learning math, develops problem-solving skills, and establishes a solid foundation for future mathematical understanding. Play encourages the use of mathematical language and reasoning during play-based activities. Through play, children not only learn mathematical principles but also discover the joy and relevance of applying math in their everyday experiences.
- **Science:** Play provides a fertile ground for early science learning, allowing children to actively engage with their environment and build a foundation of scientific knowledge and skills. Observing changes in objects, materials, or the environment during play enhances observational skills, a key element of the scientific process. Play often presents challenges that children need to overcome, encouraging them to think critically and problem-solve, skills essential for scientific inquiry.



Classroom Tip:

Help families understand the importance of play by sharing [How Play Connects to Learning](#) resources from NAEYC about play-based learning.





Learn More About Play

Explore the [scientific evidence](#) for how play builds the brain and this Hechinger Report, [The Power of Play](#), that highlights the importance of play in child development and learning. Check out research from the [National Institute for Play](#) and the [Pedagogy of Play](#) from Harvard to discover the many ways play impacts development.



Watch and Learn

To learn how play impacts child development, watch:

[How Play Helps Child Development](#) (2:43) from the Raising Children Network in Australia

[How Child-directed Play Impacts the Brain](#) (4:49)

[Play in Early Childhood: The Role of Play in Any Setting](#) (8:12) from Center on the Developing Child, Harvard University



Administrators:

Include educators in the process of reviewing and adopting a developmentally appropriate, evidence-based, comprehensive curriculum. Look for a curriculum that promotes hands-on learning, small group, and play-based experiences and minimizes whole-group instruction. The curricula listed below are aligned in all domains of the Washington Early Learning and Development Guidelines.

Infant and Toddler Age Group

The Creative Curriculum® for Infants, Toddlers, & Twos
Hawaii Early Learning Profile (HELP)® 0-3 Years
HighScope® Infants & Toddler Curriculum

Mixed Age Group (Family Child Care)

The Creative Curriculum® for Family Child Care

Preschool Age Group

Core Knowledge® Preschool Sequence
The Creative Curriculum® for Preschool/Pre-K/TK
Curiosity Corner
DLM Early Childhood Express®
Hawaii Early Learning Profile (HELP)® 3-6 Years
HighScope® Preschool Curriculum
Opening the World of Learning (OWL)
Scholastic Big Day for PreK™
Tools of the Mind

Find help selecting evidence-based curriculum and practices at the [Institute of Education Science What Works Clearinghouse](#) and the National Academies' Report, [A New Vision for High-Quality Preschool Curriculum](#).



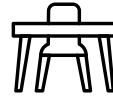
Administrators:

Find resources on the [Washington OER Hub](#) that:

- Align to Washington learning standards;
- Have clear learning objectives with accurate and relevant materials; and
- Support sound teaching practices, and have developmentally and culturally appropriate content which cultivate student interest and engagement.

Since Time Immemorial: Tribal Sovereignty Early Learning Curriculum

Consider using the [Since Time Immemorial Early Learning Curriculum](#), which was developed for all early learners in Washington State. The curriculum consists of three lessons for early learners to learn about tribal sovereignty, local tribal history, and nature. The lessons were developed through a partnership between Puget Sound Educational Service District (PSESD) and Thrive Washington.



Classroom Tip:

The Washington Association for the Education of Young Children (WAEYC) is a state affiliate of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). Their mission is to provide responsive and engaging professional development for educators in early learning so that all children thrive and meet their fullest potential. WAEYC is committed to ensuring equitable and just early learning experiences for all children. Standing in solidarity with children, families, and educators, today and every day, in working toward transforming systems toward this vision. To learn more about WAEYC please visit their webpage at waeyc.org.





DAP Reflection Questions

1. What aspects of your curriculum, school culture, or LEA currently support the implementation of DAP? What barriers, if any, limit full implementation, and who might be collaborative partners in addressing them?
2. How do you consider developmental milestones and natural variations in child development when planning learning experiences for young children?
3. In what ways do you use observation and assessment data, including GOLD® progressions, to inform instructional planning and respond to individual and group needs?
4. Which aspects of your instructional practice feel most aligned with DAP, and where might a “DAP tune-up” strengthen learning experiences for children?
5. How do you respond when DAP is framed as being in conflict with rigorous learning expectations? How might you articulate the relationship between developmentally appropriate practice and high expectations for all learners?
6. How do you advocate for DAP within your classroom, school, or LEA, and what additional supports could strengthen that advocacy?
7. How does equity show up in your instructional practices, learning environments, and interactions with children and families?
8. How have you deepened your understanding of the people, histories, and human diversities represented in your classroom, school, LEA, and broader community?
9. How do you design learning experiences with and for children, families, and educators that reflect and honor the strengths, identities, and experiences of the community?
10. How do you collaborate with others to co-design learning spaces that represent the cultures, histories, and identities of the children and families you serve?

20 DAP Checklist Questions for Teachers for self-reflection/PLC discussion.



CHAPTER 2

Part One: Classroom Community and Child Guidance

Classroom Community Key Learning Objectives

After completing this chapter, readers will be able to:

1. **Describe** how a warm and welcoming classroom community supports relationships, self-discipline, and responsibility among children and adults.
2. **Identify** strategies for fostering a positive classroom climate, including modeling respectful communication and teaching empathy.
3. **Explain** how thoughtfully designed classroom environments support children's learning, safety, and well-being and reflect children's cultures and experiences.
4. **Describe** effective child guidance practices, including setting clear expectations, using logical consequences, and responding to challenging behavior in supportive ways.
5. **Explain** how engagement-based classroom management promotes active learning and positive behavior.

An appropriate and high-quality learning environment is crucial for facilitating children's learning and ensuring their safety and well-being. It allows children to express their knowledge, curiosity, and challenges. The learning environment is critical to our teaching success, as it can either support or impede children's growth in the classroom and our ability to teach, interact with, and assess them as whole individuals (IRIS Center, n.d.).

A well-designed learning environment acts as an additional teacher, promoting skill development through exploration and engagement. Establishing a caring and safe classroom atmosphere in the first months sets the tone for the year, helping to understand children's skills. The aim is to create a welcoming, developmentally appropriate, culturally representative space with engaging materials.



Classroom Community

A warm and welcoming classroom community is essential to high-quality TK and kindergarten programs. Fostering a caring community enhances relationships among students and teachers, leading to self-discipline and responsibility. Research shows that a focus on care boosts student achievement and reduces the need for compliance-based management, allowing teachers more time for instruction. In caring learning environments, teachers emphasize relationships, autonomy, responsibility, motivation, and self-regulation. Below are strategies teachers can use to support these elements of a caring community.

Developing Relationships

Positive and supportive relationships are crucial for children's development and serve as a protective factor, especially for those who have experienced trauma. Rather than focusing solely on social skills, we should help children build strong relationships within their community. Validating their feelings and interests, showing daily care, and supporting their self-regulation abilities are key to establishing positive relationships with students.

There are many ways that we can support the development of solid and meaningful relationships within our classroom community:

- **Model respectful communication and kind behavior to children and adults. Greet all children upon arrival, use names when you speak to others, and speak to them at eye level whenever possible.**

Example: Olivia, please scoot over a bit so Mikel can see the book. Thank you. Mikel, can you see now?

Example: Wow, it looks like Greta dropped her painting. Remy and Sonny, please help me wash off the floor while she washes her shirt. We don't want anyone to step in paint or slip.

- **Listen to and acknowledge children's input, reflect, and expand on children's verbal and non-verbal communication, and join children's play to support and expand their interactions with their peers.**

Example: Interesting, that sounds like a fun thing to do, let's try it when we go outside later. Thank you for sharing, Julio.

Example: Hmmm, I never thought of that, thanks for telling me, Krystal!

- **Teach empathy and perspective-taking. Help students to consider the way that others feel by acknowledging their emotions, labeling feelings, and pointing out facial expressions and body language.**

Example: Look at her face. She looks sad because her blocks were knocked over.

Example: How do you think he feels?





- Fill up children's "**Emotional Piggy Bank**" with a 5:1 deposit vs. withdrawal ratio, encourage and comment frequently on children's appropriate behavior, and use positive descriptive feedback for children's efforts, skills, behaviors, and activities.

Example: Destiny, I noticed that you really tried and were able to put on your shoes all on your own!

Example: Angel, I see that you cleaned up the art area and then found your place on the carpet.

- If a child is nonverbal or a multilingual learner, read their cues and provide alternative ways to communicate, such as visuals or using gestures.

Student Autonomy

It is the teacher's role to help all students build skill sets and confidence so they can navigate their day and work towards independence and perseverance.

1. **Encourage children to make choices, do things for themselves, and be responsible for their actions.** Children feel empowered when they can meet their own needs. Teach them self-help skills, for example, to hang up and put on their coats and how to work snaps and zippers. Expect children to ask for or express what they need or want. Allow autonomy throughout the day, but especially during free choice centers. During free play, children should decide:

- Where they play
- Who they play with
- How they use materials
- When they are ready to move to another area

2. **Provide access to materials and teach students how to use them.** Use open, low shelves and label containers with words and pictures. Teach children where items are stored and how to organize them. Once done with materials, students should know how to return them properly.
3. **Utilize daily schedules and routines which include visuals so that students can learn to use these resources to build independence in navigating their day.** Some students may also benefit from individualized schedules and routines broken down into further steps.



Administrators:

Conducting walk-throughs of TK and Kindergarten classrooms with teachers can help to identify furniture and storage needs that are age-appropriate and accessible; ensuring the physical environment supports student autonomy and safety.





Self Motivation

Self-motivation is an essential skill for any successful learner. It is important for children to develop an enthusiasm for learning. Young children possess natural curiosity and zeal for various subjects, which can be harnessed to foster and enhance their educational experiences.

1. **Acknowledge student effort through specific praise for behavior and achievement.** Describe what children are doing and acknowledge the strategies used for a task. Avoid evaluating or using empty praise (Super! That's beautiful! Good job!) to encourage children. Watch this [video](#) outlining Carol Dweck's research (Ragan, 2014), on praise and mindsets.
2. **Recognize children's efforts and processes used for learning.** Children should develop excitement and motivation for learning that they can use throughout their education. Some students may require that you scaffold their reliance on external motivators and rewards to intrinsically motivated rewards to succeed in school.
3. **For students with an Individualized Education Program (IEP) and/or Behavioral Intervention Plan (BIP),** reinforcement and any other supports for student motivation must be provided as written in the IEP and/or BIP.

Example: Thuy, you have been concentrating and working on that puzzle for several minutes. I see you twisting the pieces around until they fit into just the right space. Impressive!



Watch and Learn

Watch and Learn Watch this 8:51-minute [TEDx video \(Hennessey, 2016\) about Cultivating Intrinsic Motivation and Creativity in the Classroom.](#)



Classroom Tip:

Use morning meetings to foster a sense of belonging through collaborative problem-solving and decision-making. Keep the duration short to match young attention spans; a brief, high-energy meeting ensures every student stays connected and ready for the day.





Social-Emotional Learning

Prioritizing social-emotional learning (SEL) is a foundational piece that builds classroom community, individual emotional regulation, and effective child guidance. Social-emotional skills help children develop friendships, participate in group settings, communicate their wants and needs, and recognize and identify emotions to better work through conflicts. Children need explicit instructions to learn these skills and multiple opportunities throughout the day to practice them in a safe, warm, environment.

Friendship Skills

Building friendships is an important aspect of establishing classroom communities. Forming strong friendships leads to better academic skills, higher school graduation rates, increased exploration and learning in the classroom, and supports children who have experienced trauma.

Consider these strategies to increase friendships within the classroom community:

1. **Create a culture of friendship** by modeling and celebrating friendships through discussing identity and differences, celebrating individual strengths, and emphasizing kindness and community.
2. **Use the environment to support friendships** by setting up materials to increase peer engagement during play time. You can do this by setting out games, buddy centers, and toys that make it easier for students to work and play together.
3. **Build time into the daily schedule for children to work and play together.** This can be done by building “buddy play” time within centers, encouraging children to help each other during clean-up and transitions, and setting up activities during small groups where children build or create together.
4. **Explicitly teach the steps of friendship skills.** Many students need explicit teaching in how to break down the individual steps of how to engage with others. Teach skills such as seeking attention, sharing, sharing requests, giving a compliment, and giving a play idea.





It is the role of the teacher to be responsive to the needs of their students in a caring and respectful manner. Validating a child's feelings and interests, showing children daily that they are cared for, and scaffolding a child's ability to self-regulate will support teachers in establishing positive relationships with their students.



Classroom Tip:

Use parts of [**5 Incredibly Fun Games to Teach Self-Regulation**](#) (Kreative Leadership, 2017) with children to introduce self-calming strategies. After the video, create a chart of which strategies they can use at school and those they cannot. Ask children to draw what it looks like when they are using an appropriate calming strategy.



Watch and Learn: Explore Social Emotional learning

OSPI created the [**Social Emotional Learning Pathways**](#) (OSPI, 2022) document and the [**Social Emotional Learning Implementation Guide**](#) (OSPI, 2019) to provide a more in-depth discussion of SEL. Additionally, watch these [**short helpful videos**](#) (Teaching Strategies, n.d.) to learn how to develop the social emotional skills of students.

Emotional Literacy

Emotional literacy is the ability to recognize, understand, and respond to emotions in oneself and others. Children with strong emotional literacy skills achieve more academically, focus better, enjoy better health, and build more successful relationships. They are also less impulsive, manage frustration better, and engage in fewer conflicts.

Children without emotional literacy struggle to label their feelings and understand others. Ensure universal access to emotional literacy instruction, especially for children with disabilities and multi-language learners, using visuals and varied practice opportunities.

Strategies for teaching emotional literacy:

1. **Teach children about emotion words and expressing emotions by using a variety of strategies** (books, games, displaying emotion visuals, emotion check-ins throughout the day).
2. **Teach children a wide range of emotions.**
3. **Model and label your own emotions and appropriate ways to express emotions.**
4. **Point out facial expressions, voice tone, body language, or words to assist children in recognizing and understanding how others might be feeling.**
5. **Label children's emotions and allow them to talk about how they feel.**

Emotional Regulation and Calming Down

Self-regulation is regulating your emotions and behaviors in different settings and activities. Children who learn to regulate their emotions handle disappointment better, have an easier time making friends, relate more successfully with peers and adults, and are less impulsive.

Emotional Regulation Strategies

1. **Model and discuss reasons for desired behaviors.**
2. **Teach clear positive expectations/rules daily.**
3. **Teach children to calm themselves with strategies like deep breathing, walking away, visuals and [Calm Down Kits](#).**
4. **Validate feelings (this includes all emotions such as being sad, happy, frustrated, scared, angry).**
5. **Label both children's and your own actions, feelings, and emotions.**
6. **Provide multiple opportunities using books, puppets, pictures, games, songs, apps, and teachable moments to identify different feelings and what may cause them.**



Classroom Tip:

Read the article [5 Ways to Support Social-Emotional Development in Early Childhood](#) (Teaching Strategies) to help teach SEL skills to young children.



Promote Community by Giving Choices for Seating

Avoiding control issues and power struggles will create a stronger classroom community and significantly reduce misbehavior.

- Ask yourself: Is it important that children sit "crisscross applesauce" while on the carpet? Or is it important that all children can see, hear, participate, and be comfortable?
- Give and model options for different ways to sit on the carpet. Consider providing different sitting supports as well.
 - **Example:** If children want to sit on their knees, they should to be in the back or ensure no one is behind them.

Sitting



Mountain



Cross Over



Criss Cross



Side



Problem Solving

Children are empowered as members of the classroom community when they are supported in working through conflicts with peers. Problem solving is a foundational skill for students in TK and kindergarten classrooms. Educators intentionally teach, model, and create opportunities for children to practice problem-solving skills, and reinforce their use when they are observed throughout the day.

Strategies for Supporting Problem-Solving in the Classroom

- **Problem solving has two parts:** the steps to solve a problem and the possible solutions for that problem.
- **The steps for problem-solving could be:**
 1. "What is the problem?"
 2. "How do I feel about it?"
 3. "What solution do I/we choose?"
- **The solutions may include:** "Share, trade, take turns, ask a teacher."
- **When children can resolve problems with each other, they are empowered as members of the classroom community.** Using social stories such as "[We Can Be Problem Solvers](#)" is one way to help them become confident problem solvers.
- **Give children ample opportunities to practice this skill.** Ask questions that prompt them to think about solutions.
- **Avoid solving problems for children; instead, help them utilize the problem-solving steps and available solutions.** Sometimes, you may need to mediate and support students as they build autonomy in the problem-solving process.

- **Create intentional opportunities for students to practice solving problems by "planning" problems throughout the day.**
- **When issues arise, such as seating arrangements during snack time or water splashing by the sink, use them as problem-solving opportunities.** Discuss the problem during a class meeting, gather solutions from the children, and collectively decide on the best one, rejecting only unsafe or unethical ideas. Implement the solution and review its effectiveness after a few days.
- **Some children will need increased opportunities to practice with lots of feedback, individualized materials, or one-on-one teacher support.**



Watch and Learn

Watch [Problem Solving in the Moment](#) (4:30 min) and [Problem Solving in Real Life Situations](#) (Pyramid Model) (2:19 min) for examples of facilitating problem-solving in early childhood classrooms.

This [Problem Solving Steps Poster](#) from the National Center for Pyramid Model Innovation is another tool you can use to teach children about problem-solving. Review their [solution kit](#) to facilitate problem-solving with your students.



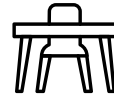
Child Guidance

Effective child guidance (classroom management) aims for children to manage their behavior safely and respectfully within the classroom community. Engagement and self-regulation are essential for effective classroom management with minimal disruptions. The strategies mentioned earlier for building classroom community help minimize child guidance challenges. Child guidance relies not only on children but also on teacher expectations:

- **Engagement-Based Classrooms** manage behavior by actively involving students intellectually, emotionally, physically, and behaviorally. This proactive approach supports their autonomy, leading to positive outcomes.
- **Compliance-Based Classroom** management which relies on strict rules and limited student agency, can hinder engagement. It emphasizes fixing deficits rather than fostering active learning.

Review the comparison on the following page for a comparison of the two approaches.

Explore the [Center for Inspired Teaching's White Paper](#) on the critical need to replace compliance-based teaching with engagement-based teaching to learn more.



Classroom Tip:

Understanding child development is crucial, as appropriate expectations set children up for success, i.e., long periods of sitting for group activities or written tasks are unreasonable and can lead to disruptive behavior. Four- and five-year-olds have limited attention spans, so expecting them to wait during lengthy instructional periods or transitions is unrealistic.



Comparison of Engagement-Based Classroom and Compliance-Based Classroom from the Center for Inspired Teaching (2018)

Engagement-Based Classroom (Inspired Teaching)	Compliance-Based Classroom
Students are believed to have an innate desire to learn.	Students are believed to be open vessels that need to be filled.
Curiosity and engagement are viewed as necessary for learning to occur	Strict discipline is viewed as necessary for learning to occur.
The teacher and students share a mutual respect.	The teacher is viewed as the ultimate authority, and students are rarely asked for their own expertise or opinion.
Learning through play is valued and encouraged.	Play is viewed as a distraction from learning
Teachers believe learning happens when classrooms are full of loud, curious, joyful energy.	Teachers believe learning happens when classrooms are quiet and controlled.
Teachers ask questions where there are many possible answers; there is a variety of evidence of student learning.	Teachers ask questions where there is one correct answer; student learning is measured primarily through conventional testing.
Students are intrinsically motivated and genuinely interested in deepening their skills and understanding the materials they are learning.	Students are extrinsically motivated; they do their school work, and they behave to earn rewards: candy, points, stickers, etc.
Student talk is prevalent, and students are treated as emerging experts.	Teacher talk dominates the classroom, and most student contributions happen in response to the teacher's prompt.



Behavior Expectations and Classroom Rules

Teachers should clearly communicate, and model expected behavior. It cannot be assumed that children know these skills from the start. Appropriate behavior requires practice and guidance. Expectations and rules guide classroom engagement and help staff align on student expectations.

Behavior expectations are general ways we want children to behave in all settings. These are broad and can be adapted to each situation. Often behavior expectations are program-wide, like within a PBIS system. Ex: Be Kind, Be Safe, Be Respectful. Many TK and K classrooms adopt the expectations established within their elementary school building; **however, it is important that behavior expectations are age-appropriate and relevant for all students enrolled in the program.**



Watch and Learn

Explore these curated videos for a deeper exploration of classroom rulemaking:

- [CECE Early Childhood Videos](#) (2:36) outline the process for developing classroom expectations.
- [Responsive Classroom](#) (1:57) shows a teacher creating expectations with her class.
- [Administration for Children and Families](#) (4:38) explores the importance of classroom expectations and best practices in early childhood.

When Creating Rules and Expectations, Consider:

- **Rules and expectations should be positively stated directing students what to do rather than what not to do.** For example, a classroom rule may be “walking feet” rather than stated as “don’t run.”
- **Always include relevant visuals and represent the expected behaviors in a positive context.** Display pictures of the students in your current classroom doing what is expected.
- **Behavior expectations and rules should be limited to 3–5 each.** For example, your classroom/program expectations may be: “be safe, be kind, be helpful, be brave.”
- **Rules and expectations should be posted at the child level and in the applicable places throughout the classroom.** Many teachers choose to post their behavior expectations throughout the room so that they are easily accessible to point to when reinforcing or reminding students of expected behavior.
- **Include children in the decision-making process of developing classroom rules and responsibilities.** When children are involved in creating classroom expectations and rules, they are more likely to internalize and uphold the expectations they have had a part in creating. You can also discuss jobs and responsibilities that need to be done to maintain the classroom.



Reinforce! Give lots of positive descriptive feedback when children demonstrate that they follow behavior expectations and rules. It is important that there is a reinforcement system in place: for example, “superstar” stamps or a container where the teacher and/or students place cotton balls or marbles in a jar whenever students follow behavior expectations or when students show kindness or problem solve without prompts.

Use logical consequences. Applying logical consequences is the most appropriate strategy to help children learn from and take responsibility for their behavior. For example, if something spills, it is cleaned up. It is not a punishment; it is a logical consequence. More examples: When children are done with materials, they put them away. If glue was smeared on the table while making a collage, they wash it off.

In the National Center Pyramid Model Innovations (NCPMI) Expectation Matrix example, program-wide expectations are across the top, with classroom “rules” below, defining what behaviors look like for each expectation within the daily routine (e.g., arrival, choice time, circle time, snack).



Expectation Matrix

Schedule	Be Safe	Be Respectful	Be Responsible
Arrival	Stay with a teacher Stay with the group	Greet teachers and children	Put your things in your cubby Wash hands
Choice Time	Be gentle with other people's bodies	Use the solution kit to solve problems Help other children	Take care of toys Clean up toys
Circle Time	Keep your body in your own space	Listen to others	Participate in activities
Snack	Wash your hands Eat your own food	Engage with other children	Clean up after snack



Handling Disruptions

Despite a teacher's best efforts to create an engaging learning environment, disruptions will inevitably occur. Children with challenging behavior need nurturing and responsive relationships, but behavior can be a barrier for adults to build relationships. Remember that **all behavior is communication**, it is important to figure out what the child is communicating so a more appropriate way to communicate the same message can be taught.

It is crucial to de-escalate situations promptly, as engaging in lengthy explanations, discussions, or problem-solving with children during moments of distress is not effective. The steps to de-escalation are:

1. Always ensure that the child is safe and cannot hurt others.
2. Help them calm down by offering a hug or sitting with them for a moment.

Remember to use a calm voice during interactions with children who are upset or misbehaving.



Think About It:

Reviews of research (Al-Ghamdi, 2017; Corpus and Good, 2021; Henderlong and Lepper, 2002; Kagan, 2007) have shown that relying on strategies that reward certain behaviors or achievement, like behavior charts (e.g., card flipping and clip charts), and treasure chests, or providing ineffective praise, decreases motivation for learning and positive behavior.



Administrators:

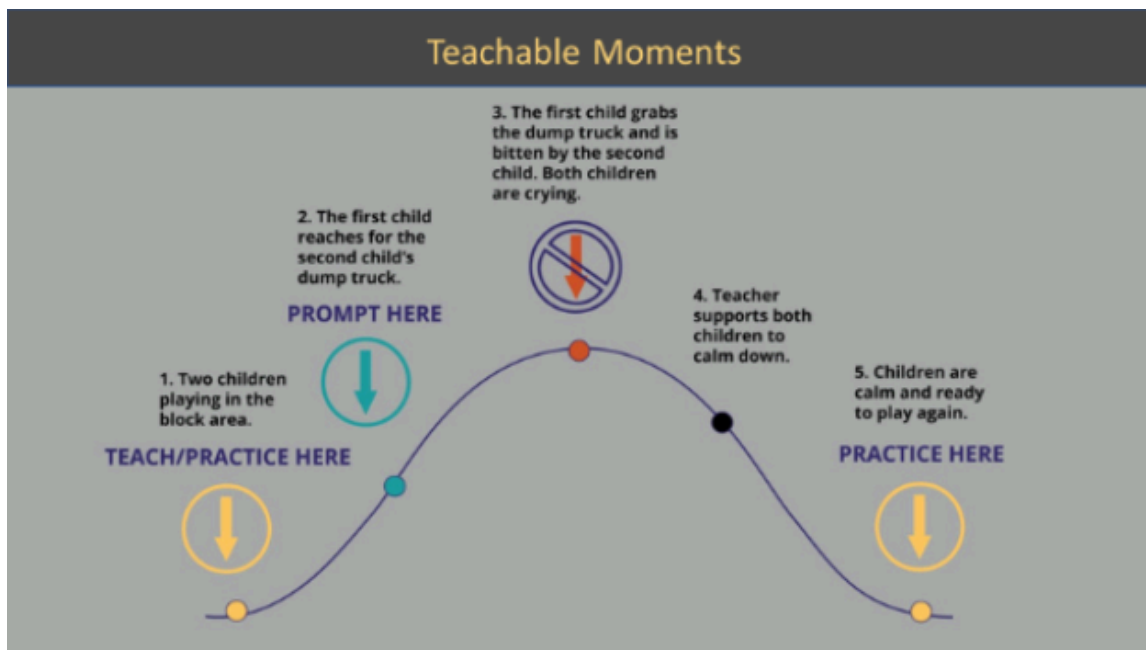
Create school policies for TK and kindergarten that follow DAP for handling disruptions and avoiding expulsion of students. Provide training to all teachers about child guidance and school policies. For help with establishing these policies, see [Discipline, Suspension, and Expulsion](#) from the Washington State Governor's Office of the Education Ombuds and OSPI's [Discipline](#) webpage.



Classroom Tip:

It is important to reflect on the behaviors we perceive as challenging and how our reactions to them impact our relationships with children and families. [The Hot Buttons Activity](#) allows us to reflect on behaviors that "push our buttons." By reflecting on behaviors we struggle with, we can make a plan to identify strategies to remain calm and to support the child in a positive way.

Being able to stay calm during challenging moments is difficult. Remember to be mindful of your own [self-care](#).



When children are calm and able to engage, a simple strategy to address problem behavior is the **ACT** approach:

A: Acknowledge the child's behavior or emotion.

"I see you are angry that you cannot have that toy."

C: Communicate the limit.

"However, we use our words when we are mad or want a turn; we do not hit others."

T: Tell choices.

"You can wait until she is done with the toy or ask if you can have a turn," OR

"You can wait for your turn or go to the block or art center."

Redirect children's misbehavior by stating what children should do or how to use a particular material. For example, "Stop running" turns into "Use walking feet." "Don't throw that inside," turns into "You can roll the ball inside and throw it when we are outside."



Think About It:

It is appropriate to ask children who can participate in problem-solving, "What do you think you should do?" The goal is that children will be able to skip to the last step of Tell Choices and come up with alternative strategies on their own or with the teacher's help.



Anti-Bias Education and Classroom Community

To be meaningful, anti-bias education should be embedded into all aspects of your classroom environment and teaching practices. Anti-bias curriculum in early childhood education aims to instill values-based principles and methodology that promote respect, inclusiveness, and fairness. It encourages critical thinking and problem-solving for children and adults, aiming to foster positive self and group identity development for every child to reach their full potential (Teaching for Change, n.d.).

The four core goals of anti-bias education are essential in creating a supportive learning community for children. NAEYC's position, authored by Derman-Sparks and Edwards (2019), identifies the four goals of anti-bias education:



Classroom Tip:

Explore the windows and mirrors concept to bring anti-bias education into your classroom. It is essential to include stories, materials, and experiences that (1) reflect the experiences of your children and (2) provide insights into the experiences of others. In this framework, windows act as stories about others and their experiences, and mirrors reflect stories about your individual experience. To learn more about Windows and Mirrors, watch [Rudine Sims Bishop Explain the Concepts](#) (1:33) For a deeper dive, this [TEDx talk from Grace Lin](#) (12:44) explores the windows and mirrors of your child's bookshelf.

Goal 1: Identity

- Teachers will nurture each child's construction of knowledgeable, confident, individual personal and social identities.
- Children will demonstrate self-awareness, confidence, family pride, and positive social identities.

Goal 2: Diversity

- Teachers will promote each child's comfortable, empathetic interaction with people from diverse backgrounds.
- Children will learn to express comfort and joy with human diversity, use accurate language for human differences, and form deep, caring connections across all dimensions of human diversity.

Goal 3: Justice

- Teachers will foster each child's capacity to critically identify bias and nurture each child's empathy for the hurt bias causes.
- Children will increasingly recognize unfairness (injustice), have language to describe unfairness, and understand that unfairness hurts.

Goal 4: Activism

- Teachers will cultivate each child's ability and confidence to stand up for oneself and others in the face of bias.
- Children will demonstrate a sense of empowerment and the skills to act, with others or alone, against prejudice and/or discriminatory actions.



Learn More: Anti-Bias Education

- The book [Anti-Bias Education for Young Children and Ourselves](#) provides practical advice to teachers and parents. It equips them with strategies to address and remove obstacles related to prejudice, misinformation, and bias concerning various aspects of personal and social identity.
- Check out the [Freedom-Reads: Anti-bias Book Talk Series](#) (Social Justice Books, 2020) to learn more about anti-bias children's books. The [Early Childhood Anti-Bias Education Booklist from Social Justice Books](#) (n.d.) is another helpful resource.
- Explore the [National Black Child Development Institute](#) to learn how to combat preschool suspension and expulsion inequities.



WaKIDS Connection:

A high-quality learning environment is paramount to the Whole-Child Assessment. A classroom that is rich with child choice, play, and a variety of materials will lend itself to numerous observation opportunities. However, if a classroom environment is primarily teacher-directed, then there will be limited opportunities to observe students.

Educators should actively search for moments to foster anti-bias education activities that align with children's interests, questions, and interactions. Significant events in the community can serve as opportunities for children to explore anti-bias themes (Derman-Sparks and Ewards, 2019).

Classroom Community Reflection Questions

1. What choices will you ask children to make in the classroom?
2. What jobs can children do in the classroom? How can they demonstrate responsibility?
3. How will you help children build relationships with you and one another?
4. How will you continue to develop your understanding of a caring classroom community?
5. How do children contribute to developing and maintaining classroom rules?

More Self-Reflection Checklists

[DAP Checklist Questions for Teachers.](#)
[Pyramid Model Practices Checklist.](#)



Classroom Tip:

How can the classroom ambiance best cater to the needs of the young learners? The focus should always be on creating an environment that is both comfortable and conducive to learning. Elements such as ambient lighting and soothing background sounds can contribute to a calming atmosphere.



PART TWO: PHYSICAL SPACE

Physical Space Key Learning Objectives

After completing this chapter, readers will be able to:

1. **Describe** how classroom layout and organization support purposeful play-based learning and meet children's developmental needs.
2. **Explain** how learning centers (such as literacy, math, science, and dramatic play) provide hands-on experiences that support academic and social development.
3. **Identify** how a variety of classroom materials, including open-ended and close-ended items, support creativity and the development of multiple skills.
4. **Recognize** how thoughtful use of visuals, wall space, and classroom décor can create a calm, engaging, and developmentally appropriate learning environment.
5. **Explain** the role of outdoor play in supporting children's physical, social, and cognitive development, including opportunities for movement, creativity, and interaction with nature.

The importance of the learning environment cannot be overstated. A well-designed space engages and inspires learners while supporting various educational experiences. From fostering social interactions to providing comfort and routine, the environment sets the stage for effective learning. This section will explore the key elements contributing to a high-quality learning environment.

The concept of the environment as the "third teacher" highlights the importance of physical spaces in early childhood education.

These spaces, along with teachers and learners, significantly shape educational experiences. A well-designed, interactive environment is crucial for fostering exploration, discovery, and development in young children.

Elements of High-Quality TK and Kindergarten Classrooms:

- **Intentionally organized and orderly layout** that allows children to move freely between defined interest areas.
- **Accessible and developmentally appropriate materials** (ex: place alphabet strips and word walls where children can touch and interact with them rather than high on a wall or ceiling.)
- **Diverse and engaging resources** like manipulatives, sensory bins, and culturally diverse books that pique interest and support different learning styles.
- **Calming and balanced aesthetic** - soothing color palette, such as soft blues, greens, and warm neutrals, to reduce visual overstimulation.



Classroom Layout

Creating a well-organized classroom is key to effective teaching. The room set up and provided materials influence student engagement and behavior. Classroom layout should meet students' developmental needs, promoting purposeful play-based activities.



Administrators:

Prioritize **child-sized, modular furniture** that can be easily reconfigured to support diverse learning needs and creative play. To foster a calm and focused atmosphere, design choices should emphasize **neutral color palettes** and maximize **access to natural light and fresh air. Ensure that outdoor environments are suitable for 4-year-olds**; many standard elementary play structures are designed for older children and may pose safety risks TK students.



Photo from Boistfort Elementary

Classroom Layout Considerations:

Adapted from the North Carolina Guide for the Early Years.

- **Spaces should be clearly defined.** Define boundaries with furniture (shelves and tables) and floor coverings (rugs). Consider floor coverings in sand and water and creative art.
- **Avoid large open pathways.** Traffic patterns allow for free, convenient movement without encouraging running.
- **Material Integration.** Tables and chairs are integrated into the classroom and spaced throughout the room (avoiding rows of desks). Various materials (e.g., writing materials and books) should be available in all areas.
- **Noise levels.** Keep quiet areas separate from noisy areas (e.g., blocks away from the library). Provide a space for children to be alone.
- **Visual Supervision.** Ensure that the entire room can be seen at all times. Furniture should not block any part of the classroom.
- **Consider logistical needs.** Place the art area near the sink, if possible, for easy cleanup. Place science/discovery near natural light. Computer/listening areas near electrical outlets.

A well-designed and organized classroom environment allows children to:

- Independently make choices and select activities based on their interest.
- Use materials appropriately and creatively.
- Engage in activities for an extended amount of time.
- Experience success through play.
- Help take care of materials.
- Smoothly transition from one activity/area to the next.



The following are the minimum items included in developmentally appropriate TK and kindergarten classrooms:

- Large group area for morning meetings and whole group activities.
- Block area for building and constructing. Smaller classrooms might consider doubling their meeting area as a block area.
- Literacy area for reading, writing, and exploring print concepts. This often is a library in the TK/K class and may include listening devices, computers, or bookmaking.
- Dramatic play area for role-playing.
- Math and manipulative area for problem-solving.
- Art area that offers a variety of open-ended materials for creative ideas.
- Science/discovery area for observing and investigating.
- Quiet area for children to take breaks and self-regulate.
- Sand and water area for beginning exploration in mathematical and science concepts.
- Outdoor area for gross motor skills (different from a playground).

Large Group Meeting Area

The large group meeting area fosters community and collaborative learning. It is essential for whole-class instruction, developing social and communication skills, and creating a sense of belonging. This space allows students to engage with peers, share ideas, and build connections in a supportive environment.

Space Considerations

- A rug that defines the areas and provides a comfortable place for children to sit
- Near a wall
- Near a whiteboard/smartboard

Furniture

Options for sitting: bean bag chairs, pillows, wobble seats, cube chairs.

Possible Materials

- Student writing materials (white boards/clipboards)
- Easel for morning meeting
- Big books
- Pocket chart
- Calendar





Centers

Centers have many names, including learning areas or interest areas. Regardless of the name, they are crucial to high-quality learning environments. **Centers are designated spaces within the classroom where children can explore specific topics, themes, or activities based on their interests during free choice play.**

These areas are designed to provide hands-on learning experiences catering to diverse learning styles and preferences.

- **Each interest area offers a variety of materials, tools, and opportunities for children to engage in open-ended exploration, creativity, and imaginative play.**
- **Centers are interdisciplinary and should be designed to develop numerous academic skills.** For example, a child may write down a restaurant order (literacy skills) and count pretend money (math) in dramatic play.
- **Centers are designed to support children's soft skills development** (sharing, interacting with peers, and solving social situations).



Centers are the cornerstone of a classroom grounded in child development. Time spent in centers is a crucial component of the child's day, and this time should not be seen as a reward (learn more about this in Chapter 4: Classroom Structures).

As outlined in [RCW 28A.150.315](#), TK and kindergarten are designed to support and develop the whole child.

When appropriately implemented, interest areas provide space to promote development and learning through play.

"Learning centers are well-defined interest areas that provide children with a wide range of materials and opportunities to engage in hands-on learning across the curriculum."

- Stuber, 2007



WaKIDS Connection:

A high-quality learning environment is paramount to an observational assessment, like the WaKIDS Whole-child Assessment. A classroom that is rich with child choice, play, and a variety of materials will lend itself to numerous observation opportunities.

THE KINDERGARTEN CONTINUUM



The Kindergarten Continuum visual from Alliance for Childhood (2009), highlights the “sweet spot” of learning. This exists in a classroom rich in child-initiated play and a playful classroom with focused learning. Centers are in the optimal sweet spot for children’s learning.





Block Area

The block play area is vital for a quality learning environment. Children become budding architects, engineers, and storytellers, engaging in construction and exploration. This space promotes hands-on learning and imaginative play, allowing children to design, build, and create with various materials.

Playing with blocks is a powerful tool for learning. Children develop problem-solving, spatial awareness, and fine motor skills in this area.



Space Considerations

- Open space near group area to expand (tip: can double up as group area)
- Consider placing the block area in a corner to use two walls as boundaries
- Near other noisy areas, such as dramatic play

Furniture

- Open shelving with labels—picture labels of block shapes
- Low shelves
- Carpeted area or rug to absorb sound and provide a boundary

Possible Materials

- Blocks (wooden unit blocks, cardboard blocks, etc.)
- Wooden hollow blocks (can be shared between classrooms)
- Magna-Tiles
- Lincoln logs
- Small cars and trucks
- Figurines (people, animals, etc.)
- Traffic Signs (consider creating community signs to create a language-rich block center)
- Plastic, rubber, or wooden animals
- Plastic, rubber, or wooden people representative of different cultures and abilities (consider printing pictures of your students and adhering them to blocks so they can play themselves)
- Dollhouse
- Train set and train tracks
- Writing utensils (with clipboards and paper)
- Dress-up clothes (construction vest, hard hat, etc.)
- Pictures of structures
- Books



Making the most of Block Area

- **Adding books and writing supplies to the block area enhances its educational and playful value.** Books about architects, construction, and global structures can spark interest.
- **Clipboards encourage planning and design.** Displaying pictures of buildings, bridges, and community structures provides inspiration.
- **Incorporate dramatic play elements like hard hats and vests for added fun.**
- **Found materials, like cardboard, plastic tubes, wrapping paper rolls, etc., are imaginative additions to the block area.** Though it is important to have conventional materials it's equally important to remember that less obvious materials open up more opportunities for pretend play (Tepylo, Moss, and Stephenson, 2015)
- **Block materials should be revolving.** Materials should be rotated and built upon. While transitioning between units of study, integrate elements from other lessons into the block area.
- **Materials in this area should be labeled and easily accessible.** Many teachers use the cutouts of block shapes on shelves to help children quickly put blocks away. Baskets are an easy way to contain smaller materials, like people, animals, signs, and vehicles (these materials should also be rotated into your block area to encourage dramatic play and creativity).



Learn More: Developmental Stages of Block Play

Did you know that there are developmental stages of block play? This chart from the Iowa Regents' Center for Early Developmental Education (n.d.) outlines the [seven stages of block play](#) so you know what you are observing.



Administrators:

Remember to budget for area rugs of various sizes for each TK and kindergarten classroom. They are used to define space for centers and activities and absorb sound.



Literacy Area

The literacy area can include the library and writing area. This can be one combined space or broken out, whichever your classroom space can accommodate. This area should serve as a cozy classroom nook furnished with comfortable seating, soft lighting, a variety of books, writing supplies, and storytelling materials.

Space Considerations

- Quiet area
- Carpeted area or rug
- Welcoming lighting
- Comfortable place to sit
- Language-rich environment

Furniture

- Couch or bench with pillows
- Rocking chair
- Beanbags
- Large pillows for floor seating
- Bookstand or bookshelf (ideal if book covers can face front instead of seeing the spine)
- Tablets
- Table and chairs for writing
- Shelf for writing materials



This “Reading Buddies” bucket from White River Early Learning Center enables children to practice reading aloud.

Possible Materials

- A variety of books that are representative of diverse cultures, family structures, and abilities
- Variety of books from different genres: picture books, non-fiction books, wordless picture books, poetry, fairy tales, concept books (shapes, numbers, colors, alphabet, opposites, textures)
- Book making supplies
- Writing supplies (several varieties, pencils, pens, markers, crayons)
- Different types, sizes, and colors of paper
- Listening center with headphones
- Storytelling props (puppets, felt pieces)
- Felt board

These classroom libraries from Evergreen School District and Edwin Pratt Early Learning Center are clearly defined and neatly arranged so that children can explore books independently or with friends.





In the literacy area:

- **Children discover the sheer delight of reading and immersing themselves in books and cultivate the enthusiasm and abilities needed for reading and writing.**
- **Children can interact with and explore various genres, read, write alone or with a friend, and create stories orally or through print.**
- **Children will work on their reading and writing abilities every day, using practice and play to learn and grow.**



The library area is an essential space where children process their learning and deepen their connection to language. Beyond quiet reading, this area should invite students to recall and reenact shared stories, browse diverse texts, and engage with audio-recorded books. To foster a sense of ownership, teachers should also include student-authored stories and class-made books on the shelves.

Book selection is key: the collection should feature a balanced mix of fiction and nonfiction that reflects a wide range of human experiences, including diverse races, cultures, abilities, and family structures. By ensuring books are displayed with covers facing out and at a child's eye level, teachers can encourage independent exploration and help every student find a story that mirrors their own life or opens a window to another.



Learn More: Multicultural and Diverse Books

Lee and Low's Beyond Good Intentions: [Selecting Multicultural Literature](#) (Shiohita, n.d.) website walks through 10 points to consider when selecting books for your classroom library. Bonus: check out the PreK-2 tab for library suggestions!

[We Need Diverse Books](#) can help source diverse books.



Watch and Learn

Rudine Sims Bishop uses "[Mirrors, Windows and Sliding Glass Doors](#)" (Bishop, 2015) as an analogy to discuss the importance of diversity in books and the authors who write them. We need books where children can see reflections of themselves and look through and see other worlds.



Dramatic Play Area

The dramatic play area is a cornerstone of any TK or kindergarten classroom. It nurtures whole child development by promoting imagination, language skills, social abilities, emotional intelligence, problem-solving capabilities, and self-confidence.

- **Children enhance their language skills by communicating with peers and adults, expanding vocabulary, and boosting confidence through role-playing.** The dramatic play area allows children to collaborate, negotiate, and cooperate with their peers.
- **They learn to take turns, share resources, and work together to create imaginative scenarios.** These interactions foster essential social skills such as empathy, communication, and teamwork.
- **Many dramatic play scenarios involve solving problems and making decisions.** Whether planning a tea party, running a pretend store, or caring for "patients" in a doctor's office, children face creative problem-solving challenges.



Think About It

When we limit the materials in a dramatic play center, children are compelled to use their imaginations and be creative!

- **Dramatic play allows children to express themselves freely and gain confidence in their abilities.** Dramatic play lets children express themselves, building confidence and decision-making skills. They gain independence by setting up scenarios and managing playtime, fostering responsibility and autonomy.
- **Dramatic play enhances academic skills.** Children will make math connections while measuring, comparing, and counting. They will deepen reading and writing skills by taking orders, reading recipes, and writing lists or invitations, expanding their vocabulary and storytelling abilities.
- **As the year progresses, so should the dramatic play area.** After beginning the year with a home-based area (like a kitchen), the space should evolve with your curriculum, children's interests, and developmental needs.



Administrators:

Provide teachers with **dedicated space** and **organized storage solutions** for both dramatic play materials and other classroom supplies (manipulatives, etc.); it is important they provide **more than a home kitchen experience** for children, offering a rotating variety of themes. Maximize your investment by creating shared resource libraries where dramatic play materials are rotated between classrooms; providing diverse, high-interest kits that ensures teachers can keep learning environments fresh and engaging.



Space Considerations

- Carpeted area or rug (if not using a table)

Possible Materials

- Kitchen set
- Pretend food (representative of different cultures)
- Kitchen items (dishes, silverware, baking utensils, pots, pans, broom)
- Aprons
- Child-sized table and chairs
- Dolls (representative of different cultures)
- Doll bed, clothes, blankets
- Dress-up clothes (multicultural, community helpers)
- Theme-related materials (e.g., cash register, shopping cart)
- Paper, writing utensils, cookbooks, menus
- Puppet theater and puppets

Furniture

- Open shelving with labeled containers
- Table and chairs or large rug
- Kitchen (start the year with a kitchen area, and adapt as the year progresses)

Dramatic Play Area Ideas

- House/Kitchen
- Doctor's Office
- Vet Clinic
- Restaurant
- Bakery
- Ice Cream Shop
- Grocery Store
- Inventory Center
- Flower Shop
- Post Office
- Airport
- Theater

Don't forget to regularly wash your dramatic play materials!



This dramatic play area from the Bethel Early Learning Center is neatly designed, with clearly marked spaces for materials. There are not too many items to create a cluttered or overwhelming experience for children.



Math and Manipulative Area

The math area is filled with opportunities for fine motor work, reasoning, sorting, classifying, sequencing, comparing, counting, measuring, inquiring, joining and separating sets, recording, defining, estimating, and solving meaningful problems at their level of development and interest. Math centers look different in every classroom. This photo, from Evergreen Public Schools, shows a math area that provides math activities and materials that are accessible.

In the math area, children work independently or in small groups, engaging in tasks that demand concentration and thoughtful engagement. It is essential to:

- **Position the manipulatives center away from noisy and active areas, such as block-building or dramatic play spaces.**
- **Utilize child-sized tables with limited seating** (encourages individual or small-group work).
- **Include diverse collections of objects for sorting, games, puzzles, and open-ended materials.**

Teachers can enhance children's play in this area by providing engaging materials, rotating resources to match interests and curriculum, and asking questions that inspire thinking. For example, a teacher might prompt a child to consider sorting toys by size or shape after the child has sorted by color.



Space Considerations

- Carpeted area or rug (if not using a table)
- Table embedded in the area

Furniture

- Open shelving with labeled containers
- Table and chairs or large rug

Possible Materials

- Legos and other construction materials
- Sorting bowls (commercial and/or ice trays, muffin tins)
- Math and sorting manipulatives (e.g., pattern blocks, snapping cubes, two-sided counters, counting bears, buttons, small colored blocks, shells)
- Number chart to 20 for TK, 100 for kindergarten
- Dice and spinners
- Board games, playing cards
- Lacing cards and lacing beads
- Dominoes
- Puzzles (wooden, floor)
- Puzzle Storage
- Paper, clipboards, writing utensils
- Marble run



Art Area

The art area serves as a space where children can creatively express their thoughts, explore their imaginations, experiment with different art mediums, and develop their fine motor skills. A well-stocked art center:

- **Encourages children to freely express themselves through drawing, painting, sculpting, collage-making, and other forms of artistic expression.**
- **Encourages children to think freely.** Experiment with various materials, colors, and textures, and translate their thoughts and emotions into visual forms.
- **Develop confidence, independence, and a sense of identity, making the art center a vital component of a high-quality learning environment.**
- **Develop a wide range of skills.** Here, children will work on their fine motor skills, explore mathematical concepts around shapes and symmetry, explore balance with sculpture, and conduct experiments with blending colors.
- **Encourages social interaction and collaboration** as students share materials, ideas, and projects.
- **Teaches children how to communicate their creative vision and listen to the perspectives of others, fostering critical social skills.**



Classroom Tip:

Teachers can leverage the art center to benefit other interest areas. For example, students can make puppets of their favorite book characters and retell the story in the literacy area.

Space Considerations

- Tile floor
- Close to sink
- Close to drying area for wet art projects
- Near shelf with art supplies

Furniture

- Open shelving with labeled containers (a movable art cart can be used if space is limited)
- Easels (can be used to divide space)
- Tables and chairs
- Drying rack or space for drying

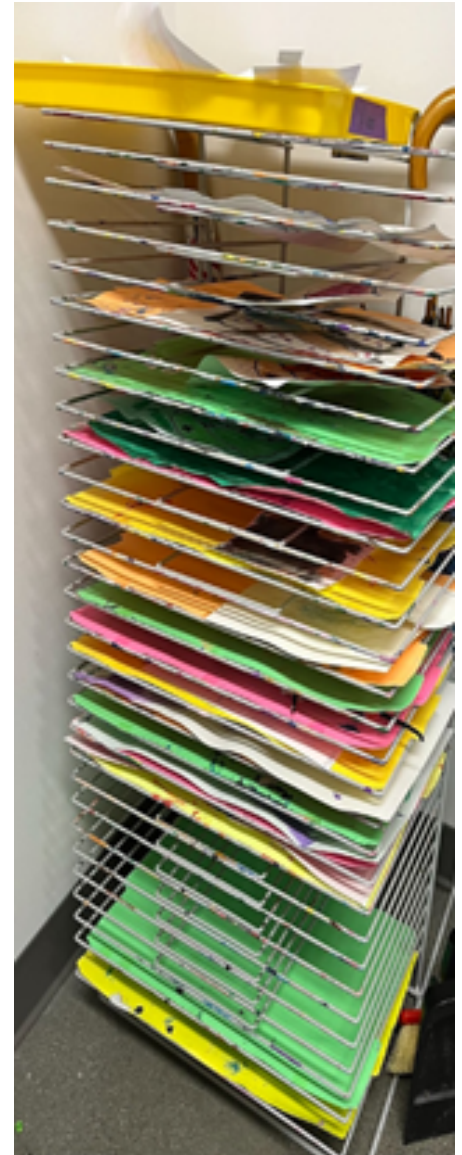
Possible Materials

- Easel
- Smocks
- Drying Rack
- Paint brushes, paint pots with lids
- Playdough with tools: rolling pins, scissors, cookie cutters
- Scissors (class set)
- Staplers
- Hole punchers
- Tape dispenser
- Consumables: tempera paint, masking tape, scotch tape, watercolors, oil pastels, pencils, crayons, markers, colored pencils, construction paper, watercolor paper, drawing paper, sequins, buttons, cotton balls, toothpicks, craft sticks, pipe cleaners, recycled materials/loose parts, fabric, stickers, glue and glue sticks, yarn, natural objects or items



Administrators:

Drying racks are essential for TK and kindergarten classrooms. Teachers are hesitant to provide experiences for children to express themselves creatively if there is limited or no space to store their creations while they dry.



Be creative when displaying your students' original work! Photos from White River Early Learning Center and Edwin Pratt Early Learning Center.





Science/Discovery Area

Children are naturally inquisitive and full of wonder. Providing a space where they can ask questions, search for answers, and observe their world provides opportunities for children to make meaningful connections in and outside the classroom.

Using the interests of the children and units of inquiry, the science/discovery area creates a space in the room for children to go and further develop their understanding of the natural and human-made world. Here, children will investigate problems, compare findings with classmates, test and develop their ideas, ask questions, and make predictions.

Incorporating a science/discovery area in your classroom enhances the understanding of scientific concepts and nurtures a lifelong appreciation for science and the natural world. It encourages students to become active and confident learners who are unafraid to explore, question, and discover.



Pumpkins are available for weighing in this discovery area.

Photo from Mill Pond Elementary, Yelm SD.

Space Considerations

- Against wall or other support
- Near natural light (window) or close to an outlet for light source for plants
- Near a water source

Furniture

- Open shelving with labeled containers
- Table (to maximize space, consider using the top surface of shelving unit for children's exploration; children can stand)
- A computer/tablet so children can look up information, take pictures, and observe

Possible Materials

- Scale or balance
- Magnifying glasses, bug magnifiers
- Tape measure, ruler
- Tweezers
- Sensory bottles (e.g., sound, smells)
- Natural materials for sorting and exploration (e.g., leaves, rocks, sticks, shells)
- Magnets and magnet wands
- Paper, clipboards, writing utensils
- Integrate materials based on current units of study



Water/Sensory Area

Sensory play is a fundamental element in the learning and development of young children, particularly in kindergarten and TK settings.

Children can explore measurement, size, weight, volume, consistency, and texture through sensory play. The sensory area encourages creativity, imagination, and problem-solving as children experiment, manipulate, and interact with various materials and textures.



Space Considerations

- Tile floor with rug to absorb spills
- Next to containers with sensory toys
- Place to hang smocks and towels

Furniture

- Sensory table with clear sides or clear plastic bins on top of tables
- Sand table
- Open shelving, baskets, clear plastic bins with materials

Possible Materials

- Sand table/sensory table with lid
- Smocks
- Sensory materials (e.g., sand, soil, water, beads, shaving cream)
- Measuring toys
- Funnels, sieves
- Sponges
- Shovels, rakes
- Rocks, sticks, leaves, and other natural materials
- Tongs/tweezers
- Cups, small buckets
- Small animal or vehicle toys

Using food, (e.g., rice, beans, pasta) as a sensory material can be insensitive to those who struggle to feed their families. Model that food is a valuable resource for everyone.



Both natural and manufactured materials provide engaging sensory experiences for children. Photos from Bethel Early Learning Center, White River Early Learning Center, and Edwin Pratt Early Learning Center.



Break Area

Classrooms should dedicate space for children needing a quiet place to regulate and work through emotions. A child in the break area should still feel part of the classroom community and should have opportunities to self-select throughout the day to think, self-reflect, relax, or problem-solve. Thinking about students sensory needs can help the teacher decide what should or should not be in this space. Depending on the needs of the students, this can change over time.

Space Considerations

- Quiet, cozy space for 1–2 children
- Carpet or rug

Furniture

- Floor pillows or bean bag
- Soft tent

Possible Materials

- Soft furnishings (pillows, bean bag chair)
- Quiet activities like board books, beads to string, breathing ball, sensory tube
- Visuals for self-regulating strategies
- Emotion chart
- Squish toys

These spaces provide privacy and resources for children who need time to self-regulate. Photos from White River Early Learning Center and Edwin Pratt Early Learning Center.



Managing Centers

Children benefit from opportunities to make meaningful choices when engaging in learning centers. Allowing children to select activities and determine when to transition between centers supports autonomy, engagement, and self-regulation. Maintaining open learning centers provides children with multiple options and encourages deeper exploration based on their interests.

Create a visual system that allows all children to see which centers are available and makes clear how many students may be at each center at a time.

Like any classroom routine, these learning area management strategies require specific teaching and take time.



Administrators:

Ensure schedules allow for extended opportunities for free play and guided play; and provide professional learning focused on implementation of play-based practices in TK and K.



In this picture, the available spots are denoted by the number of velcro pieces on the chart. Children move their pictures to their areas of choice. Children are encouraged to freely select their areas and move their pictures anytime.

Need More Layout Support?

Check out these layouts and furniture lists from reputable national companies for more ideas to set up your classroom!

TK and Kindergarten Samples

- [Floor plan from Lakeshore Learning](#)
- [Furniture list from Lakeshore Learning](#)
- [Floor plan and product list from Discount School Supply](#)
- [Floor plans from Community Playthings](#)
- [Floor plan and product list from Kaplan](#)



Think About It:

Cuban's (2001) research findings disclosed the significance of visual aids in the learning process. This study showed that only 11% of information acquisition is attributed to hearing. In contrast, 83% of knowledge absorption is attributed to visual exposure. Furthermore, the research revealed that individuals retain just 10% of what they read, 20% of what they hear, and 30% of what they see. However, a remarkable 50% retention rate is achieved when information is presented through auditory **and** visual means. Active engagement through speaking leads to 70% retention, but the most astonishing statistic is that **individuals retain 90% of information when they combine speaking with practical application.**



The picture above illustrates another learning area management strategy. Adopted from the [Tools of the Mind Curriculum](#), each learning area has color-coded clothespins that children clip to their clothing. When they want to change areas, they return to the meeting area and swap out their clothespin for another selection.



Visuals

Effective teachers use visuals to help children participate successfully in the classroom. Visuals aid in remembering and following expectations, routines, and schedules. They label materials, facilitating easy identification and independent storage. They also remind children of strategies for interacting with others, such as problem-solving and requesting materials.

Search the [Resource Library](#) from the National Center for Pyramid Model Innovations (NCPMI) for many free, downloadable visual materials. Visuals like the image below, help children know what to do in a particular area (dramatic play in this example).



Administrators:

Teachers benefit from the flexibility to use classroom wall space to display visuals that support children's learning and behavior. When considering policies that specify required postings or limit what may be displayed, it is important to prioritize visuals that children need to see and use most often. Visuals placed at children's eye level are especially effective when they are relevant to current learning and referenced regularly throughout the day or week.

Classroom Decor and Wall Space

Research shows that too much color and decoration can create sensory overload, making children less likely to be engaged and more likely to be distracted (Fisher et al., 2014).

Neutral colors, minimal wall clutter, and functional anchor charts are preferred to create a calming atmosphere that fosters focus. Using natural materials, such as straw baskets for storage instead of brightly colored plastic, reinforces a calm environment.

It is crucial to leave some space and not overwhelm children with too many visual stimuli:

- **Teachers should limit the number of anchor charts/learning posters displayed and rotate them regularly to expose students to new information.**
- **Walls that are overcrowded with information can make a room feel cluttered.**
- **Anything that is posted for children should be at their eye level.** If emergency procedures or family announcements need to be displayed, post them at an adult's eye level.



Learn More

Check out the [Do's and Don'ts of Classroom Decorations article](#) (Terada, 2018), [5 Tips for Decorating Your Classroom](#) (Edutopia, 2019), and the [Science of Classroom Design](#), all from Edutopia, to learn more about classroom decorations.

Read [Consider the Walls](#) (Tarr, 2004), an article that critically examines classroom walls from differing perspectives.

Items	Considerations: Placed at Children's Eye Level
Family Photos	• Use picture frames or removable photos that children can carry.
Children's Art or Writing	• Post original creative art or writing. • Avoid posting photocopies of pages that children color or decorate. • If allowed, consider hanging art from the ceiling using tree branches or dowel rods and fishing line.
Classroom Expectations	• Three–five expectations or rules.
Area Rules	• Display at each center or activity area.
Visual Schedule	• Use pictures and words. • Use pictures of children engaged in activities for each part of the day. • Make it interactive: i.e., children place checks next to completed activities or flip the card (activity) over.
Job Chart	• Use pictures and words. • Use pictures of children engaged in jobs.
Charts and Graphs from Lessons	• Secure charts or graphs used or created with the children (e.g., voting, graphing data, sorting letter sounds) so they can be referenced later. • Replace old charts with new charts on a regular basis.
Learning Posters	• Avoid posting the alphabet just below the ceiling. • Place posters in meaningful areas (e.g., alphabet by writing center and library). Small cards on a ring of nap time expectations for individual children is a great idea too.
Environmental Print	• Place these in relevant areas (e.g., stop sign near a door to line up, restaurant and food logos in dramatic play).



Language-Rich Environment

A language-rich environment will help facilitate literacy development and is a must-have when designing the learning environment. It allows students to interact with many different forms of print. Teachers should intentionally use and display print (and print concepts) throughout the classroom. This demonstrates that print carries meaning, and reading and writing serve everyday purposes. Teachers should add the following:

- **Label items and spaces** - Containers and materials (e.g., crayons in the art area), areas in the classroom (e.g., block area), and children's areas (e.g., cubbies). These labels should be in English and other languages represented in the classroom. Consider using a different color for each language.
- **Routines and instructions** - Leverage print around your classroom by posting routines.
- **Student name chart** - Create a chart of your students' names and pictures and consider posting this in the writing area. Children can use this to write each other messages or include others in their writings.
- **Daily read-alouds** - Read-alouds model that words carry meaning. TK and kindergarten classrooms should feature at least one read-aloud a day. Feel free to explore one book in depth and reread it with a different focus each time.
- **Bring in print from the community** - Use familiar community landmarks in your block center, or have children bring in names of their favorite food brands and use these for word walls.

- **Abundant writing materials** - Paper and writing utensils should be embedded into all learning centers.
- **A variety of reading materials** - Fiction, nonfiction, class-made books, magazines, posters, anchor charts, morning messages, sign-in sheets, etc.
- **Children's writing displayed on the walls**
 - Honor children's work by proudly displaying their work. This creates a language-rich environment and builds classroom community by allowing children's work on the walls.



Learn More

You can read more about language-rich environments from [Reading Rockets Guide to Literacy-Rich Environments](#) (Access Center, 2007).



Materials

Access to a variety of materials is part of a high-quality learning environment. In a child-directed space, students have the autonomy to select their materials. A variety of materials allows children to select what interests them. Children need various materials that differ in size, texture, and color to help inspire their creativity.

Open-Ended Materials

Open-ended materials do not have one designated purpose and offer endless possibilities. These materials inspire creativity, allow children to leverage their imagination, encourage experimentation, and can be moved, combined, and designed in any way the child sees fit.

A variety of open-ended materials allows children to explore and demonstrate numerous skills across all areas of development.

Examples of Open-Ended Materials

- Magna-tiles
- Figurines
- Manipulatives
- Wooden blocks
- Pebbles
- Pinecones
- Playdough
- Counting blocks
- Beads
- Clothespins
- Bottle caps

Natural materials, such as rocks, shells, pinecones, leaves, and sticks, provide an ideal link to science exploration. Using natural materials in the classroom helps connect children to the outdoors and sparks an interest in nature. Donating open-ended or natural materials to the classroom is another way for families to contribute to their child's learning.



Classroom Tip:

Make note of how children are using materials, what materials are used most often, or not at all. Replace broken materials and switch out items regularly based on the interests of children.



Learn More: Loose Parts

Open-ended materials are referred to as loose parts in some educational philosophies (ex., Montessori, Reggio Emilia). You can find a variety of books and articles on this topic. If you would like to learn more, check out the [Loose Parts](#) series by Lisa Daly and Miriam Beloglovsky or this free downloadable guide from Sally Haughey and Nicole Hill called [Loose Parts: A Start-Up Guide](#).



Recycled Materials

Everyday items like paper towel rolls can be used in a classroom. Cardboard tubes can be used in art projects; and plastic cups, plates, or containers can hold art supplies, paint, or water and can be used in many projects. Recycled materials offer an excellent opportunity for family engagement because they offer a simple way for families to contribute to the classroom.

Close-Ended Materials

Young children need consistency, order, and purpose, and close-ended materials to this. Close-ended materials have a single purpose and offer one specific way to use them. Typically, close-ended materials target a specific skill or learning target.

Examples of Close-Ended Materials

- Puzzles
- Board games
- Sequencing materials
- Lacing cards
- Letter-sound correspondence materials
- One-to-one correspondence materials



Classroom Tip:

Egg cartons may harbor bacteria. Even with sanitation methods in place, it is not advisable to use them in the classroom.

Outdoor Play

Outdoor play contributes to children's development by offering physical, mental, and social benefits. It supports physical activity, aiding motor skills, bone density, and muscle development. Furthermore, outdoor play facilitates social interaction, problem-solving, and creativity, and may enhance a connection with nature and potentially improve mental health.

From reducing stress to improving mental and physical health, outdoor-based learning helps kids thrive. Research shows that kids who participate in outdoor educational activities are more likely to graduate, are better behaved in school, and have more relationships with peers, higher academic achievement, more critical thinking skills, and more direct experience of scientific concepts in the field. They also have better leadership and collaboration skills and a deeper engagement with learning, place, and community.



Conceptual design for the playground located at Walla Walla Center for Children & Families



Learn More: Outdoor Play

- [Young Children Benefit from Regular Time Outdoors](#)
- [Nature as a Pathway for Healing from Aces](#)
- [What to Wear: How to dress for nature adventures](#)
- [Incorporating Nature into your Early Childhood Program](#)
- [Outdoor Learning and Social Emotional Learning Connection](#)
- [Considerations for Outdoor Learning](#)

Learning Environment Reflection Questions

1. How do you determine which materials are rotated regularly, and how does this support children's interests and learning?
2. Are materials accessible, well organized, and labeled in ways that support independent use and cleanup?
3. Do storage containers and shelves support children's ability to use and return materials with minimal adult assistance?
4. How does the learning environment reflect a calm, child-centered space that supports engagement and regulation?
5. In what ways do wall displays, including children's artwork, reflect the cultures, identities, and home lives of the children and families you serve?
6. Are visuals and displays placed at children's eye level and used meaningfully during the day?
7. Can children with visual, motor, or other access needs move through the classroom and participate in activities with minimal adult assistance?
8. Do learning areas include picture labels or visual directions that help children understand expectations and how to engage?
9. Is a daily schedule posted with visual cues to support understanding and predictability?
10. Are individualized visual schedules available for children who benefit from additional support?

Play in the Learning Environment

1. How does play in my classroom reflect and support children's developmental strengths, interests, and emerging skills?
2. How does play connect to learning goals and curricular outcomes while remaining child-centered and meaningful?
3. What opportunities does play provide for children to collaborate, problem-solve, and engage with peers?
4. How do materials, space, and time encourage sustained, imaginative, and purposeful play?
5. How do I observe, document, and reflect on children's play to inform planning and instructional decisions?
6. In what ways does play provide children with choice, autonomy, and opportunities to direct their own learning?

CHAPTER 3



Chapter Three Key Learning Objectives

After completing this chapter, readers will be able to:

1. **Describe** how a teacher's attitudes and dispositions toward teaching and learning influence children's experiences in school.
2. **Explain** the importance of strong content knowledge and pedagogy in supporting children's development across all learning domains.
3. **Recognize** how teachers interpret and implement curriculum while using observation and assessment to inform instruction.
4. **Explain** how high-quality instruction supports children's social, physical, emotional, and cognitive development and is grounded in developmentally appropriate practice (DAP).
5. **Identify** characteristics of child-centered learning experiences that are meaningful, relevant, and appropriate for young learners.
6. **Describe** instructional strategies that support active learning, including play, child-selected activities, small-group learning, movement, music, and interactions with peers and adults.

TPEP Criteria 2, Instruction:

- Centering instruction on high expectations for student achievement.
- Demonstrating effective teaching practices.
- Providing clear and intentional focus on subject matter content and curriculum.



This chapter builds on developmentally appropriate practices and engaging environments, focusing on hands-on, meaningful, and play-based learning. Teachers can incorporate these instructional practices into any academic instruction. TK and kindergarten teachers need various effective instructional strategies at the ready. Choosing the best strategy at any given moment depends on the learning goal, the specific situation, and the individual child (Heroman and Copple, 2006). Teachers should be flexible in using and combining various approaches.



Classroom Tip:

Intentionally weave learning opportunities across social-emotional, physical, cognitive, and language domains throughout the day - for example, by embedding math concepts in block play, literacy in dramatic play, and self-regulation skills during transitions - to create rich, connected experiences for every child.

Teacher's Role

According to the Alliance for Childhood (2009), "In effective play-based kindergarten, the teacher has a strong though subtle role. [They] understand child development—cognitive, physical, and social emotional. The teacher is attuned to the children's play themes and builds on them, introducing new content and play materials to stimulate their minds. [They know] the needs of individual children and help them overcome obstacles in their lives that hinder learning" (p. 8).

Intentional Teaching

Intentional teaching in TK or kindergarten classrooms recognizes the extensive role of teachers in skillfully orchestrating these interactions to facilitate meaningful learning experiences for children. It also emphasizes purposeful and well-crafted teacher-child interactions that contribute to the teacher's goal of promoting holistic child development and learning.

It is important to highlight that intentional teaching is not synonymous with direct instruction. Teachers can grow their pedagogy by including intentional instructional strategies in their daily practice. Research on cognitive science, master teachers, and cognitive supports was consolidated by Rosenshine (2012) to put together a list of effective instructional practices described below:

- **Review previous learning.** Daily review can strengthen previous learning and lead to fluent recall.
- **Present in small steps with practice.** Only present small amounts of new material at one time and then assist students as they practice after each step. Presenting too much information may confuse students and it overwhelms their working memory.
- **Ask questions.** Questions help children practice new information, connect to prior learning, and allow teachers to check for understanding.
- **Provide models.** Teachers should demonstrate step-by-step how to perform a task or solve a problem. This may involve narrating the thinking process while sounding out a word.



- **Guide student practice.** Children need additional time rephrasing, elaborating, engaging with, and summarizing material before storing it in their long-term memory. Teachers facilitate rehearsal by asking questions and providing feedback (correcting errors in understanding).
- **Encourage a growth mindset.** Instead of giving evaluative praise, offer comments or nonverbal actions that promote children's persistence and effort (e.g., "That wasn't easy, but you kept trying different things.").
- **Give specific feedback.** Offer specific rather than general comments on the child's performance (That's a "d," Lilly, not a "b." It looks a lot like a "b," but it's turned the other way, see?").
- **Model skills, desired behavior, and problem-solving strategies.** Model a skill or desirable way of behaving for example, whispering when you want the children to lower their own voices; model cooperation and problem-solving by saying, "You both want to use the computer, so let's think about how this could work" or using felt pieces to demonstrate and talk through how to solve an addition problem.

- **Create or add challenges.** Encourage academic rigor and promote a culture of continuous learning by generating a problem or adding difficulty to a task so that it is just beyond what children have already mastered (once a child counts up to five items accurately, begin engaging them in counting sets of six to eight).
- **Give a cue, hint, or other assistance.** Scaffold children's learning by helping them work "on the edge" of their current competence (such as initially labeling cubbies with both picture and print labels, with the pictures to be removed later). Ask prompting questions to help children solve problems ("What would happen if you moved the piece this way?" when working on a puzzle.)
- **Provide information.** Directly give children facts ("Birds make nests like this one to live in"), verbal labels ("This is a cylinder"), and other information. Provide a balance of background information, simple facts, and more complex ideas.
- **Give directions.** Provide specific instructions for children's actions or behavior ("Move the mouse to this icon and click on it; "Pour very slowly so we don't lose any of the liquid").

TK and kindergarten teachers are most effective at meeting their students' needs and helping them reach challenging goals by scaffolding and/or gradually releasing responsibility during activities over the course of the year. The individual needs and developmental level of the child will determine how much support to provide and when they are ready to start taking control of their actions and learning experiences.





Implicit Bias and Teaching

Examining implicit bias is fundamental to improving educational outcomes, meeting children where they are, and giving all children the education they deserve. Without acknowledgment of one's biases, it is easy to equate children's achievement differences to purely external factors. Here is what implicit bias may look like in a TK or kindergarten classroom:

- Calling on one subset of students more often (ex., calling on more females than males).
- Offering more support to one student group.
- Giving positive reinforcement or words of praise more often (ex., praising a native English speaker for asking a question during a large group, but rushing an emerging bilingual student to ask their question).
- Responding to interactions more frequently (ex., offering more support to male students).

Teachers should continuously reflect on their beliefs and practices to provide children with the equitable learning experiences they deserve.



Administrators:

Encourage teachers to videotape themselves or have peers observe each other to learn more about their instructional practices and implicit biases.



Watch and Learn

Watch this video about a [Yale Study on Teacher Bias](#).



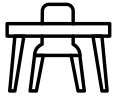
Learn More: Implicit Bias

Implicit bias is a universal phenomenon, not limited by race, gender, or even country of origin. If you are curious about your implicit biases, take this [Implicit Bias Test](#) (2011) from Harvard University.

Language and Teacher-Child Interactions

A critical factor in children's learning is the language they hear and use in the classroom. A language-rich environment includes speech between teacher and children; and between children and their peers. Teacher-child interactions have emerged in research as a key indicator of a quality learning environment and play an important role in building relationships and improving children's academic outcomes (Hamre, 2014).





Classroom Tip:

[Lunchtime Conversations](#) (2023) is a great resource with ideas to facilitate conversations. Print and post these suggestions by snack tables as a helpful reminder for all the adults in the room.



Strategies for Increasing Language Experiences

Effective teacher-child interactions are vital for children's social and academic development. By providing carefully designed and implemented professional development, the quality of language experiences and teacher-child interactions can be increased. Read on for evidence-based strategies that can help improve language in the classroom.

Model Conversations with Rich Vocabulary

Children learn language by hearing it throughout the day. This exposure helps them with grammar, sentence structure, turn-taking, vocabulary, and cognitive skills (Salmon and Barrera, 2021). Teachers can enhance language learning by narrating their actions and using complex vocabulary. For example, saying, "I am looking for the non-fiction book about habitats," or describing the actions of others like, "I see Julio building a narrow road around the block shelf."

Ask Open-Ended Questions

Interactions between students and teachers occur throughout the day, significantly aiding language, and cognitive development.

Open-ended questions, which require thoughtful responses, are particularly effective (Salmon and Barrera, 2021). Such questions help children organize and articulate their thoughts, facilitating deeper learning and reflection.

Examples of open-ended questions and prompts include:

- How did you know that?
- Tell me how that works.
- What should we do next?
- How can you...?
- What would happen if...?



WaKIDS Connection:

Open ended questions are an excellent way to observe children's language skills.



Plan Peer Conversations

Intentionally creating opportunities for children to interact increases their language use and social skills. Activities that encourage peer interaction include partner tasks, group discussions, snack time chats, dramatic play, and group games or outdoor activities.

"Play is often talked about as if it were a relief from serious learning. But for children, play is serious learning. Play is really the work of childhood."

- Fred Rogers



Learning Experiences

Young children are naturally curious and eager to learn about their surroundings. However, they need guidance and support as they grow and encounter new information. Play, small and whole group activities, and independent exploration are essential for children's cognitive, social, and emotional development. Varied learning experiences provide different contexts for learning.



Watch and Learn

Watch [3Ts for Early Educators](#) (2022), from the [TMW Center for Early Learning + Public Health](#) at the University of Chicago to learn more about using the Tune In, Talk More, Take Turns strategies when interacting with children in your classroom.

Check out different prompts to ask children, [Higher Order Thinking Prompts](#) (Early Childhood Community Development Center) and [Open-ended Questions](#) (from Georgia's Pre-K Program). [Talk, Read, and Sing Together Every Day for Teachers and Families](#) provides several strategies for developing language skills.



Administrators:

Encourage and grant time to teachers (including specialists) to integrate play into TK and kindergarten curricula.



Purposeful Play

Play is a multifaceted and essential aspect of childhood development, encompassing a spectrum of activities and a range of structures within those activities. Three types of play include free play, guided play, and games. **Free play** provides learning opportunities while still allowing children to direct their play. Conversely, current research (Zosh, et al., 2022) shows **guided play and games** are more effective in achieving learning goals. Children learn more vocabulary and spatial skills in guided play compared to free play. **Each approach to play offers distinct benefits and contributes to various aspects of children's cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development, emphasizing the importance of providing diverse play experiences to support holistic growth and learning.** These three types of play should be central to any TK or kindergarten classroom.



WaKIDS Connection:

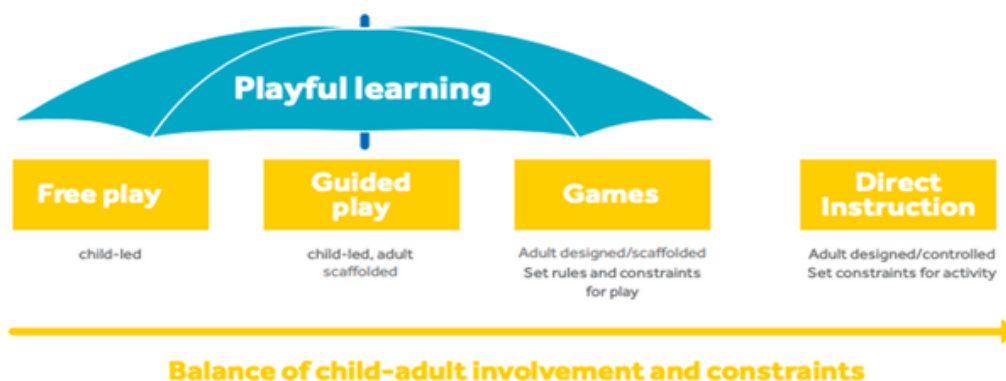
Purposeful play is an excellent time to observe students for the Whole-child Assessment.



Free Play (Child-Led)

Free play is an activity initiated and directed by the child, where they can choose and use materials in any way they like, without adult interference. TK and kindergarten students need daily opportunities for free play in their classrooms, as it is essential for developing self-regulation, social skills, and creativity (NAEYC, 2022). Free play should not be seen as just a luxury, break, or limited to recess; it is a critical part of their learning experience. Free play:

- Allows children to explore, create, and engage based on their own interests.
- Encourages autonomy, creativity, and self-expression.
- Helps children practice important social-emotional, communication, and problem-solving skills.





Guided Play (Child-Led/Adult Designed)

Guided play combines both free play and structured activities, where children are provided with guidance and direction but still have the freedom to explore and learn through their curiosity.

- Involves adult facilitation/scaffolding to provide support, encouragement, and learning opportunities.
- Cultivates a child's creativity and imagination while supporting cognitive and social development.

For example: a teacher may set up a play area with different materials and objects and give children a specific task or challenge to complete, but, they are free to explore and create in their own way.

Guided play, which lies midway between direct instruction and free play, has outperformed direct instruction and free play approaches in encouraging positive academic outcomes (Skene et al., 2022). Guided play allows children to maintain a significant degree of control over their learning while presenting a learning goal and scaffolding the environment. This creates active and engaged learning situations (Weisberg et al., 2013).

Games (Adult Designed)

Games involve predefined rules, goals, and structures, offering opportunities for social interaction, skill development, and strategic thinking within a structured framework. Games play a vital role in promoting learning in early childhood by providing engaging and interactive experiences that facilitate the development of various skills and concepts.

- Through games, children practice problem-solving, critical thinking, and decision-making in a fun and motivating environment.
- Games encourage exploration, experimentation, and creativity, helping children develop a deeper understanding of concepts in subjects like math, language, social-emotional, and science:
 - Matching sorting activities, children develop early math and literacy concepts such as identifying patterns, recognizing shapes, and distinguishing colors or letters.
 - Games involving counting spatial reasoning, or simple addition and subtraction strengthen children's mathematical understanding and problem-solving abilities. One study showed that playing a linear, numerical-based board game increased numerical development (Siegler and Ramani, 2008).
 - Cooperative games reach sharing, turn-taking, and teamwork, fostering empathy and collaboration. Games require rule-following and decision-making, promoting self-regulation skills. The playful nature of games offers diverse learning opportunities, enhancing academic, social, and emotional development.

Incorporating games into early childhood education creates engaging environments, catering to various interests, and fostering a love of learning, building a strong foundation for future success.



Teachers Role in Play

While play is undoubtedly children's work, teachers play a key role in facilitating meaningful play. Recall that play is freely chosen by the child and child directed. When playing, children lose autonomy through teacher involvement, and the play experience loses meaning and purpose. Conversely, teachers empower children to learn when they play a supportive role.

Planning for Play

(Adapted from Zosh et al., 2022)

A high-quality and developmentally appropriate learning environment (see Chapter 2 for more details) will prepare the classroom for meaningful play experiences. Because play is how young children learn best, classrooms thrive when we make time, create welcoming spaces, and provide rich materials for exploration.

To plan for play:

- **Include play in classroom schedules.** This may be through learning centers, or choice time, but including play is paramount.
- **Include a variety of materials.** Chapter 2 explores materials in depth, but various materials empower children to intentionally engage with materials that interest them.
- **Create a developmentally appropriate environment.** If only desks are in the classroom, how would students play? A DAP environment is built upon children's needs, interests, and abilities. Remember that establishing learning environments that are developmentally appropriate and promote creativity is part of [RCW 28A.150.315](#).

- **Provide choices.** Allow children to choose where, with what materials, with whom, and how long they play (within the allotted time). This freedom enables children to become more independent and shape their own learning experiences.
- **Scaffold their understanding.** Plan for teachable moments during play by including materials, opportunities, or questions that extend upon children's current understanding.
- **Feeling safe and included.** Children learn best when they are welcomed and included. Ensure that the environment and materials reflect children's needs, developmental levels, ethnicities, languages, and culture.

Facilitating Play

In the supporting role of facilitating play, a teacher can ensure that children experience success in play. To do so, teachers must first know students' interests, needs, and developmental levels.

- **Ask open-ended questions.** Extend children's learning and grow their vocabulary by asking relevant questions during play.
- **Leverage teachable moments.** As children explore and discover during play, teachers will encounter moments when they are on the brink of learning something new. In this situation, help children by assisting them with their discovery (but do not take over the experience or give them answers).
- **Model.** Some children may need assistance entering into play by watching a teacher model for them. Modeling may include social-emotional skills (entering play, sharing materials, communicating with peers). When modeling, it is best to stop once children are set up for success.



Reviewing Play

Teachers can plan for play and inform their instruction by reviewing children's play:

- **Being an observer** - This is an excellent way to conduct the WaKIDS Whole-child Assessment. Take this time to watch children play and document observations (anecdotal notes, pictures, videos, etc.).
- **Touching base** - Check in with children during play.

Indicators of Playful Learning

The indicators of playful learning discussed in this chapter highlight the importance of teachers creating an environment where children can take charge of their own meaningful learning experiences. This involves providing the necessary space and resources, recognized as essential instructional practices.

Playful learning is characterized by three key factors (Mardell et al., 2023):

- Children taking the lead in their educational journey.
- Embracing exploration of the unknown with wonder and curiosity.
- Finding joy in the learning process.



The Project Approach

The project approach is a child-centered methodology in kindergarten and TK settings to foster holistic development and deep learning experiences. This approach emphasizes inquiry, exploration, and collaboration among young learners, encouraging them to investigate topics of interest within a structured framework. Through projects, children engage in meaningful experiences that integrate various subjects, promote critical thinking and problem-solving skills, and encourage creativity. These projects often involve real-world connections, enabling children to make sense of their surroundings while developing essential social-emotional skills such as communication, teamwork, and empathy. The project approach in kindergarten and TK cultivates a love for learning, nurtures curiosity, and lays a strong foundation for lifelong learning.

Community Playthings Resources:

The [Project Approach to Teaching and Learning](#) and [Why the Project Approach](#).



Administrators:

"[A Pedagogy of Play](#)" includes a chapter on what administrators, school leaders, and teachers can do to build a schoolwide culture of playful learning.



Leading Learning

It is crucial to empower students to take charge of their learning journey. In play, the children are in charge, choosing who to play with, what to play, and for how long to play; “Learners leading learning is a key element of playful learning” (Mardell et al., 2023, p. 50). By fostering an environment where learners feel confident seeking assistance, establishing goals, and expressing their ideas, teachers promote a culture of lifelong learning.

Exploring the Unknown

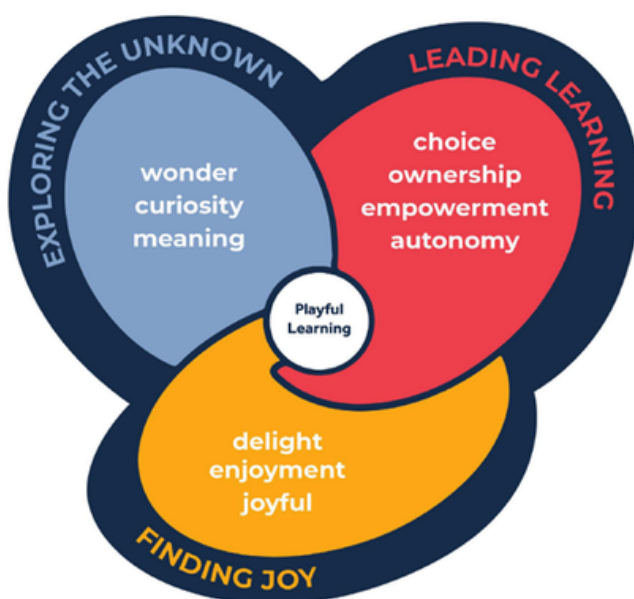
Embracing the unknown is a core aspect of playful learning, characterized by wonder, curiosity, and the pursuit of meaningful experiences (Mardell et al., 2023). Teachers are facilitators of this work by allowing children to explore the unknown. Add materials and resources that encourage exploration and experimentation in the classroom. This may include:

- Open-ended toys
- Sensory materials
- Thematic play areas that spark children’s imagination

Teachers can further cultivate a culture of inquiry and discovery by asking open-ended questions encouraging children to hypothesize and problem-solve during play. Also providing opportunities for children to engage in hands-on, experiential learning activities that promote critical thinking and creativity.

Finding Joy

Joy is a key element in playful learning and promotes interest and motivation (Mardell et al., 2023). Teachers can achieve this by incorporating fun and excitement into learning activities and demonstrating a genuine love for learning and play. By actively engaging with students during playtime, offering encouragement, and facilitating social interactions, teachers help cultivate a sense of joy and fulfillment in children's play experiences.



Elements are illustrated in this diagram as cross-cultural indicators of playful learning (Mardell et al., 2023). When learners exercise choice, explore the unknown, and experience joy simultaneously, it indicates the presence of playful learning, fostering an environment where meaningful educational experiences thrive.

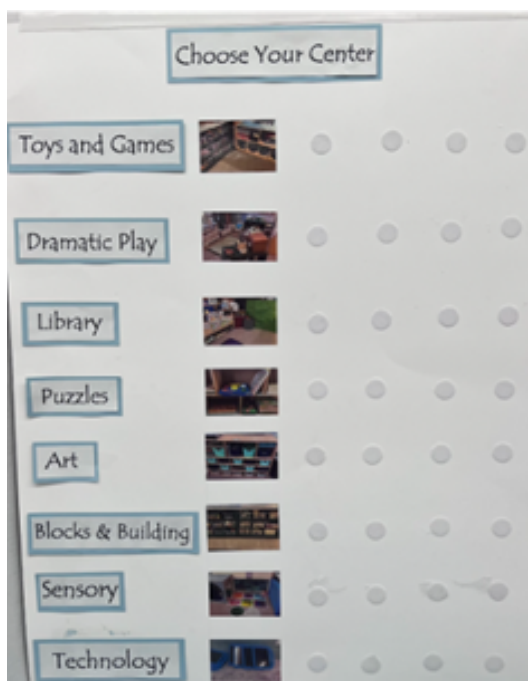


Play in the Classroom

Plan, Do, Reflect

When children engage in self-selected play, they actively connect with the skills introduced throughout the day and week, fostering personal meaning. The "Plan, Do, Reflect" process becomes a vital tool, allowing children to solidify and expand these skills by establishing meaningful connections to their lives.

The "Plan, Do, Reflect" model is ideally a 60-minute uninterrupted component of the day. During this time, the teacher engages with children to expand their thinking, guide them, and model learning while children participate in both guided and free play. The process evolves throughout the year, starting simply and gaining complexity as children become familiar with their choices, articulate plans, and reflect.



This teacher-created board is a helpful visual tool to facilitate children's planning. Photo from Oakville Elementary.

Plan: "Choice with Intention"

The planning process encourages children to articulate their ideas, intentions, and decisions. It increases not only their self-confidence but also establishes a sense of control. It begins the process of engagement in learning, leading to concentrated play that allows a child to move along a continuum with increasing complexity.

Do: "Develops Competent Thinkers, Decision-Makers, and Problem Solvers"

Through the process of 'do' children can carry out their ideas with the guided support of a trained adult. Children can construct meaning as they engage in key experiences by manipulating appropriate familiar and unfamiliar materials and interacting with peers and adults. In a risk-taking environment the children can explore and extend their ideas while also processing new information. The adults can then observe, support, and scaffold the students' play, leading to a deeper level of learning.

Reflect: "Remembering and Reflecting with Analysis"

Children can use language and/or props to share their thinking and learning process with their peers. In doing so, they can describe and review mental images. The child can engage in a conversation beyond the present and evaluate the process of their learning.

Plan

What it Is

- Adults provide opportunities to have children plan thinking of the student's development.
- Children are provided the time to individually plan and share their plan with an adult or peer.
- Children can communicate their plans using pictures, print, or words.
- Each child plans and then gets right to work! During the work period, children have the freedom to move between areas.

What it is Not

- Children are assigned areas to play in, or the areas are structured so that there is only one entry point.
- Children are all asked the same rote sentence: "Where are you going to play today?"
- The adult closes certain classroom areas, not allowing them to be used.

Do

What it Is

- The "DO" immediately follows the plan.
- Children can carry out their plans by self-selecting the materials they need and choosing whom to work with.
- Children are free to invent and create since the materials are all open-ended.
- The adult's role is to interact, play, and extend a child's thinking by always being at the same physical level. It is a 'with' process.
- The adult-child interactions sound like conversations, and the adults support a child's ideas/learning.
- Student supports are scheduled outside of this block of time.
- Adults attend to the child's social-emotional needs, addressing them through problem-solving issues.

What it is Not

- The centers are filled with pre-set activities for the children to complete.
- Only a certain number of children can be in an area at any given time.
- Children are directed how and when to use materials by the adult in the classroom.
- Adults in the classroom are doing paperwork, packing students up, answering emails, and directing.
- The adults are only supervising the children and passively observing them at work.
- Adults give their ideas of what the children should be doing.
- Adults tell children how to solve their problems without taking in the child's view or voice.



Reflect

What it Is

- Reflection follows the plan.
- Adults provide opportunities to have children reflect, thinking of the student's development.
- Children can share their work using props, words, pictures, writing, and/or reenactment.

What it is Not

- Reflection happens as a detached part of the sequence, for example, at the end of the day.
- Children are asked to reflect in a rote fashion: "Where did you work today?"

Purposeful play can and should coexist with rigorous learning. The following are examples of how play contributes to the enhancement of mathematical skills within the context of the kindergarten state standards:

Play and the Kindergarten Washington State Standards for Mathematics

K.Q.CC Counting and Cardinality

Know number names and the count sequence: Play can involve games or activities that incorporate numbers, helping children recognize and understand the symbolic representation of numbers.

Count to tell the number of objectives: Through play, children often engage in activities that involve counting objects, whether it is counting loose parts, building blocks, or cookies in dramatic play.

Compare numbers: Play often involves solving problems, whether it is figuring out how to balance blocks to build a tower or strategizing in a board game or balancing a scale in the science center.

K.R.OA Operations and Algebraic Thinking

Understand addition as putting together and adding to and understand subtraction as taking apart and taking from: Watch how children group items, count aloud, and respond to prompts about "adding to" or "taking away" while they are playing store, pretend cooking or building with blocks.

K.R.NBT
Number and
Base Ten

Work with numbers 11–19 to gain foundations for place value: Many play-based activities involve challenges that require grouping, counting, and decomposing numbers, helping children develop reasoning about number relationships. Play also provides a bridge from concrete representations (like blocks or objects) to abstract thinking about numbers.

K.DA.MD
Measurement
and Data

Describe and compare measurable attributes: In a science center, challenge children to track plant's growth and measure over time. In blocks, observe children comparing the height of their structures. Additionally, activities that involve measuring ingredients or comparing sizes during play contribute to understanding measurement concepts.

Classify objects and count the number of objects in each category: You may see this standard in dramatic play, with children taking orders.

K.SR.G
Geometry

Identify and describe the shapes (squares, circles, triangles, rectangles, hexagons, cubes, cones, cylinders, and spheres): Building with blocks and planning structures helps children grasp concepts like size, shape, and spatial relationships. This lays the foundation for geometry understanding.

Analyze, compare, create, and compose shapes: Solving puzzles requires spatial reasoning, helping children develop a sense of how shapes fit together and spatial awareness.





Stations and Centers

Stations and centers (or interest areas, free choice, etc.) are terms used often, yet differently, in early learning and elementary settings.

How do learning centers differ from learning stations? While both may be seen in a TK or kindergarten classroom, exploring, and understanding the differences is important. This guide refers to stations and centers with these understandings:

- **Stations** refer to teacher-selected activities where children independently practice specific skills, typically in math and literacy.
- **Centers** refer to free choice centers where children choose where they play, how long they play, and how they play in each center. Children engage in free and guided play in centers.



Learn More About Play

Explore these resources from the LEGO Foundation for ideas to embed [playful learning](#) into the classroom.

Read [Playful Learning: A Powerful Teaching Tool from NAEYC](#).

Keep in Mind

- Both stations and centers play a critical role in children's learning and are present in quality TK and kindergarten classrooms.
- Centers should be implemented in both settings every day for a minimum of 45–60 minutes in TK and at least 45 minutes in kindergarten.
- TK programs may consider utilizing stations in the second half of the school year.

Learning Center and Learning Stations

Similarities

Use of hands-on developmentally appropriate materials
Standards-based
Intentional environment and materials
Document learning and development via work samples
Develops autonomy and self-regulation
Promotes creativity

Learning Center

Differences

- Free play and guided play
- General practice of standards-based skills
- Process-oriented
- Integrated content
- Choice of participation
- Emphasis on social-emotional learning

Learning Station

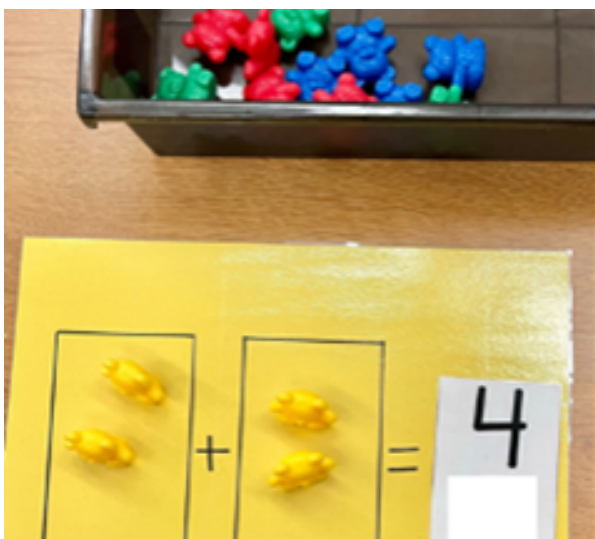
- Specific skills practice
- Product-oriented
- Optional integration
- Mandatory participation
- Emphasis on cognitive learning

Stations

- Children can work independently, with a partner, or in a small group.
- As children become more comfortable navigating stations, they might monitor their progress by using a system for documenting completion of tasks.
- While some activities may require specific documentation, avoid relying exclusively on commercial worksheets, instead opting for more meaningful ways for children to document their learning.
- Teachers can use self-correcting materials (e.g., pieces that only fit together with a correct response) or provide materials that are open-ended.
- Instructions and visual cues should be given for each station activity, allowing children to work independently with minimal to no guidance from an adult.
- It is helpful if, throughout the year, stations contain similar-type activities, so children know what to do, but materials are changed within the activities to reflect current learning topics and to sustain the engagement of children.
- It is common practice to transition small group activities to stations, where children are already familiar with the activity and can continue to explore the materials independently.



Above are two examples of literacy stations. On the bottom, children create letters out of craft sticks, and on the top, they sort objects based on their initial letter sounds.



Two examples of math stations: Children use manipulatives and number cards to create number sentences and make thematic bowls of soup with numbered recipe cards.



Literacy Station Examples

Skills	Phonological awareness Explore more phonological awareness activities from Reading Rockets (n.d.). Print upper and lower-case letters. Capitalize the first word in a sentence. Spell simple words phonetically. Use ending punctuation.
Partners	Beginning sound or rhyming memory game. Tic-tac-toe using letters, words, or punctuation marks. Phoneme Dominoes
Drawing/ Writing	Draw pictures of objects with initial consonant sounds or rhyming words. Create an alphabet book. Squiggle pictures: Children create a picture from a random scribble on a page and then write a word, sentence, or description to go with their picture. Can be theme related. Write letters to friends, family, or story characters. Write the room.
Manipulative /Sensory	Write letters in sand (or create letters in playdoh) to match the beginning sound of a picture. Write letters and words on sand or shaving cream. Create letters or words with playdoh. Use small blocks, paper clips, craft sticks, etc. to create letters and words. Use a keyboard or computer to write.



Math Station Examples

Skills	Classify objects. Analyze, compare, create shapes.
Partners	Scavenger hunt to find objects that fit into different categories. Shape grab bag - take turns using hands to feel the pattern block in the bag and name the shape.
Drawing/ Writing	Draw or list objects that fit into different categories (e.g., animals that fly, live in water, live on land). Draw and color various shapes. Draw shapes that fit into different categories.
Manipulative /Sensory	Sort natural or play materials on t-charts, pie-charts or in containers. Use pattern blocks to create shapes, with or without templates. Use geoboards and rubber bands to create shapes. Use various materials (e.g., pipe cleaners, playdoh) to create shapes.



Watch and Learn: Learning Stations

[Station Rotation: Differentiating Instruction to Reach All Students](#) (5:15; Edutopia, 2017).

[Literacy Centers in Action](#) (4:43; Smedley-Warren, 2020).

[Best Activities for Independent Work Stations in Kindergarten and First Grade](#) (10:08) Teachers Making the Basics Fun, 2022).



Classroom Tip:

Even though stations are teacher-selected activities, they should still provide opportunities for choice and creativity!



Centers (Free Choice or Free Play)

- Children engage in both free play and guided play in a carefully teacher-planned environment.
- Various centers that promote play and learning should be included in TK and kindergarten programs:
 - blocks
 - library
 - writing
 - dramatic play
 - science
 - math and manipulatives
 - art
 - sensory experiences
- Materials in these centers should be relevant and culturally representative of the children and the community and refreshed often.

Refer to Chapter 2 on materials to find detailed lists of appropriate materials to include in each center.

- During centers, children choose where, with whom, and for how long they want to play in each center.
- The **Plan-Do-Reflect** process described earlier takes place during centers. It facilitates children's development of executive function skills as they play, implement, and then reflect on their experiences.
- Centers should be available daily for a minimum of 45–60 minutes in TK and at least 45 minutes in kindergarten.



Learn More About Play

Read [The Pedagogy of Early Learning, A State of the Field Research Brief](#) from the Center on Early Learning Success.



Administrators:

See how to make TPEP connections to Play/Choice time at end of chapter.



Classroom Tip:

Centers should be available for all children every day and should never be delayed until other work or tasks are completed. Engaging in centers is not a reward, it is a critical learning activity that all children should take part in daily.

Resources:

[Printable Posters](#) to prompt conversations in different centers.

[Planning Guide](#) to help plan meaningful centers.



WaKIDS Connection:

Observations during play (i.e., center time) are authentic and valuable. You will gain information about children's cognitive, language and social skills, as well as amazing insight into their personalities!

Small Group

Teacher-initiated small group activities are most appropriate for skill and concept development, allowing for closer observation and guidance (Wasik, 2008).

- Teachers can support and monitor children's progress with subject area concepts and skills during small group sessions.
- Small groups should consist of 2–5 children with similar learning needs. Although the small group experience may be teacher-initiated, the activities need to be engaging, offer choices, and be student-directed as much as possible.



Think About It:

Calendar activities for young children are a common practice but do not make the impact we think they do. Read [Good Intentions Gone Awry](#) from NAEYC (Beneke, Ostrosky, and Katz, 2008) to learn appropriate alternatives!



Classroom Tip:

TK small groups should be 15 minutes and kindergarten small groups should aim for 10-20 minutes.



Administrators:

Please consider recommended whole group times for TK and kindergarten be limited to 15-20 minutes or less when structuring the master schedules for our youngest learners.



Whole Group

Whole group experiences are ideal for read-alouds, community-building, movement, music, and introducing or reviewing concepts (Vanover, 2020). A whole group is only one strategy for engaging with children and not the primary way to support their learning (Wasik, 2008).

- **It is recommended that whole group experiences for TK and kindergarten be limited to 15-20 minutes or less** (Virtual Lab School, n.d.).
- Teachers must monitor children's engagement and attention and **end whole group experiences when children's attention has waned**.
- The duration of whole group experiences should begin with shorter times at the beginning of the school year, gradually increasing as the year progresses.
- In TK and kindergarten, whole group experiences should prioritize active engagement and playful learning (like interactive storytelling and group games) to create vibrant and enriching environments for young learners.
- Teachers should plan inclusive, developmentally appropriate activities for the whole group that are aligned with learning objectives.
- Active engagement does not justify longer group times, as it remains a teacher-directed activity. A few short whole groups scattered throughout the day are generally more effective than one or two long whole-group sessions.



Direct and Explicit Instruction

Both direct and explicit instruction have a history of effectiveness, especially for students at risk or with a learning disability. In essence, they are complementary to one another, but not identical in nature. Research ([Magnuson and Duncan, 2016](#)) has indicated that while direct and explicit instruction is most effective for positive learning outcomes, it must be implemented in a way that is developmentally appropriate. This can be achieved by tailoring the teaching methods to match the individual developmental level of each child, using engaging activities, incorporating play-based learning, and ensuring instruction is age-appropriate, while still providing clear and focused instruction on specific skills.

Direct Instruction

A teacher-centered approach for delivering information, can be used by TK and kindergarten teachers to briefly present facts in a small or whole group setting.

Direct instruction defines the language and the processes a teacher goes through in teaching. This would include modeling learning processes, guiding students through the application, and arranging for independent practice. Past studies found that children who received direct instruction improved in reading, math, and language skills (Education Commission of the States, 2000; Ellis and Fouts, 1993). However, recent research supports the idea that children who engage in playful learning experiences perform just as well or better (see Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009 for review). It is important for teachers who use direct instruction to supplement their delivery of information with visuals, real objects, and connections to children's prior knowledge to make the experience more meaningful.



Classroom Tip:

Keep this in mind when teaching literacy for early learners:

- Research from the National Early Literacy Panel (2008) confirms there must be a balance between child-centered and teacher directed approaches.
- Small group, direct and explicit instruction has been shown to be the best format for teaching alphabetic learning.
- Child-centered play activities have a more positive impact on vocabulary development.
- A report from the National Reading Panel (NICHD, 2000) notes that there is compelling evidence for explicit, systematic instruction for each of the five essential components of reading (phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, comprehension).



Explicit Instruction

A deliberate teaching method that is systematic, direct, engaging, and oriented towards student success. This approach has been demonstrated to enhance achievement among all students. Explicit refers to the explanation of concepts and skills. The teacher's language is concise, specific, and related to the objective. With explicit instruction, actions of the teacher are unambiguous, direct, and visible ensuring all students grasp essential early childhood skills, especially those who might struggle with more open-ended learning approaches; this approach also helps build confidence through ample practice opportunities and promotes a strong understanding of foundational concepts like letters, numbers, and basic vocabulary.

Find more about Direct and Explicit Instruction: [**What is DIRECT, SYSTEMATIC and EXPLICIT Instruction?**](#)

[**16 Elements of Explicit Instruction**](#)

Find Resources from [**Understood.org**](https://www.understood.org) for more information about explicit instruction.



The Science of Reading:

A vast, interdisciplinary body of scientifically based research about reading and issues related to reading and writing.

The science of reading is not a single program or technique but does provide evidence for a set of techniques that can best support all students to become proficient readers.

Learn more about Developmentally Appropriate Practices when Implementing Science of Reading for Early Learners:

[Science of Reading for Ages 0-5](#)

[The Science of Reading in Early Childhood Education: Building Strong Literacy Foundations](#)

[The Science of Reading in Preschool](#)

[Reading 101: Self-Paced Learning Modules | Reading Rockets](#)

[Seven Elements Important to Successful Implementation of Early Literacy Intervention](#)



The Science of Reading Continued...

Florida Center for Reading Research

- [Snapshot Series for Emergent Literacy.](#)
- [FCRR Student Center Activities | Florida Center for Reading Research.](#)
- [Student Center Activities](#) for pre-kindergarten to fifth grade.

Institute of Education Sciences

- [Self-study Guide for Implementing Early Literacy Interventions.](#)
- [Preparing Young Children for School.](#)
- [What does 20 years of research say about teaching language and literacy in preschool?](#)



Administrators:

As defined by the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, **meaningful professional development** is:

- Sustained (not a stand-alone, one-day, or short-term workshop),
- Intensive,
- Collaborative,
- Job-embedded,
- and classroom focused.

Professional development should include supervision and feedback from an experienced leader familiar with best practices in early childhood education. Supervision should be reflective, incorporate student assessment data, and offer chances to reinforce strengths and foster growth. It should also support the individualization of teachers' professional development and goals.

Combined, supervision and professional development provide the tools necessary for high-quality teaching practices and enriching early learning experiences. They also support teachers in managing the stresses and demands of their work, contributing to a safe and healthy environment for all.

LEAs and schools utilizing Title funds to implement programs must follow these standards of Professional Development. Learn more: [Supporting High-Quality Preschool with Title I Funds.](#)

Instructional Practices Reflection Questions

1. In what ways have you observed purposeful play contributing to the development of various skills and fostering a positive learning environment for your kindergarten students? How can you enhance or expand purposeful play opportunities in your classroom?
2. How can you advocate for purposeful play in your classroom and school?
3. How do you organize and structure centers and stations in your classroom to promote meaningful exploration and engagement among students? Are there adjustments you can make to optimize the effectiveness of these learning spaces?
4. Consider the balance between small-group and whole-group instruction in your classroom. How do you determine when each instructional approach is most beneficial, and are there opportunities to further tailor your methods to better suit the needs of individual students?
5. Reflect on the effectiveness of your current strategies for managing and facilitating small group instruction. How might you refine these approaches to better address the diverse needs and learning styles of your students?
6. How will you use assessment data to determine your small groups?
7. How will you encourage peer conversations and collaborative learning experiences?
8. Consider your teacher-child interactions in both small group and whole group settings. How do these interactions support individual student needs and contribute to a sense of community within your classroom?
9. Reflect on any challenges you have encountered in implementing inclusionary practices related to teacher-child interactions, play, and instruction. What strategies or professional development opportunities can support you in overcoming these challenges and promoting a more inclusive learning environment for all students?
10. Thinking about the special relationships you build with each child, what everyday practices already help you notice and respond to every child with fairness and warmth? Where might there be an opportunity to try something new so that no one feels overlooked or misunderstood?



Administrators:

See below for TPEP connection to Free Play.

Free play offers a prime opportunity to observe:

- **Intentional interactions**
- **Facilitation of learning**
- **Classroom culture**
- **Use of formative assessment**
- **Equity and inclusion**

Evaluating teachers under the **Teacher and Principal Evaluation Program (TPEP)** during **free play**—especially in early childhood or primary grade settings—can be both meaningful and aligned with the standards, though it requires a nuanced understanding of what effective teaching looks like during less structured time.





Best Practices for Principals

1. **Pre-observation Conference:** Ask the teacher to describe the goals of the free play time and how it supports standards.
2. **Use a TPEP-aligned lens:** Even if direct instruction isn't happening, look for intentionality, interaction quality, and learning extensions.
3. **Focus on student behaviors too:** How students behave and engage is often a reflection of effective teacher guidance and classroom systems.
4. **Document observations with examples:**
 - "Teacher supported social-emotional learning by helping students negotiate turn-taking at the water table, reinforcing positive language."
5. **Post-observation debrief:** Ask the teacher to reflect on how free play ties into broader academic and developmental goals.

Example of Evaluation Through Danielson Framework

Domain 1: Planning and Preparation

- Evidence might be indirect but visible through:
- Materials available during free play
- Intentional design of centers (e.g., literacy-rich, STEM-based)
- Embedded SEL goals or fine/gross motor development

Domain 2: The Classroom Environment

- 2a: Creating an Environment of Respect and Rapport
- Observe how the teacher models respectful language and mediates peer conflicts.
- 2b: Establishing a Culture for Learning
- Are students curious, engaged, and taking ownership of their activities?
- 2c: Managing Classroom Procedures
- Transitions into/out of play, routines, and expectations.

- 2d: Managing Student Behavior
- Proactive guidance and redirection, positive reinforcement.

Domain 3: Instruction

Though direct instruction may be limited:

- 3a: Communicating With Students
- Listen for how the teacher supports vocabulary and explains concepts informally.
- 3e: Demonstrating Flexibility and Responsiveness
- Does the teacher adapt to students' interests, scaffold deeper engagement, or extend play meaningfully?

Domain 4: Professional Responsibilities

This might come into play via post-observation reflection or planning documentation.



CHAPTER 4

Chapter Four Key Learning Objectives

After completing this chapter, readers will be able to:

1. **Explain** how structuring time, establishing routines, managing transitions, and interacting with children can reflect a program's philosophy and create an engaging learning environment.
2. **Describe** how a balanced daily schedule supports play-based learning, integrates multiple content areas, and provides children with meaningful choices.
3. **Identify** strategies for facilitating smooth and effective transitions that promote independence and self-regulation.
4. **Explain** how teaching, modeling, and practicing routines helps children understand the flow of the day, meet expectations, and build flexibility and independence

The way a program structures time, establishes routines, manages transitions, and interacts with children directly reflects the program's philosophy. These elements shape the time spent in a classroom and play a crucial role in establishing an engaging learning environment. A well- designed classroom structure provides predictability while helping children feel comfortable and safe.

This section highlights essential components that should be included in the discussion for building schedules and maximizing time in the classroom.



Dr. Sharon Ritchie, from the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute, explored the breakdown of schedules across a PreK, kindergarten, and first-grade classroom. The three graphs below outline the shift in time allocation across the three grade levels. Note the shifts between choice time and whole group instruction.

What is the difference between a schedule, routines, and transitions?

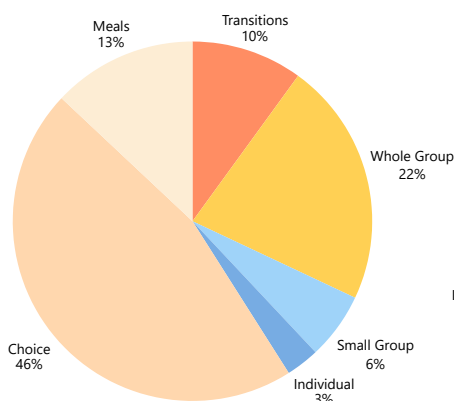
A **schedule** represents the big picture and includes the main events throughout the day.

Routines are the steps needed to complete each part of the schedule.

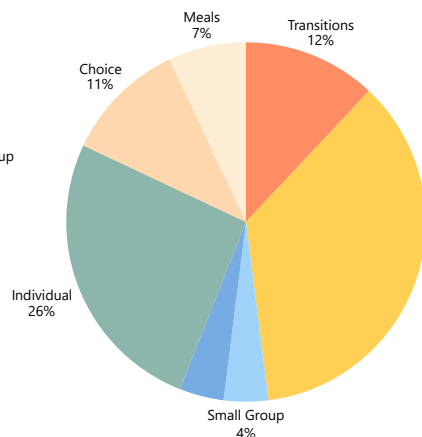
Transitions are when the children move from one activity in the schedule to the next.

Time Use in Classrooms

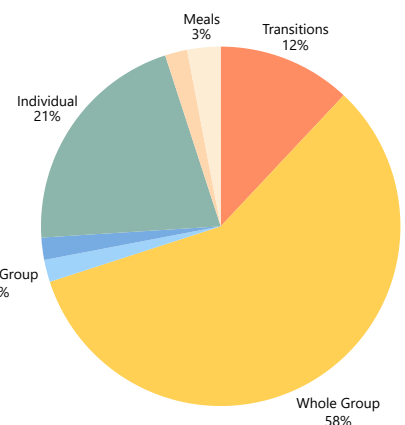
Activity Settings-PreK



Activity Settings-Kindergarten



Activity Settings-1st



Source: Ritchie, *FirstSchool*, 2001

Kindergarten and TK students thrive when granted more opportunities for free play and small group activities. Whole group instruction, while important in moderation, can be limiting for young children due to several factors:

- It often lacks individualization, failing to address the diverse learning needs and interests of each child.
- The passive nature of whole-group instruction may not effectively engage all students, leading to disengagement and limited retention of information.

- In a large group setting, some children may feel overlooked or hesitant to actively participate.

By contrast, free play and small group activities offer a more dynamic and inclusive learning environment where children can explore, collaborate, and receive tailored support from educators.



Schedules

Much like the learning environment outlined in Chapter 2, the classroom schedule plays a role in creating a developmentally appropriate environment.

Creating a classroom schedule involves juggling many factors (e.g., specials, lunchtime, recess) often beyond the teacher's control. While mandated instructional time for math or literacy must be honored, it is essential to recognize that early learning instruction is integrated across subject areas. Teachers and administrations should collaborate to explore how learning unfolds throughout the schedule.

A balanced daily schedule in a classroom should accommodate play-based learning and include both child-initiated and teacher-led activities. It is crucial to allow uninterrupted play-based activities, integrate various content areas, and offer choices to children to engage deeply in learning. Successful schedules balance active and quiet moments, and require careful planning to ensure a mix of small group, large group, teacher-directed, and child-directed learning experiences. This approach maximizes children's engagement and minimizes challenging behaviors.



Administrators:

To meet the needs of TK and K students, it is best practice to prioritize developing TK and K classroom schedules first. This helps to accommodate the needs of the youngest learners and ensures appropriate breaks. Administrators should consider including 45–50 minutes of child-led exploration time, 20–30 minutes of rest or quiet time, and minimizing transitions.





Key considerations include:

- The more active elements should separate the sedentary components of the day.
- Whole group times for TK and kindergarten should be limited to 15-20 minutes or less (not necessarily all in one setting, can be scattered throughout the day). Group times at the beginning of the year will be shorter and can be gradually increased as the year progresses.
- Incorporate a balance of teacher-directed and student-initiated activities to foster both guided learning and child-led exploration.
- Aim for a thoughtful mix of collaborative (partner/small-group) and independent experiences to build social-emotional skills alongside self-directed learning. Support child agency in centers by encouraging free choice of activities and self-paced transitions, which research shows enhances engagement and ownership rather than adult-assigned rotations.
- Include at least one 45 to 60-minute block of child-directed exploration time (learning centers) each day for students to engage with their peers and explore throughout the classroom. This also creates natural chances for students to practice friendship skills, social-emotional skills, and problem-solving.
- Meals and snacks. Consider time for a snack in the morning and/or the afternoon. Be sure to allow **ample time** (at least 20 minutes) for young children to eat lunch. Keep in mind that food should not be used as a reward or punishment, and children should not be forced to finish their food. Meal and snack time can be used to support teacher-child interactions, foster communication, and conversations, and provide opportunities to contribute to a children's learning, development, and socialization.
- Provide 20–30 minutes of quiet time per day (required for any program running six hours or longer, per HSPPS [§1302.31\(e\)\(1\)](#)). Some students may need to nap, but all students must be provided time for rest or quiet activities. Napping or rest should be encouraged but not forced.
- Approach routines, such as hand washing and transitions between activities, as opportunities for strengthening development, learning, and skill growth.
- Recognize physical activity as important to learning and integrate intentional movement and physical activity into curricular activities and daily routines in ways that support health and learning and remembering not to use it as reward or punishment.



Administrators:

Support teachers by affirming their expertise in adapting publisher-suggested large whole-group blocks to better match young children's attention spans and developmental needs—encouraging a balanced mix of shorter whole-group time, small groups, purposeful play, and child choice. Provide planning time, resources, and reassurance that gradual increases in whole-group instruction are appropriate as children's focus and engagement grow throughout the year.



In their 2018 book, *Kids 1st From Day 1: A Teacher's Guide to Today's Classroom*, Hertz and Mraz discuss how willpower depletion can affect classroom behavior and suggest

designing schedules with a balance of structured and unstructured activities to help manage students' willpower.

Structured Activities

An activity where children follow a set plan, or tasks given by someone else instead of following their will.

Unstructured Activities

An activity where children have control over their choices, projects, partners, or possibilities.

- Which materials to use
- Where to work within the classroom
- What topics or content to explore

Do Now:

Examine your classroom schedule and code each section of your schedule as:

- Highly structured (teacher-directed learning)
- Structured (a mixture of teacher and child-directed learning)
- Unstructured (child-directed learning)

Think about:

- How can you alternate between the three types of structure and avoid stacking one kind of structure together? For example, if your schedule starts with several highly structured activities (do now, morning meeting, literacy block), your student's willpower may be depleted before lunch. How does this scheduling impact children who come to school with demands already on their willpower?
- How do assigned seats impact a task's structure? Can seats be unassigned to give children more control and choice?
- When do children have a choice in the day?

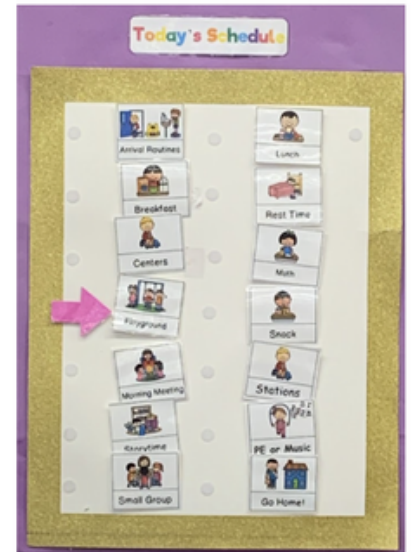


Visual Prompts

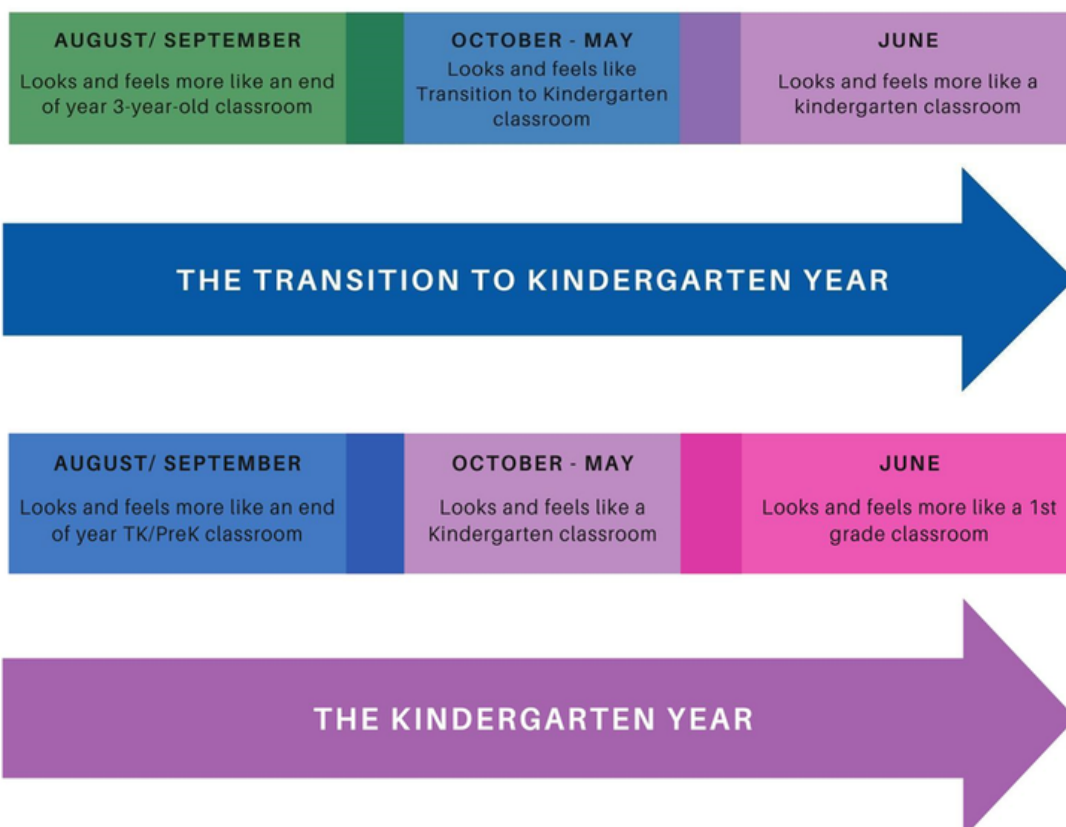
Visual prompts support children in understanding daily schedules and routines. Schedules with pictures posted at children's eye level help them anticipate activities. Frequent reference throughout the day and advance notice of changes support engagement and smooth transitions. Interactive schedules that allow children to mark completed activities, as well as individual schedules at workspaces, can further enhance attention and participation.

Classroom schedules naturally evolve as children progress throughout the year. Different cohorts may be ready for changes at different times, highlighting the importance of meeting the developmental needs of the students while working toward the expected goals by the end of the year.

For example, a TK or kindergarten classroom schedule may shift from the beginning to the end of the year. Teachers can reference the WaKIDS Objective for Development and Learning Booklet to observe changes in the color bands, such as green to blue (TK year) and blue to purple to magenta (kindergarten year), to guide developmental progression and planning.



Examples of interactive visual schedules in TK and kindergarten. Photos from White River Early Learning Center and Oakville Elementary.





TK and Kindergarten Schedules

Schedules will differ for TK and kindergarten classrooms. The developmental needs of a 4-year-old in TK may be vastly different than those of a kindergarten classroom with 5 and 6-year-olds. For instance, in a TK classroom, quiet time is built into the schedule but may not be needed in a kindergarten classroom all year. Instead, Kindergarten students may be reading decodable mini books as a quiet activity by the middle of the year. Additionally, TK classrooms may have different requirements when braiding funding.



Watch and Learn:

Check out these two videos, [Communicating Your Schedule \(2:15\)](#) and [A Day In Preschool \(4:57\)](#), from the Virtual Lab School at the Ohio State University for great examples of teachers using their schedules with children. Both videos can be found in the [Virtual Lab School's Preschool Environment Resource](#); scroll down to the bottom of the web page to view them.



Example of a linear schedule at child's eye level from Meridian School District.

Next Steps

Reflect on your classroom schedule with the checklist below. Place a checkmark next to each item that is true for your schedule.

Reflect on Your Schedule

	Does/Is your schedule...	Check if this applies to your classroom schedule
1	Posted at children's eye level	
2	Represent all daily activities	
3	Include a visual representation of each significant part of the day	
4	Show the passage of time (e.g. using a marker to show what part of the schedule is currently happening)	
5	Include 45-60 minutes of uninterrupted, child-directed free play (learning centers)	
6	Include a balance of teacher and child-directed activities	
7	Balance active vs. sedentary times	
8	Include small group time	
9	Include whole group time, 15–20 minutes or less	
10	Accommodates when changes occur	
11	Minimizes the number of transitions across the day	
12	Do you reference your schedule throughout the day?	
13	Do you call out changes to the schedule?	
14	Are our values and beliefs reflected in our master schedule?	

Sample Schedules

Transition to Kindergarten Example 1

Beginning of Year		End of Year	
15 min.	Arrival and Table Activities	10 min.	Arrival and Table Activities
10 min.	Morning Circle/SEL	15 min.	Morning Circle/SEL
60 min.	Learning Centers	60 min.	Learning Centers
20 min.	Morning Recess	20 min.	Morning Recess
15 min.	Snack	15 min.	Snack
10 min.	Read Aloud/Literacy	20 min.	Read Aloud/Literacy
40 min.	Literacy games, writing/drawing, sensory writing exploration	45 min.	Integrated Literacy Stations/ Small Groups
10 min.	Whole Group Integrated Math/Science Investigation	15 min.	Whole Group Integrated Math/Science Investigation
40 min.	Math games, manipulatives, centers	30 min.	Integrated Math Stations/Small Groups
30 min.	Specials	30 min.	Specials
15 min.	Afternoon recess	15 min.	Afternoon recess
10 min.	Read Aloud	10 min.	Closing Circle/Daily Review
5 min.	Music/Movement		
10 min.	Closing Circle/Daily Review		

Transition to Kindergarten Example 2

Beginning of Year		End of Year	
20 minutes	Arrival and Table Activities	15 minutes	Arrival and Table Activities
10 minutes	Morning Circle/SEL	15 minutes	Morning Circle/SEL
35 minutes	Literacy games, writing/drawing, sensory writing exploration	45 minutes	Integrated Literacy Stations/ Small Groups
10 minutes	Read Aloud/Literacy	20 minutes	Read Aloud/Literacy
15 minutes	Snack	15 minutes	Snack
20 minutes	Morning Recess	10 minutes	Morning Recess
30 minutes	Specials	30 minutes	Specials
15 minutes	Whole Group Integrated Math/Science Investigation	20 minutes	Whole Group Integrated Math/Science Investigation
35 minutes	Math games, manipulatives, centers	40 minutes	Integrated Math Stations/Small Groups
60 minutes	Learning Centers	50 minutes	Learning Centers
15 minutes	Recess	10 minutes	Recess
10 minutes	Read Aloud	5 minutes	Read Aloud
5 minutes	Music/Movement	15 minutes	Closing Circle/Daily Review
10 minutes	Closing Circle/Daily Review		

Transition to Kindergarten Example 3, adapted from Creative Curriculum PreK Curriculum Guide

35 minutes	Arrival, breakfast, and choice time
15 minutes	Focused Project Learning: Large-group discussion and shared writing
35 minutes	Free Choice Time (Learning Centers)
20 minutes	Read Aloud/Literacy
45 minutes	Specials
30 minutes	Outdoors
30 minutes	Lunch
20 minutes	Quiet Time/Read Aloud
5 minutes	Music and Movement
45 minutes	Focused language and literacy, guided small groups and learning stations
30 minutes	Outdoors or gross motor
45 minutes	Focused mathematics, guided small groups and learning stations
20 minutes	Large group roundup and departure

*Teaching Strategies (2024)

Kindergarten Example 1

Beginning of Year		End of Year	
20 minutes	Arrival and Table Activities	15 minutes	Arrival and Table Activities
15 minutes	Morning Circle/SEL	20 minutes	Morning Circle/SEL
60 minutes	Learning Centers	50 minutes	Plan-Do-Reflect Learning Centers
15 minutes	Morning Recess		
15 minutes	Snack	15 minutes	Snack
15 minutes	Read Aloud/Literacy Lesson	25 minutes	Read Aloud/Literacy Lesson
40 minutes	Integrated Literacy Stations/ Small Groups	40 minutes	Integrated Literacy Stations/ Small Groups
15 minutes	Math/Science Investigation, Whole Group	25 minutes	Math/Science Investigation, Whole Group
40 minutes	Math/Science Stations, Small Groups	40 minutes	Math/Science Stations, Small Groups
30 minutes	Specials	30 minutes	Specials
15 minutes	Read Aloud/Integrated Writing	20 minutes	Read Aloud/Integrated Writing
10 minutes	Closing Circle/Daily Review	10 minutes	Closing Circle/Daily Review

Kindergarten Example 2

Beginning of Year		End of Year	
20 minutes	Arrival and Table Activities	15 minutes	Arrival and Table Activities
15 minutes	Morning Circle/SEL	20 minutes	Morning Circle/SEL
45 minutes	Integrated Literacy Stations/ Small Groups	45 minutes	Integrated Literacy Stations/ Small Groups
15 minutes	Read Aloud/Literacy Lesson	25 minutes	Read Aloud/Literacy Lesson
15 minutes	Morning Recess		
15 minutes	Snack	15 minutes	Snack
30 minutes	Specials	30 minutes	Specials
15 minutes	Math/Science Investigation, Whole Group	25 minutes	Math/Science Investigation, Whole Group
45 minutes	Math/Science Stations, Small Groups	40 minutes	Math/Science Stations, Small Groups
45 minutes	Learning Centers	45 minutes	Plan-Do-Reflect Learning Centers
20 minutes	Read Aloud/Integrated Writing	20 minutes	Read Aloud/Integrated Writing
10 minutes	Closing Circle/Daily Review	10 minutes	Closing Circle/Daily Review

Sample Schedules from Teachers Online

- Check out this [kindergarten daily schedule with descriptions](#) of what happens during each part of the day from the Research and Play blog.
- [Kindergarten and TK schedule examples](#) from Kindergarten Connection.
- [Sample schedule from Teaching Strategies](#). Includes examples around transitions.



Routines

Once the classroom schedule is established, it is time to outline the routines. Routines are the steps required to complete each part of the schedule. Effective routines will help classrooms run smoothly. Routines empower children by teaching them:

- To understand the flow of the day
- To know what happens next
- To respond to clearly defined expectations
- To build flexibility and adapt to change

Teaching, modeling, and practicing routines is essential at the beginning of the school year. Regular review, especially after breaks, helps maintain them. Routines aid predictability, reduce anxiety, and foster independence. Adjust routines as needed, ensuring new students are taught upon arrival.

Classroom schedules provide the roadmap for the day. By layering routines into the schedule, students are able to answer these questions:

1. What am I doing now?
2. How do I know I'm making progress?
3. How do I know when I'm finished?
4. What comes next?

The following is a variety of suggested common routines to consider in the classroom. Please note that routines may differ between a TK and a kindergarten classroom.

- Entering and exiting the classroom
- Turning in work products
- Attendance
- Lunch
- Recess

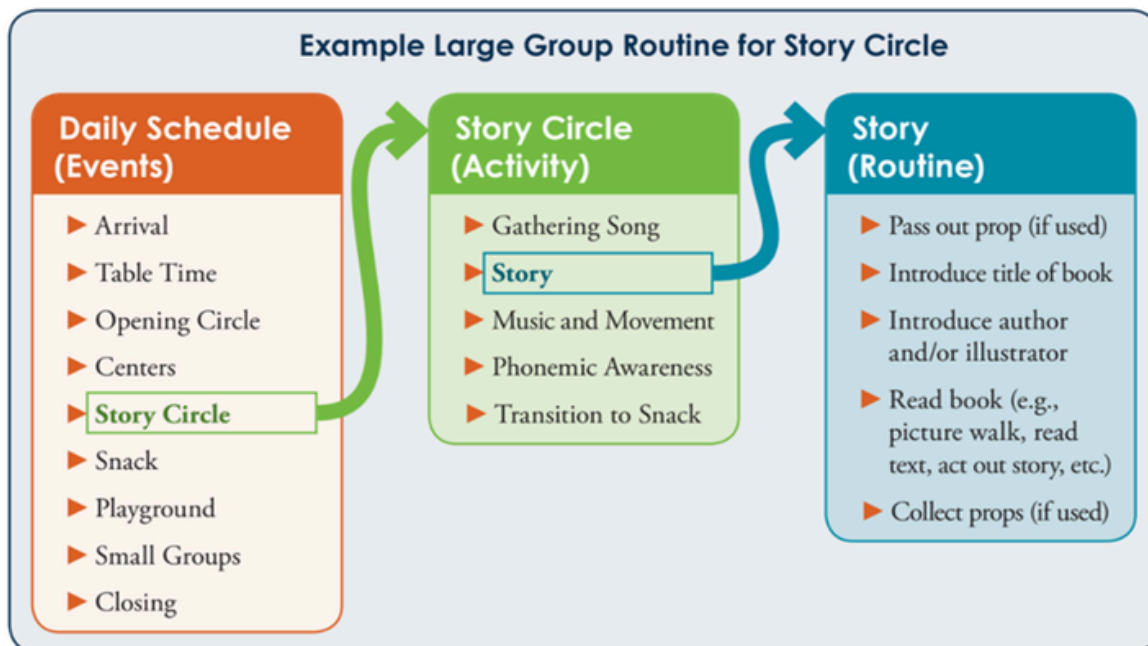
- Classroom library use
- Classroom jobs
- Use of technology
- How to choose centers
- Center clean up
- Circle time/large group time
- Snack time
- Transitions and moving within the classroom
- Pencil sharpening
- Group work
- Getting supplies
- Emergency drills
- Arrival and dismissal
- Bathroom/toileting
- Washing hands
- Meals
- Quiet time
- Independent Work Time





NCPMI offers a helpful framework for exploring classroom routines, called routines to the third power. This framework helps to break down daily routines further. In this framework, there are three components to the day:

1. **Events (Routine1):** The core things you do in the classroom daily. This is the schedule component.
2. **Activities (Routine2):** These are the main things that happen within an Event.
3. **Routines (Routine3):** These are the things that happen within an Activity.



Visuals are useful tools that help children complete classroom routines.



Next Steps

Are you ready to plan your routines? Use the [National Center for Pyramid Model Innovation for Building Routines](#) within your daily schedule.



Learn More About Routines

The Importance of Schedules and Routines (USDHHS, 2023), has ideas about sharing the importance of routines with families and helping children learn routines at the beginning of the school year.

Behavior Expectations and Strategies Poster from the National Center for Pyramid Model Innovations. When behavior expectations and rules are taught and practiced explicitly, children are more likely to engage in positive behaviors across all activities and routines.

Use this resource, **6 Questions to Tackle in Managing Classroom Procedures** (Konen, 2017), to learn how to make the most of your routines and procedures to promote positive behavior.

Transitions

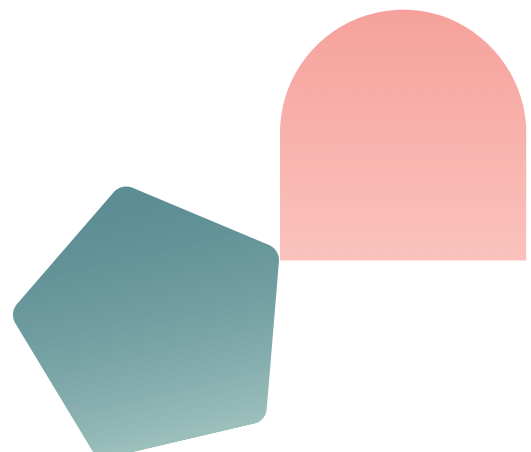
Transitions are crucial for ensuring smooth and efficient daily routines. They allow children to move from one activity to the next and develop independence and self-regulation skills. However, they can also be challenging for young children struggling with changes or waiting times. Ineffective or poorly taught transitions can be chaotic and disrupt the learning environment, so they must be intentional, brief, and embedded with learning opportunities.

Effective transitions keep classrooms running smoothly and maximize instructional time (as shown in the diagram of Time Use in Classrooms at the beginning of the chapter). **Saving 15 minutes daily with efficient routines, will gain an additional 45 hours of instructional time per year.**



WaKIDS Connection:

Transitions are an excellent time to observe students. Consider using the GOLD® On the Spot Checklist to easily capture documentation during transitions.





The National Council of Pyramid Model Innovation offers the following strategies to smooth transitions and lessen challenging behaviors:

- **Provide a verbal warning that one activity is going to end, and another is going to begin.** This may be a verbal reminder: “We will finish drawing and then we will clean up for lunch.”
- **Use visuals:**
 - **Use a timer(s).** Use multiple visual timers: sand timer, red/yellow/green lights, etc.
 - **Visual schedule.** Leverage your schedule to help with transitions.
 - **Cue cards.** Pictures or symbols of what is happening.
 - **First/then visual.** Cards that have a picture of what will happen first, and what will happen next (learn more with [NCPMI Routine Cards](#)).
- **Use first/then language.** “First you will put away your books, then you can select a center.”
- **Utilize a transition “song.”** A song or music to warn of an upcoming transition.
- **Limit the number of transitions.** Too many transitions can be overwhelming. Ensure that your transitions are meaningful and efficient.
- **Provide opportunities for active engagement during transitions.** Most children love to move, dance, or sing. Consider using transition songs to help children move to the next activity. As a bonus, a song provides a set amount of time to complete a transition.
- **Offer choices.** Provide autonomy and offer children options for how they would like to move or transition to the next event.
- **Have ideas of things to do if it is necessary to wait for the transition to occur** (count to 20, rhyming word games, I spy, etc.)

Some children may benefit from more individualized transition support. This support may include:

- Provide more warnings
- Give children a transition job
- Allow a child to transition before others
- Offer transition items
- Modify demands
- Use visuals
- Create a social narrative
- Provide positive, descriptive feedback

Need transition support? All TK and kindergarten teachers have access to MyTeachingStrategies® for WaKIDS. This platform also grants users access to Mighty Minutes. Mighty Minutes are short activities (rhymes, games, chants, songs, etc.) that can turn any transition time into a learning opportunity. Mighty Minutes are aligned to language, literacy, and math GOLD objectives and empower teachers to maximize their day. To learn more, please visit the [Planning for Mighty Minutes Support Article](#).

When teaching routines and transitions, children need explicit instructions on what the classroom routines should look and sound like. This instruction provides opportunities for children to see, hear, practice, and receive feedback about their efforts. According to Understood.org, explicit instruction can be broken down into four steps:

1. Model
2. Verbalize
3. Provide opportunities to practice
4. Give feedback

Classroom Structure Reflection Questions

1. How have your current classroom structures contributed to a positive and developmentally appropriate environment for your students?
2. How do you observe your students responding to the established routines and transitions? Are there areas where adjustments might enhance their engagement?
3. Reflecting on your teaching practices, how do the established classroom structures support the development of essential skills such as independence, self-regulation, and collaboration among your students?
4. Have you noticed any challenges or disruptions during transitions or specific parts of the daily schedule? How might you modify these aspects to ensure smoother transitions and optimize learning opportunities?
5. How do your classroom structures cater to your students' diverse needs? What modifications could you introduce to accommodate individual differences/preferences better?
6. Considering the impact of routines and transitions, how might you involve students in co-creating or refining some aspects of the transitions and routines to increase their ownership and engagement?
7. How will you teach schedules and routines with your students?
8. How can you break down routines and activities to create routines to the third power?

NCPMI Building Routines

9. What are the daily routines that keep your classroom functioning?



CHAPTER 5

Chapter Five Key Learning Objectives

After completing this chapter, readers will be able to:

1. **Explain** the importance of inclusion as a civil right and a cornerstone of developmentally appropriate practice in TK and kindergarten classrooms.
2. **Describe** strategies for creating inclusive environments that celebrate individual differences, support full participation, and promote positive relationships.
3. **Explain** the principles of Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) and how they support students' strengths, equity, and multicultural perspectives.
4. **Identify** ways to implement Universal Design for Learning (UDL) to minimize barriers and maximize learning for all children through multiple means of engagement, representation, and expression.
5. **Describe** strategies to support multilingual learners (MLLs), including using culturally relevant materials, fostering peer interaction, and creating a welcoming classroom environment.
6. **Explain** how inclusive practices benefit all students by fostering engagement, equity, and a positive learning community.



Inclusion is a civil right as outlined by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Inclusion is also a cornerstone of developmentally appropriate practices and should be present in all TK and kindergarten classrooms. Inclusionary practices (IP) are more than just a pedagogical approach; they are a fundamental commitment to equity, diversity, and social justice in education. By embracing the principles of inclusion and fostering environments that celebrate the uniqueness of every child, early childhood educators play a pivotal role in laying the groundwork for a more inclusive and compassionate society. Through thoughtful planning, collaboration, and relationships with students, we can create classrooms where every child feels valued, supported, and empowered to reach their full potential. **This chapter will outline how inclusion benefits ALL children. Reflection questions follow each main concept of this chapter.**

In TK and kindergarten, inclusionary practices involve implementing strategies to guarantee the engagement, participation, and success of all children, regardless of their backgrounds or abilities. Inclusion fosters environments where all children feel valued and can fully participate in learning. By providing targeted services and accommodations, students with and without disabilities benefit academically and socially. Research shows improved outcomes for all students in inclusive settings.

To maximize the benefits of inclusion, ensure that TK and kindergarten students with disabilities are integrated into general education classrooms as much as possible. This fosters learning alongside typically developing peers in the primary placement setting.



Administrators:

Please consider how special education personnel can be used to support general education teachers in inclusive classrooms.

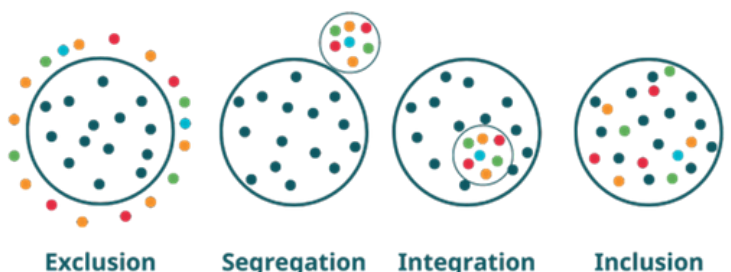


Classroom Tip:

Intentionally include your highly capable students in all inclusionary practices planning and implementation to ensure they receive appropriate challenges and feel fully part of the TK/K classroom community.

In Washington State, DCYF and OSPI have collaborated on a [Joint Inclusion Position Statement](#) that can further explain these values.

The visual below displays the difference between exclusionary, segregated, integrative, and inclusive practices.



- **Exclusion** refers to students encountering direct or indirect obstacles or being denied access to education.



- **Segregation** involves providing education to students in separate settings specifically designed or utilized to cater to particular impairments, effectively isolating them from their peers without disabilities.
- **Integration** is a process that involves placing children with disabilities into existing mainstream educational institutions, contingent upon their ability to conform to the institution's established standards and requirements.



Administrators:

Encourage all teaching staff to become familiar with your school and LEA policies on requesting assessments or making referrals for student services, and explore ways to integrate these into your Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) framework to better support every learner. Learn more about [Child Find](#) (includes pre-k) policies and procedures on OSPI's website.

For classrooms utilizing Title funds, see [Supporting High-Quality Preschool with Title I Funds](#) (pg. 13) for screening and referral requirements.

Inclusion involves a comprehensive process of reform that includes changes and adaptations in educational content, teaching methods, approaches, organizational structures, and strategies. These changes aim to remove barriers and provide all students within the relevant age group with an equitable and participatory learning experience, tailored to their individual needs and preferences.

Note that placing students with disabilities into mainstream classes without making necessary structural adjustments, such as changes in organization and teaching strategies, does not constitute true inclusion. Additionally, integration alone does not guarantee the transition from segregation to genuine inclusion.



Administrators:

Support your teaching staff by providing access to targeted professional development on comprehensive inclusionary practices, and assess needs for additional materials, personnel, or classroom supports to strengthen inclusive environments. Incorporating purposeful play, short direct instructional blocks of 10–15 minutes, and adequate adult support will further enhance these efforts for all young learners.



What Inclusion Is and Is not. Excerpt from OSPI Inclusionary Practices Handbook (Lynn and May, 2021)

What Inclusion Is:

Inclusive Vision and Practice: a shared belief that everyone belongs, regardless of perceived ability or disability.

Growth Mindset: The belief that everyone can learn and benefit from increased expectations of general education standards.

Supported by Research: Students with disabilities included in general education develop self-determination and acquire greater social and academic gains.

Presumed Competence: Understanding that students learn best when they feel valued, and educators hold the highest expectations while creating meaningful curriculum opportunities in social, academic, and functional development across environments.

Practice of Differentiation and Universal Design for Learning: The provision of equitable access in the least restrictive environment to minimize the need for specially designed instruction through removing barriers and providing options for individual learners.

What Inclusion is Not:

Traditional School Practices: The shared belief that students who have needs outside of the norm receive specialized instruction in a separate setting within the school building. An expectation that students be 'ready to learn,' and able to do the same work as students without disabilities to be placed in general education.

Fixed Mindset: The belief that student behaviors and the capacity to learn is limited and cannot be changed.

Integration: Arranged time spent with peers without disabilities (recess, lunch) with low expectations of students with disabilities

Mainstreaming: Selective placement in general education class settings (art, PE, music) with minimal planning, goals, and supports.

Unidimensional Instructional Strategies: Instruction and environmental arrangements designed for an illusory average student with narrow learning objectives, standardized expectations, and little flexibility.



High Quality Inclusion in the Classroom



High-quality inclusion in the classroom promotes and affirms individual differences. The Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center (ECTA) offers guidance for high-quality inclusion in the classroom. While ECTA is geared towards preschool, these tips are equally relevant in kindergarten environments. Consider the following best practice tips while developing an inclusive classroom environment:

- Comment on the accomplishments of all children to the entire learning community. Display all children's work and call attention to all children's contributions. Work is displayed at children's eye level.
- Identifying all children's preferences and continually use them to guide instruction.
- Establish predictable routines through visual schedules posted and used by all (practitioners and staff) throughout the day.
- Promote positive and culturally responsive adult-child relationships by giving **at least five positive statements** for every feedback statement or redirection statement.



WaKIDS Connection: :

Establishing relationships with families and learning the correct pronunciation of their names happens during the Family Connection Meetings meeting.

- Promote positive and culturally responsive adult-child relationships by giving **at least five positive statements** for every feedback statement or redirection statement.
 - This includes intentionally teaching social-emotional skills in small and large groups to support problem-solving, entering play, and taking turns. For ideas on feedback, visit the [NCPMI Positive Feedback and Encouragement](#) resource.
- Set up classroom environments and activities that promote interactions. Provide support in the form of peer-mediated strategies to build relationships and communication systems between all students.
- Plan for consistent social opportunities with routines.
 - This can be done through peer modeling (buddy play and clean-up partners) to capitalize on all children's strengths and abilities.
- Integrate themes that reflect children's interests, abilities, familial, and cultural norms. These classrooms ensure that the necessary adaptations are in place to ensure that all children can access and participate in activities.
- Integrate each child's needs into the instructional setting. This includes adaptive supports, environmental modifications, and ongoing teaming to meet the child's individual needs.
- Ensure that all children can participate.



Learn More About Inclusion

- [UW Haring Center's tip sheet on inclusion resources](#)
- Watch Shelley Moore's 3:08 minute video on [Transforming Inclusive Education](#) (SSHRC, 2016).

Inclusion Reflection Questions

1. How do you encourage all children to participate to the best of their ability?
2. How will you determine what supports children may need in the classroom?
3. How do you plan for consistent peer interactions and social opportunities for all children?
4. What is the process for accessing additional supports for children in your classroom?



Culturally Responsive Teaching

Culturally responsive teaching (CRT) supports inclusive classrooms by recognizing and valuing the diverse backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives that children bring to school. By incorporating culturally relevant materials, perspectives, and instructional strategies, educators can create learning environments where all students feel seen, respected, and supported. These practices help educators reflect on their own assumptions, address potential biases, and promote equitable learning opportunities for all students.

In TK and kindergarten, culturally responsive teaching goes beyond representation to create classroom communities where children experience belonging, respect, and fairness. Through daily interactions, stories, and classroom experiences, young learners begin to explore empathy, understanding, and inclusion.



Administrators:

Schedule dedicated collaboration time for general and special education teachers. See the Indicators and Elements of High-Quality Inclusion from the Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center (ECTA) for guidance.

Early modeling of respectful communication and equitable practices helps children develop the skills they need to participate in diverse communities and become thoughtful, engaged citizens.



CRT in early education fosters empathy, understanding, and social responsibility, helping prepare children to value fairness and inclusion in their communities.

To be culturally responsive, educators benefit from a shared understanding of what culture means. Culture can include:

- **The way people live their daily lives**
- **Shared values and customs**
- **Expectations for behavior and interaction**
- **Belief systems**
- **Communication styles**
- **Traditions that are shared and passed down across generations**

(Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute, n.d.)

Culture may be shaped by many aspects of identity and experience, including family background, language, community traditions, and lived experiences.

Culture influences how children learn, communicate, cope, and solve problems. Understanding children within their cultural contexts helps educators recognize the experiences, values, and perspectives that shape children's behavior and learning (Gay, 2010).

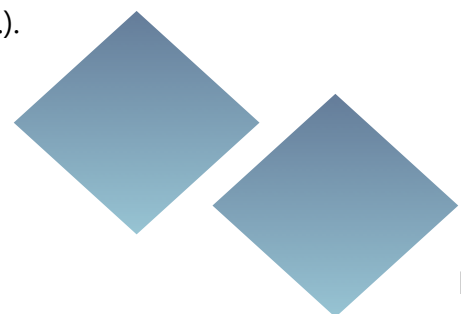
Scholars have identified a number of principles and teaching practices associated with culturally responsive teaching. While these frameworks share many common ideas, each offers slightly different perspectives. For example, based on Gay's culturally responsive teaching framework, Elizabeth B. Kozleski (2010) of the Equity Alliance at Arizona State University identified a set of key educator behaviors that support culturally responsive practice.

These behaviors focus on the educator as a reflective practitioner and include:

- **Communicating high expectations for all students**
- **Actively engaging students in learning**
- **Facilitating learning**
- **Understanding the assets and strengths that students' families bring**
- **Anchoring curriculum in the everyday lives of students**
- **Selecting participation structures that reflect students' ways of knowing and doing**
- **Sharing aspects of classroom decision-making with students**
- **Engaging in reflective thinking and writing**
- **Exploring personal and family histories**
- **Acknowledging membership in different social and cultural groups**
- **Learning about the history and experiences of diverse communities**
- **Visiting or learning about students' families and communities**
- **Learning from successful teachers working in diverse settings**
- **Developing an appreciation of diversity**
- **Participating in efforts to improve and strengthen educational systems**

To read more about these ideas, explore Culturally Responsive Teaching Matters from the Equity Alliance at Arizona State University.

The Frank Porter Graham Institute of Child Development at the University of North Carolina provides two lists of culturally responsive practices. One is an adaptation of practices from Ladson Billings 1994 book, *The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African-American Children*, and the other is from Gary Howard's *Seven Principles of Culturally Responsive Teaching* (Frank Porter Graham, n.d.).





Ladson-Billings (1995) adaptation:

1. **Communication of high expectations.**
2. **Active learning and teaching methods.**
3. **Student strengths are identified and nurtured.**
4. **Inclusion of culturally and linguistically diverse teaching strategies.**
5. **Cultural sensitivity.**
6. **Supportive learning environments reflect cultures of all children.**
7. **Small group instruction.**

Gary Howard:

1. **Students are honored for their cultural connections. "Kids get it, that we get them."**
2. **Teachers are personally and culturally inviting; there are personal connections to each student. "Kids get it, that we like them."**
3. **The classroom is physically and culturally inviting. "School looks like me."**
4. **Children's development and efforts are reinforced; children are seen from a strengths-based lens and perceived as smart and capable.**
5. **Adjusting instructional strategies to meet the needs of unique learning and cultural styles of children.**
6. **Classroom management is caring and consistent. "Respect begins with the teacher."**
7. **Instruction is individual as well as collective. "Student-centered learning."**

CRT values the strengths of all students, raises expectations for learning, and recognizes multicultural perspectives as assets in the classroom. In TK and kindergarten, this includes understanding and respecting each child's cultural background and experiences, helping children maintain a strong sense of identity and belonging.

Key principles for educators include:

- **Self-reflection.** Educators reflect on their own cultural perspectives and assumptions to better understand how these may influence classroom interactions and instructional choices. Ongoing reflection helps teachers adapt practices to ensure all children and families feel respected and included.
- **Learning about children's cultures and communities.** Understanding the cultures of children and families supports meaningful connections between home and school. Engaging with families and communities and learning from their experiences helps educators avoid stereotypes and build cross-cultural understanding.
- **Fostering positive attitudes toward diversity.** Classrooms that welcome and celebrate differences help children and families feel valued and respected. Building authentic, ongoing relationships with families supports inclusive environments and strengthens learning partnerships.
- **Using observation and dialogue to guide teaching.** Observation and conversations with families provide valuable insight into children's interests, skills, and experiences. Approaches such as the WaKIDS Whole-child Assessment help educators design learning experiences that build on children's strengths and cultural knowledge.
- **Using culturally meaningful materials and experiences.** Classroom materials, books, and activities should reflect and respect the cultures of the children and families in the classroom. Incorporating these resources into daily learning helps validate children's identities and strengthens connections between home and school.



Culturally responsive teaching connects children's learning in school with their cultures, languages, and life experiences. By focusing on the strengths and assets children bring to the classroom, educators can create equitable learning opportunities that support engagement, belonging, and success for all children.

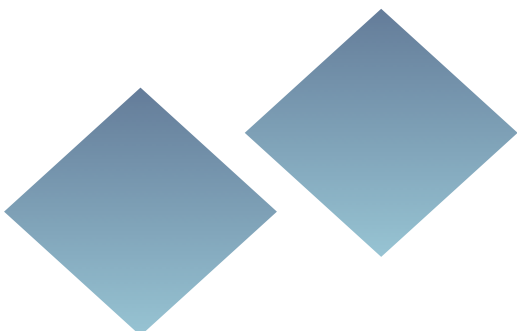
Individualist and Collectivist Perspectives

Educators may notice that cultures differ in how they emphasize independence and group relationships. These differences are often described through two cultural perspectives: individualism and collectivism.

- **Individualism** emphasizes personal goals, independence, and individual expression.
- **Collectivism** emphasizes group harmony, cooperation, and prioritizing the needs of the community.

In the United States, educational systems have often emphasized individualism. At the same time, many children and families bring cultural perspectives that value cooperation, shared responsibility, and group success. Early childhood classrooms may naturally emphasize independence—such as developing self-help skills, making individual choices, and celebrating personal accomplishments (Iruka et al., 2020).

Considering both perspectives can help educators create balanced learning environments that support all children. For example:



Administrators:

Use this video, [Seven Principles for Culturally Responsive Teaching and Learning](#), to facilitate a professional learning experience for teachers. It includes built-in pauses and discussion questions.

- **In a classroom emphasizing collectivist values**, children may work together toward shared goals, support one another during activities, and view success as something achieved as a group.
- **In a classroom emphasizing individualist values**, children may be encouraged to share their ideas, make individual choices, and develop independence and personal responsibility.

Both perspectives offer strengths for learning. When educators recognize and value these differences, they can design classroom experiences that support cooperation, independence, and a sense of belonging for all children.

Reflections on Individualist and Collectivist Perspectives (from Iruka, et al., 2020)

1. Which perspective do you support most often in your class? Why?
2. How can it be problematic to reach and support all children and families in your classroom?
3. Think about families in your classroom. Do you know whether they have individualist or collectivist perspectives?
4. How can you represent and honor both perspectives in your classroom?



Learn More About Culturally Responsive Teaching

- Watch this [10-minute video interview](#) with Zaretta Hammond, author of *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain* (Edthena, 2021).
- Read [What is Culturally Responsive Teaching?](#) article from Understood.org. This article provides foundational content on the what, why, and how of culturally responsive teaching.
- How to Use Culturally Responsive Practice in the Classroom from [Understood.org](#) has many resources on CRT.
- Read Edutopia's article on [Culturally Responsive Teaching in Early Childhood Education](#).
- Read this short article, [How to Get Started with Culturally Responsive Teaching](#) (Rucker, 2019).
- Check out this short guide, [Three Tips to Make Any Lesson More Culturally Responsive](#) (Hammond, 2015), to learn more about using CRT in your classroom.
- See the [Culturally Responsive Teaching Checklist](#) from Re-Imagining Migration UCLA.
- [What Is Culturally Responsive Teaching in Early Childhood Education?](#) from Brightwheel.

Culturally Responsive Teaching Reflection Questions

1. How has learning about culturally responsive teaching influenced the way you think about diversity in your classroom?
2. Which of your current practices already reflect culturally responsive teaching, and how might you continue to build on them?
3. How do your classroom routines, materials, and learning experiences reflect and respect the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of your students?
4. How do you differentiate instruction to support children with diverse strengths, languages, and learning needs?
5. How do you create opportunities for all children to experience both independence and collaboration in the classroom?
6. How do you partner with families to ensure your classroom practices reflect and honor their cultures, languages, and experiences?
7. What steps will you take to continue strengthening inclusive and culturally responsive practices in your classroom?



Universal Design for Learning

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is an approach to curriculum that minimizes barriers and maximizes learning for all students. It is a framework for making intentional choices about the environment, materials, and instruction so that all children can engage and succeed. It refers to learning experiences designed to make sure everyone learns; the design is flexible, and choice driven.

Three key principles of UDL:

1. Connecting to children using multiple means of **engagement** by providing choices and connecting to background knowledge.
2. Supporting multiple means of **representation** of content with varied supports.
3. Employing multiple options for children to **express** what they know.

In the classroom, UDL involves creating learning environments that are interesting, accessible, and engaging for all children. With UDL in mind, all children can participate more independently. UDL also confirms that our instruction and our learning environments should be accessible to all children regardless of their learning needs.

Within UDL, all children should have access to instruction and to the materials in the classroom. When environments and instruction are designed using UDL, fewer learners will need additional intervention. The more we can use UDL to plan for children in our classrooms to engage with, understand, and participate, the fewer children will need additional support. **UDL is a key component of inclusive programs—with UDL, we plan for all children to participate as independently as possible.**



Classroom Tip:

Combine culturally responsive teaching (CRT) with Universal Design for Learning (UDL) by building on students' backgrounds and maintaining high expectations for all learners.

Learner Variability

Learner variability recognizes that every learner is unique and possesses different strengths, challenges, interests, and preferences. By addressing learner variability, educators can create learning environments that are more equitable, inclusive, and responsive to the diverse needs of their students.

In TK and kindergarten classrooms, learner variability is especially noticeable due to different developmental levels and backgrounds. This results in “jagged learning profiles,” where children exhibit varying strengths and weaknesses across different areas. For example, a child may excel physically but struggle with reading comprehension.



WaKIDS Connection:

The WaKIDS Whole-child Assessment is a helpful tool to capture children's jagged learning profile.

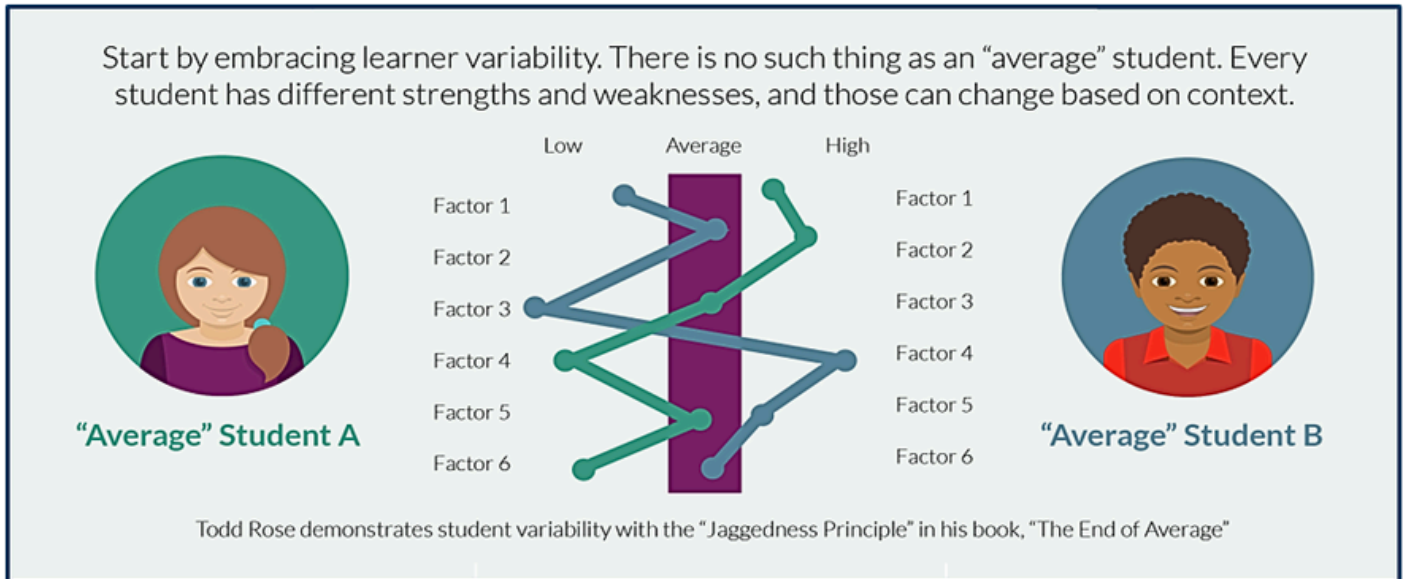


Image Source: What is UDL Infographic

Learner variability extends beyond skill level and includes learner mindset, interest and learning mode, social learning, and cultural relevance. Learner variability and jagged learning profiles are expected in all classrooms and educators should proactively plan for a wide range of learner needs.

Understanding jagged learning profiles is crucial for educators, as it informs instructional strategies and interventions tailored to address each student's specific areas of strength and need. By recognizing and accommodating these variations, educators can support learners' holistic development and help them reach their full potential.

Planning for learning variability involves considering students' interests, preferences, learning styles, cultural backgrounds, and social-emotional needs. By valuing this diversity, educators can design engaging instruction that connects meaningfully to students' lives. This promotes greater motivation and achievement, creating inclusive environments where every student feels valued and supported.

By embracing UDL principles, educators create inclusive environments where every child is empowered to succeed, fostering a sense of belonging and maximizing academic and social-emotional growth.

Keep the following in mind when planning for UDL:

1. Provide access to materials that allow students to interact with content at their own pace and level.
2. Represent content in various formats and in different settings (whole group, small group, centers).
3. Grant students opportunities to share their understanding in a variety of ways.
4. Provide questions and opportunities to help students monitor their progress and reflect on their learning.
5. Offer students choices during learning experiences.
6. Connect new concepts to prior learning and experiences.



Planning for Learner Variability Beyond Skill Level

Skill Progress



Where are students in the skill sequence?



Learning Mindset



What does this student believe about himself as a learner?

What is his disposition towards learning or the subject?

Interest & Learning Mode



What are students curious about?

How do they want to show their learning?

How do they want to learn?

Social Learning



Does this student prefer learning individually or cooperatively?

Does this student see his value in a group setting?

Cultural Relevance



What culturally informed perspective about learning may this student have?

How is his race or culture represented in the curriculum?

Image Source: Building a Learner Variability Mindset



Learn More: UDL Learner Variability

Watch [The Myth of Average](#) about nurturing individual potential.

Read this [WaKIDS document](#) that explains the characteristics of entering kindergarteners.

This video from CAST, the creators of UDL, provides more details:

[UDL: Principles and Practice](#).

Kindergarten video examples of the three principles of UDL:

- [UDL: Multiple Means of Engagement in Kindergarten](#)
- [UDL: Multiple Means of Representation in Kindergarten](#)
- [UDL: Multiple Means of Action and Expression in Kindergarten](#)

[UDL Early Childhood Education Crosswalk](#)



UDL Reflection Questions

1. How can Universal Design for Learning (UDL) support students with diverse strengths and learning needs in your kindergarten classroom?
2. What are some ways you can provide multiple means of representation (e.g., visuals, hands-on materials, storytelling) to support different learners?
3. How do you differentiate instruction to respond to the varied interests, strengths, and preferences of young learners?
4. How do you support the diverse social-emotional needs of students as part of your instructional planning?
5. How might technology be used to support UDL and increase access to learning for all students?
6. How do you create a classroom culture that values and celebrates each student's strengths and contributions?
7. How can you partner with families to support learning strategies that reflect UDL principles?
8. Think about a recent lesson or activity you taught. How might you modify it to better support learner variability and ensure access for all students?

Multi-Tiered Systems of Support

A multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS) (MTSS) is an education framework that focuses on organizing the efforts of adults within systems to enhance student achievement. MTSS helps to ensure students benefit from nurturing environments and equitable access to instruction and supports that are differentiated to meet their unique needs. Washington's MTSS Framework outlines the essential **components of MTSS**, which include team-driven shared leadership, data-based decision making, student, family, and community engagement, continuum of supports, and evidence-based practices.

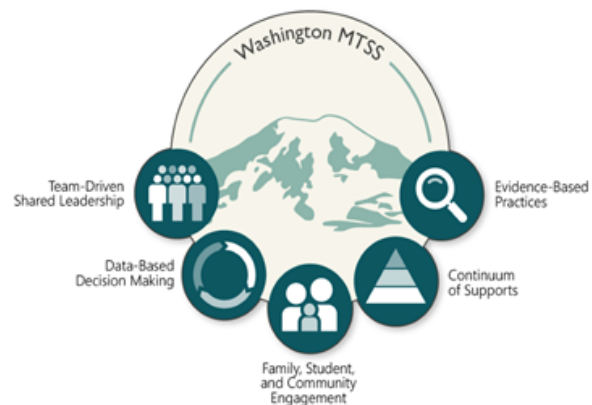
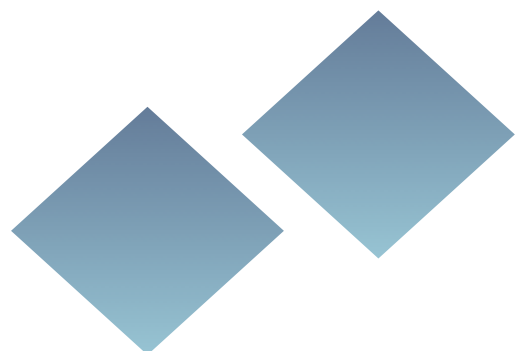


Image Source: [OSPI Multi-Tiered System of Supports \(MTSS\)](#)





In 2016, the Washington State Legislature established Washington's **Integrated Student Supports (ISS) Protocol**. Child Trends (2014) defines integrated student supports (ISS) as "a school-based approach to promoting students' academic success by developing or securing and coordinating supports that target academic and nonacademic barriers to achievement" (p. 12). Schools and LEAs are required to plan and implement supplemental supports using the ISS Protocol starting September 1, 2025. Given their shared purpose, and to support schools in building upon the systems they may already have in place, the **Center for the Improvement of Student Learning (CISL)** in OSPI developed an ISS Protocol Implementation Guide to support the delivery of integrated supports through the framework of MTSS.

If teachers feel as though a student is not equitably accessing the instruction and supports they need to thrive, they should work with their school team responsible for implementing integrated student supports through MTSS.

The Pyramid Model and MTSS

The Pyramid Model provides the framework for MTSS for early childhood programs across Washington. It aligns with state initiatives to ensure that every child has equitable access to the instruction and support they need to thrive.

By identifying students' needs early and providing targeted interventions matched to their level of need, the Pyramid Model aims to prevent academic and behavioral challenges from escalating and to promote positive outcomes for all students.

Pyramid Model practices include:

- Developing meaningful relationships with children and their families.
- Establishing schedules and routines.
- Providing clear directions and expectations.
- Promoting social engagement among all children.
- Encouraging appropriate strategies for communicating emotions.
- Promoting children's emotional regulation.
- Teaching children to problem-solve.
- Providing intensive individualized support when children have persistent challenging behavior or significant social-emotional delays.

The **National Center for Pyramid Model Innovations** (NCPMI) provides resources to support the implementation of these practices.

Both the Pyramid Model and MTSS underscore the importance of early intervention, collaboration among educators and families, and ongoing monitoring and adjustment to support the development of all children.





The National Center for Pyramid Model Innovations (NCPMI) provides resources to support the implementation of these practices.

Both the Pyramid Model and MTSS underscore the importance of early intervention, collaboration among educators and families, and ongoing monitoring and adjustment to support the development of all children.

UDL and MTSS

Universal Design for Learning and MTSS are both educational frameworks that cater to students' diverse learning requirements. Notably, a substantial portion of UDL principles can be seamlessly integrated into the MTSS interventions and strategies employed across various subjects and support tiers. While UDL primarily pertains to pedagogical techniques and instructional approaches, MTSS pertains to the broader structural framework that ensures comprehensive attention to students' individualized needs.

UDL principles can greatly enhance core, or universal (tier 1), instruction in MTSS and foster inclusive learning environments capable of accommodating the diverse needs of all students, regardless of their unique learning profiles or disabilities. The core tenets of UDL equip educators with a versatile toolbox for differentiating instruction and constructing multiple pathways for students to access and actively engage with the core curriculum.

Incorporating UDL into the foundational design of the core curriculum represents a proactive approach for educators to address the wide spectrum of students' learning requirements comprehensively. This strategic integration may diminish the necessity for subsequent interventions and support measures, thereby promoting more equitable and inclusive educational experiences for all learners.



Learn More About Inclusion

- [**Myths and Facts about Inclusionary Practices in Washington State**](#) is an OSPI document that explores various misconceptions about inclusionary practices.
- [**OSPI Inclusionary Practices Handbook**](#) provides detailed guidance and resources about inclusion for teachers, administrators, and families.
- [**Early Care and Education Environment Indicators and Elements of High-Quality Inclusion**](#) details key elements necessary for implementing high-quality inclusive practices in early childhood settings.
- [**Washington State MTSS Framework**](#) provides a comprehensive framework of MTSS to assist LEAs and schools in ensuring equitable outcomes for every Washington student in the PK–12 system.
- [**Multi-Tiered System of Supports \(MTSS\)**](#) is the OSPI website with resources and events related to MTSS.
- [**Washington's Integrated Student Supports Protocol**](#) outlines the steps and resources necessary to deliver integrated student supports through MTSS.
- [**MTSS Infrastructure and Support Mechanisms from Center on Multi-Tiered Systems of Supports**](#). This site has several downloadable tip sheets: leadership, teams, professional development, fidelity, prevention, schedules, evaluation, culture, and linguistic responsiveness, and more!



Multilingual Education

Students from diverse linguistic backgrounds, often referred to as multilingual learners (MLLs), bring a wealth of cultural and linguistic assets to our schools. Educators play an important role in creating inclusive, supportive learning environments that nurture language development while honoring each student's identity and experiences. Multilingual education in TK and kindergarten supports students' academic growth, social development, and sense of belonging in the classroom. This section describes who multilingual learners are and highlights practical strategies educators can use to support them effectively in TK and kindergarten settings.

Supporting Multilingual Learners

MLLs are students who are developing proficiency in two or more languages.

Exposure to multiple languages may come from the home environment, where a language other than the primary language of instruction is spoken, or through interactions with extended family members, community networks, or cultural contexts.

Multilingualism is a valuable asset that enriches the learning environment for all students. Research shows that learning multiple languages can support cognitive flexibility, strengthen problem-solving skills, and deepen cultural awareness. To support MLLs effectively, educational systems and classroom practices should be designed to make learning accessible while building on students' linguistic and cultural strengths. The following strategies can help teachers create welcoming, inclusive environments where multilingual learners thrive:

1. **Create a Welcoming Environment:** Display multilingual signs, books, and classroom materials that reflect the linguistic backgrounds of students. This helps create a space where students feel recognized, valued, and respected.
2. **Use Culturally Relevant Teaching Materials:** Incorporate books, songs, and activities that feature diverse characters and cultural experiences. This allows students to see themselves reflected in the curriculum and supports a strong sense of belonging.
3. **Make Content Accessible:** Use visuals, gestures, modeling, and real-life experiences to scaffold instruction. These strategies reduce language barriers and support comprehension while helping students learn about diverse perspectives and experiences.
4. **Promote Peer Interaction:** Provide opportunities for students to interact and collaborate with peers. Partner and group activities allow multilingual learners to practice language in meaningful contexts while building social connections.
5. **Provide Individualized Support:** Recognize that multilingual learners develop language skills at different rates and in different ways. Differentiated instruction tailored to students' language proficiency helps ensure they receive the support needed to succeed.
6. **Involve Families:** Provide resources and communications in families' home languages whenever possible and invite families to share their languages, stories, and cultural traditions with the classroom community. Strong partnerships between home and school support student learning and belonging.
7. **Support English Language Development:** Provide opportunities for multilingual learners to develop language skills across all four domains (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) through meaningful, authentic experiences. Activities such as storytelling, role-playing, and interactive discussions offer engaging ways for students to practice language in context.



Multilingual learners benefit cognitively, socially, and academically from developing multiple languages. Supporting students' home languages while promoting English development helps build a strong linguistic foundation for long-term learning and success. In Washington State, the Transitional Bilingual Instruction Program (TBIP) supports local education agencies (LEAs) in meeting the linguistic and cultural needs of multilingual learners through state and federal requirements and research-based practices.

See the [TBIP website](#) for Washington state policies, practice guide, and other resources and toolkits. There are legal requirements to support MLLs with instruction that provides meaningful access to content and designated English language development (ELD).

WIDA

English language development standards address the language expectations for each grade level. Washington belongs to the 41-state WIDA Consortium that promotes equity for MLLs by providing standards, assessments, and high-quality professional development for Washington state educators. In 2021, Washington State adopted the [WIDA English Language Development Standards Framework](#).

The Four Big Ideas that anchor the standards include:

1. **Equity of opportunity and access**
2. **Integration of content and language**
3. **Collaboration among shareholders**
4. **Functional approach to language development**

The 2024–25 school year marks the fourth year of implementation of the WIDA framework and the first year of full statewide implementation. Young learners develop language across many settings, including their homes, communities, and early learning environments.

To support educators, WIDA has developed Guiding Principles for Early Language Development that align with the Can Do Philosophy. The Early Years Can Do Descriptors provide concrete examples of what dual language learners can do at different stages of language development and offer guidance for supporting language growth in early learning classrooms. For additional information and resources, please visit OSPI's WIDA website.

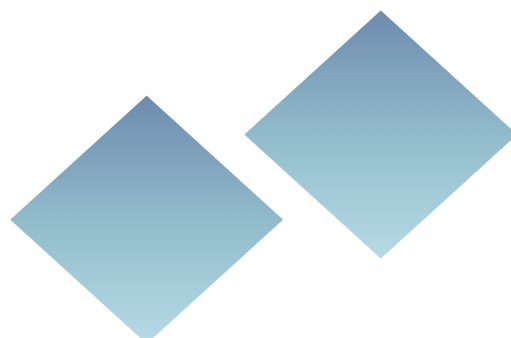


Administrators:

Ensure educators have the resources, professional learning, and support needed to effectively implement the WIDA English Language Development (ELD) Standards Framework.

Dual Language Education

Dual language programs teach content in English and a partner language. Programs in Washington begin in preschool or kindergarten and continue through middle or high school. OSPI plans for all students to have access to dual language education by 2040. Helping dual-language learners maintain and build their home languages while promoting English fluency benefits children culturally, academically, cognitively, and socially (Espinosa, 2013).





Learn More About Multilingual Education and WIDA

- [Since Time Immemorial: Tribal Sovereignty in Washington State](#): A required tribally developed curriculum through the Office of Native Education at OSPI. This curriculum is available for all ages, including early learning and K–3 children.
- Explore the [OSPI Dual Language Education and Resources](#) page for more information.
- This Edutopia article, [6 essential strategies for teaching English language learners](#), provides helpful tips from experienced educators.
- [WIDA Can Do Philosophy](#).
- [PreK-3 WIDA Landing Page](#)
- [WIDA PreK-3 Essential Actions](#)
- [PLUSS Framework for Instructional / Intervention Enhancement: Observation Rubric](#)

MLL Reflection Questions

1. How can you create a welcoming and inclusive classroom environment that affirms the languages and cultures of multilingual learners (MLLs)?
2. How can culturally relevant books, songs, and instructional materials support multilingual learners and strengthen students' sense of belonging?
3. What strategies can you use to make classroom content more accessible for multilingual learners?
4. How can peer interaction support language development and social connection for multilingual learners in your classroom?
5. How might you differentiate instruction to provide individualized support for multilingual learners at different stages of language development?
6. In what ways can you partner with families to support students' language development and honor the languages spoken at home?
7. What opportunities can you create for multilingual learners to practice and develop English across listening, speaking, reading, and writing in meaningful classroom activities?

CHAPTER 6

Chapter Six Key Learning Objectives

After completing this chapter, readers will be able to:

1. **Explain** the purpose and scope of parent and family engagement (PFE) in supporting children's development, learning, and well-being.
2. **Describe** strategies for building strong partnerships with families based on trust, respect, and collaboration, including fostering inclusivity for families of children with disabilities and multilingual learners.
3. **Explain** the principles of two-way communication with families and how it treats families as equal partners in children's education.
4. **Describe** how family interactions at home contribute to children's academic success and overall development.
5. **Identify** ways to involve families in planning, developing, and evaluating classroom activities, programs, and systems.

"Creating effective partnerships between schools, parents, and communities isn't just a nice idea. It's a necessity."

-- Don Davies, 2000



Families are a child's first, longest-lasting, and most influential teachers. When families are meaningfully and consistently engaged in their child's learning and development, children experience positive outcomes in their academic success, health, and overall well-being.

Research highlights the significant role family engagement plays in early learning (Bierman et al., 2017; Boonk et al., 2018; Castro et al., 2015).

Early childhood family engagement is associated with:

- Improved vocabulary, early literacy skills, and reading fluency
- Higher academic achievement
- Lower rates of grade retention
- Greater parent confidence and competence in interactions with their children

Intentional family engagement strengthens meaningful partnerships between families and schools by ensuring that communication and collaboration are purposeful, responsive, and inclusive of diverse family needs. When educators prioritize strong family partnerships, schools benefit from improved communication, increased family participation, and stronger student outcomes.

Engaging families as partners in their child's education helps build strong home-school connections that support children throughout their PK–12 journey. Ultimately, the goal of family engagement is to support the learning and development of every child. For this reason, educators should view family engagement as an essential component of equitable, high-quality education.





What is Family Engagement?

Family engagement extends beyond inviting or involving families in the educational setting.

While it is commonly associated with activities such as classroom volunteering and parent-teacher conferences, its scope transcends these conventional notions. Family engagement is a multifaceted concept and can vary from one family to another. It is the teacher's responsibility to cultivate a welcoming environment and provide a variety of meaningful opportunities for families to participate. This approach aims to instill a sense of comfort and enthusiasm, encouraging families to actively assume the role of partners in their child's educational journey (NAEYC, 2022, p. 147.)



Administrators:

How does your school reflect the cultures, languages, and experiences of the children and families it serves? Consider how the school environment communicates welcome, respect, and belonging.

NAEYC's recommendations for creating strong relationships with families include:

1

Recognize and honor the primary role of families in children's development and learning. Understand each family's values, languages, and culture, and support their goals for their children's behavior, learning, and development.

2

Respect each family's right to make decisions for their children. When their desires conflict with professional knowledge, collaborate to identify common goals and establish mutually acceptable strategies.

3

Be curious. Show interest in their languages, customs, activities, values, and beliefs to create a culturally responsive learning environment. Reach out to families who may not respond to traditional methods like surveys or invitations.

4

Maintain consistently high expectations for family engagement, being open to multiple and varied forms of engagement, and providing intentional and responsive supports. Ask families how they would like to be involved and what supports may be helpful. Recognize that it is your responsibility as an educator to connect with families successfully so that you can provide the most culturally and linguistically sustaining learning environment for each child.

5

Communicate the value of multilingualism to all families. Highlight the social and cognitive advantages and emphasize the importance of supporting the home language as English is introduced, ensuring children grow into fully bilingual adults.



Building Relationships

Building a strong partnership with families in early childhood education is rooted in trust, respect, and collaboration. This involves open communication, valuing family input, and fostering inclusivity. Listening to families' perspectives is key to creating a supportive learning environment. Regular communication channels and involving families in classroom activities enhance collaboration. By working together, educators and families can support children's development and improve educational outcomes.

As described in the WaKIDS chapter, building a relationship based on trust and respect is essential for meaningful family engagement.



Administrators:

Provide teachers with adequate release time to conduct 30–45 minute family conferences. Consider scheduling substitutes to ensure teachers have enough time for thoughtful, uninterrupted conversations with families.

Teachers should connect with families before the school year begins and keep the following in mind:

- **Listen to families.** Listening demonstrates care and respect for families' perspectives, experiences, and knowledge of their child.
- **Create a classroom environment that reflects students and families.** Ensure the classroom represents the diverse cultures, languages, and identities of the children in the program.
- **Display family photos.** Including family photos helps children feel a sense of belonging and connection between home and school.
- **Use inclusive and culturally responsive materials.** Select books, posters, songs, and learning materials that reflect diverse cultures, family structures, and individuals with disabilities.
- **Honor children's names.** Ensure names are spelled and pronounced correctly and avoid asking families to "Americanize" or change their child's name.
- **Learn about family relationships.** Review enrollment information carefully to understand family structures and the important adults in each child's life.

A pre-enrollment form that provides contact and other helpful information about the child and family is beneficial. Discuss this information during the Family Connection Meeting.

Teachers can use LEA developed forms, OSPI WaKIDS Introducing Me booklet, or create their own.

See the box below for considerations on what to include on a family intake form.



What do you want to know about children and families in your classroom?

- Who does the child live with and what is their relationship to the child?
- Methods of contact, and which are preferred:
 - Do they have an email address and access to the internet?
 - Child and family primary languages; which language is preferred for communication?
- Do they want their name and contact information included in a class directory?
- Does the child have any health issues you need to be aware of?
- How will the child get to and from school?
- What does your child enjoy? What comforts or calms them?

As educators prepare to build relationships with families, it is important to consider several key factors that shape families' experiences as they enter the school community.

- **Understand kindergarten access in Washington.** In Washington State, children have the right to access public education beginning in kindergarten. **The only requirement for kindergarten entry is that a child turns five years old by August 31.** While kindergarten attendance is optional, it is often the first opportunity families have to engage with the public school system. Age eligibility, rather than developmental readiness, helps ensure equitable access to public education.
- **Recognize that families may have different experiences with schools.** Schools in the United States have historically reflected dominant cultural norms, and not all families may feel immediately comfortable or welcomed in school environments. For some families, entering a classroom may mean navigating a new school, a new system, or even a new country. Educators should intentionally consider how to create welcoming and inclusive entry points for all families.

- **Reflect on assumptions about family engagement.** Families may hold different cultural expectations about family–school relationships and communication. There is no single “right” way for families to engage with schools. Educators can strengthen partnerships by remaining open, curious, and responsive to families' perspectives.
- **Recognize diverse early learning experiences.** Children and families enter kindergarten with a wide range of early learning experiences. Some children may have attended preschool or early learning programs, while others may be entering a school setting for the first time.

Conferences

Meeting with families is a critical component of meaningful family engagement. These conversations provide an opportunity for educators to learn about children's strengths, interests, and experiences while building trusting relationships with families. Family conferences also create space for collaborative dialogue about children's learning, social-emotional development, goal setting, and ways to support children both at home and at school.





In preparation for family conferences, consider the following:

- Are there meeting times offered that accommodate working families?
- Is video conferencing offered as an alternative?
- Is 30–45 minutes scheduled for each meeting?
- Are there interpreters available?
- Is there enough time scheduled between conferences to accommodate transitions?
- Where will families wait comfortably so they cannot overhear an ongoing family conference?
- How will seating be arranged so all adults are at an equal level? (Teachers should not be in an elevated position or sitting behind a desk. Families need adult-sized chairs. Sitting around a table is a neutral arrangement.)
- Are safe materials for young children available to explore close enough for families to monitor?
- Are there work samples and/or assessment documentation available to share?
- Is there an outline for the meeting that includes sufficient time for families to share their ideas and concerns and to ask questions?



Moving Toward Intentional Family Engagement Strategies

Family engagement grows from the relationship between the teacher, child, and family. In the past, communication between schools and families was often one-directional. Teachers shared what they believed families “needed to know” about their child’s school experience, while families primarily received information. Opportunities for families to share their perspectives or contribute ideas were less common. Over time, research and experience have shown that this approach does not fully support meaningful partnerships.

Families bring valuable knowledge about their children, including their interests, strengths, cultural experiences, and ways of learning. When educators and families learn from one another, they can develop stronger partnerships that support children’s growth and learning.

Educators of children of all ages can benefit from approaches to family engagement that emphasize collaboration, shared understanding, and mutual respect. The table below contrasts some traditional approaches to family engagement with ideas for practices that support more intentional and reciprocal partnerships with families.

One research-based framework that supports this shift is the [Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family-School Partnerships](#) (Mapp and Kuttner, 2013). The framework describes how family engagement can move beyond isolated activities toward practices that are systemic, integrated, and sustained. It highlights the importance of creating opportunities for both educators and families to build their capacity to work together effectively. Its four key components—building trusting relationships, linking engagement to learning, collaborative decision-making, and recognizing families as assets—reflect many of the approaches described in this chapter.



Classroom Tip:

Some families may not feel comfortable taking photos or having them publicly displayed. Consider inviting families to share images of something meaningful from home—such as a favorite food, book, or activity.

The Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family-School Partnerships (Version 2)



Dual capacity-building framework for family-school partnerships (Version 2).

Retrieved from: www.dualcapacity.org

Moving From Traditional to Intentional Family Engagement

Traditional

- Telling parents what their children know, what they need to know, and how they are behaving.
- Sharing information using one strategy.
- Using one-way communication strategies.
- Images and materials in the classroom show only able-bodied people and stereotypical images of cultures, gender, and family composition.
- "Tourist" view of cultures (food and holidays) represented in teaching.
- Parents volunteering in the classroom.

Intentional

- Ask for input about children from families using surveys and through conversations.
- Collaborate to set goals for children's learning and behavior.
- Provide information in various formats, translated into home languages, as needed.
- Provide several opportunities for reciprocal, two-way, meaningful conversations (phone calls, video conferences, face-to-face, communication apps).
- Include images and materials that depict children and families of different cultures, abilities, and composition.
- Invite families to share their experiences and cultures, in their own way.



Moving From Traditional to Intentional Family Engagement

Traditional

- Completing reading logs and helping with homework.
- Telling families what informational workshops are available for them with inflexible dates and times.
- Scheduling 15-minute parent conferences during the school day.
- Reaching out to families exclusively to report misbehavior or other problems.
- Assuming whether families need an interpreter based on the family language. survey

Intentional

- Provide multiple opportunities for families to volunteer or participate in the school community that do not require coming to school during the school day.
- Provide meaningful, developmentally appropriate learning at home activities for children and adults to experience together.
- Ask for family input. What do they want to know more about? When is a good time to meet? Do they prefer meeting in-person or virtually? Plan accordingly to meet needs as you are able.
- Provide flexible scheduling (with family input), that includes evening options and enough time for meaningful, collaborative conversations and transition time between meetings.
- Initiate positive contact before the school year. Share positive information on a regular basis throughout the school year and build rapport so conversations about problems are easier (and not the normal subject of communication).
- Ask families if they need an interpreter for conferences, phone calls, school events, etc. and when they would like an interpreter present.





Family Volunteers



Family engagement has evolved beyond parent volunteers in the classroom. Although this is still a helpful and meaningful engagement opportunity for some families, it does not meet all families' needs. Many adults do not have the ability (or desire) to volunteer in the classroom due to work, transportation issues, or other barriers, but still want to be active in their child's school experience. Teachers and families benefit when there are multiple ways for families to be involved. Confidentiality should be a consideration in seeking volunteers.

Ideas for Family Volunteering/Engagement

Volunteer in the classroom

- Read to children during whole group or center time.
- Share a family tradition.
- Chaperone a field trip.
- Engage in a special activity with children (cooking, art, gardening, music, celebrations).

Volunteer in the school

- Help in the office or library.
- Assist with extracurricular activities (clubs, PE, music).
- Help with translation or interpretation services.

Learning at home activities

- Read together.
- Engage in conversations.
- Participate in learning at home activities shared by teacher or school.

Attend family-teacher conferences

- Ask questions of your child's teacher.
- Assist in setting goals for your child.

Help from home

- Gathering materials (recycled or purchased).
- Cutting out materials.
- Special skills like sewing (make beanbags, repair dramatic play clothing) or carpentry.

Weekend or After School

- Outdoor work (playground, garden, outdoor classroom; gardening, building, painting, repairing).

Special Events

- Attend or assist with carnivals, plays, concerts, fundraisers, school pictures, curriculum nights, family education classes.



Families of Children with Disabilities

Children with disabilities and their families often benefit from strong partnerships with educators (Division for Early Childhood, 2014; Sandall et al., 2019). Families bring deep knowledge of their child's strengths, needs, and experiences, which can help inform classroom practices and supports. Research also suggests that some families of children with disabilities may experience increased stress, isolation, or concerns related to navigating services and supports.

When educators build trusting relationships with these families, it can open opportunities for collaboration and shared problem solving. These partnerships can also support coordination among the people involved in a child's learning and development, including school staff and other providers a child may work with outside of school. Working together in this way can help ensure that supports are aligned with the child's individual strengths and needs.



Administrators:

Schools often benefit from having a clear and supportive approach to family engagement that includes resources for both teachers and families. Some schools provide volunteer orientations that include guidance on privacy and confidentiality practices. Offering teachers support in coordinating these orientations can help ensure that family volunteers feel welcomed, prepared, and informed.

Resources for Supporting Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Families

Families who are culturally and linguistically diverse may benefit from additional support when engaging in their child's education. Listed below are articles, videos, and other materials to help grow our understanding and build a network of support to serve families. While reading, think of which strategies you will employ during the Family Connection Meeting.

- [**6 Strategies for Partnering with Families of English Language Learners**](#) (Breiseth, n.d.): A helpful article with strategies for building relationships with families of English language learners.
- [**English language learners in special education: 4 things to know about partnering with families**](#) (Urtubey, n.d.): from Understood.org provides helpful strategies for educators about working with families around special education.
- [**Lessons Learned from Our Collaborations with Families**](#) (Morris, 2017): A short article by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) that addresses ways to support continuous learning at home with families that are developmentally appropriate.
- [**Principles of Effective Family Engagement**](#): An article that focuses on 6 key principles of family engagement identified through NAEYC's. Engaging Diverse Families project.



Multilingual Learners

Family engagement is essential for multilingual learners' academic success. Involved families support learning by reading at home, assisting with homework, and participating in conferences.

Families also help connect home and school cultures, offering valuable insights for teachers. Schools can encourage engagement by providing multilingual resources and translation services, and inviting families to participate in events, fostering a supportive environment for multilingual learners.



Funds of Knowledge

Funds of Knowledge are the historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being. These include family work practices, life experiences, and cultural traditions that can be integrated into teaching to make learning more meaningful and connected to students' lives.

This framework is rooted in **asset-based thinking**, recognizing that families and communities already possess rich knowledge that schools can draw on, rather than approaching families from a deficit lens (Amanti, Neff, and Gonzalez, 1992). Teachers can use this knowledge to plan learning experiences that are more meaningful. Please see the [Funds of Knowledge Toolkit](#) from OSPI to learn more.

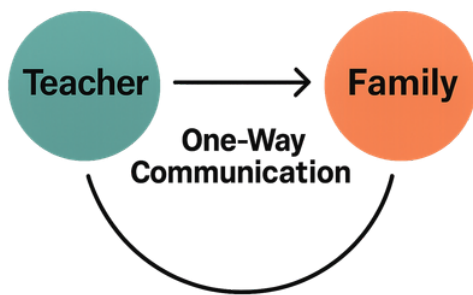


Communication

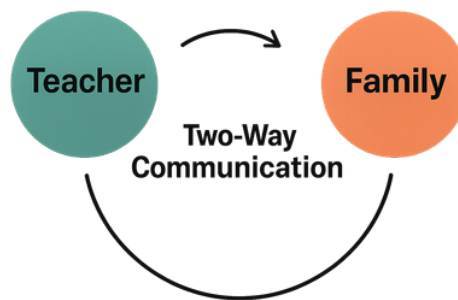
Communicating with families is a top priority. Effective communication with families must go beyond outdated one-way methods where teachers merely inform parents. One-way communication often fails to respect families' views or encourage their participation. Teachers should foster meaningful two-way conversations that allow families to share insights, ask questions, and engage in problem-solving.

Two-way communication treats teachers and families as equal partners, showing respect for the family's knowledge about their child. These interactions occur through in-person meetings, phone calls, or video conferences. Although such communication can be time-consuming, it is crucial for addressing sensitive issues about a child's learning and behavior. These discussions should not be handled via email or text messages; instead, they require thoughtful, collaborative conversations.





- Teacher as expert and authority
- Sharing information via newsletters, emails, texts, websites, bulletin boards
- Topics: announcements, reminders, calendar, sharing photos and videos, sharing positive behavior and accomplishments



- Family and teacher as experts and equals
- Demonstrates respect
- Conversations via phone calls, in-person, or video conferencing
- Topics: Problem solving, goal setting, challenging behavior, sharing positive behavior and accomplishments

Effective communication between teachers and families fosters understanding. Familiarity with various methods helps utilize the best strategy for each context. Teachers should meet families where they are, addressing diverse needs with empathy and accommodation. Some families may hesitate to engage due to crisis or trauma. The goal is to create safe, supportive opportunities for these families to communicate with us using a variety of methods.

Check with a school administrator to learn about translation and interpretation services; all families have a right to participate in their child's education and language should not be a barrier.

See the Box: Resources for Supporting Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Families on pg. 153 of this chapter for more information.

Methods of Communication

Communicating with families in early childhood education involves various methods, each with unique benefits.

- Newsletters share updates and important information about classroom activities and events.
- Emails provide detailed messages and attachments.
- Texts offer quick, direct communication for urgent matters.
- Bulletin boards visually share announcements and children's work.
- Phone calls allow personalized discussions about individual concerns or achievements.

- Apps provide a centralized platform for real-time communication.
- Face-to-face interactions foster trust and meaningful dialogue, supporting children's learning and development.



Administrators:

Find out the different languages spoken in your TK and kindergarten classrooms and secure resources for translation and interpretation services. Establish and share the protocol for teachers to access them.

Methods of Communication with Families

Strategy	Helpful to use for	Pros	Cons	Considerations
Newsletter	Classroom and school updates	Scheduled delivery Variety of information No schedule conflicts	Too much information or not helpful Disorganized presentation No way to know if information was read or understood	Proofreading Translations
Text Message	Reminders Sharing good news	Quick Individual or group messages No schedule conflicts	Too much information or not helpful Disorganized presentation No way to know if information was read or understood	Proofreading Translations
App based (e.g., Class Dojo, SeeSaw)	Sending photo/video Sharing good news Classroom updates	Quick Photos/videos No schedule conflicts Many translate to several languages	May not offer response opportunity for family	Translations
Email	Reminders Updates Scheduling meetings Distributing newsletter Sharing good news	Quick Individual or group Documentation of message No schedule conflicts	Too much information or not helpful Disorganized presentation No way to know if information was read or understood	Proofreading Translations
Phone	Sharing good news Answering questions Sharing concerns and discussing solutions	Personal Check for understanding and answer questions in real time	Scheduling conflicts Cannot see reactions or body language	Interpreter
In-person or video conference	Sharing progress reports Setting goals Answering questions Sharing concerns and discussion solutions	Personal Can read body language Check for understanding and answer questions in real time	Scheduling conflicts	Interpreter



Communication Missteps

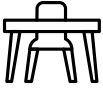
We all make mistakes, the following common communication errors with families can hinder effective collaboration:

- Overloading families with information can overwhelm them and obscure key messages.
- Focusing only on negatives without highlighting positives can create a negative perception.
- Using jargon or technical language may alienate families unfamiliar with educational terms, leading to misunderstandings.
- Rushing communications without ensuring clarity can result in misinterpretations.
- Not providing evidence for concerns or observations may leave families feeling uninformed, undermining trust.

To avoid these pitfalls, balance communication, prioritize clarity and conciseness, highlight strengths along with challenges, use accessible language, take time to ensure understanding, and provide evidence-based explanations. The table below explains common errors and suggests ways to avoid them.

Communication Missteps and Helpful Strategies

Common Misstep	Helpful Strategies
Information overload: Sharing too much information and overwhelming families	Engage in bidirectional communications that seeks family input into what is important for them to understand or know more about. Prioritize together the most important items to discuss or share.
Focus on the negative: Majority of contact is to share negative news or spend most of the time together talking about negative behaviors.	Maintain a classroom website where "other helpful information" can be accessed by families.
Speak in generalizations with no supporting evidence: Using broad terms to describe behavior or progress with no specific evidence to share.	Frame conversations around children's skills and strengths and address negative behaviors or uncomfortable topics in terms of goals and problem solving.
Use jargon: Using terminology that is not familiar to families.	Come prepared with work samples, assessment data, or anecdotal evidence of what the teacher wants to discuss. Avoid terms like "always" and "never."
Rush the conversation: Short (inadequate) time limits for conversations that lead to reading through information teachers want to share or teacher does not provide enough time for authentic conversations or questions.	Use terms that are easily understood and provide a list of terms with definitions to help families navigate reports. Schedule enough time to engage in conversation, not just enough time to read through information; be sure to check for understanding and allow time for questions. Prioritize the focus for the meeting.



Classroom Tip: Three key steps when facing challenges with communicating with families is a helpful resource from the National Center for Pyramid Model Innovations.



Learning at Home

Learning at home is a central aspect of family engagement and plays a significant role in supporting children's academic success. Research and practice have consistently shown that the everyday interactions families have with their children—through conversation, shared experiences, and routines—have a powerful influence on learning and development. Teachers play an important role in supporting families in this work by helping them recognize and build upon these learning opportunities.

Educators can support learning at home by sharing ideas and examples through newsletters, bulletin boards, family nights, informal conversations, and communication apps. These approaches can help families make connections between what children are learning in the classroom and their experiences at home. Because families' schedules, resources, languages, and preferences vary, it is important to offer multiple options rather than relying on a single approach. Providing a range of strategies allows families to engage in ways that are meaningful and feasible for them.

Examples of strategies that support learning at home include:

- Ideas for conversations and experiences embedded within daily routines (e.g., mealtimes, bedtime, bath time, riding in transportation, or walking together).
- Short, engaging activities connected to classroom learning (e.g., surveying family or friends about their preferred pizza topping, or noticing living and nonliving things outdoors).
- Opportunities for shared reading, along with prompts that support adults in talking with children about texts.

Communication Apps

Communication apps are gaining popularity as convenient ways for teachers to share information with families, and hopefully to receive information from them! It is important to consider an app's features when determining which one to adopt in your school or classroom.

Consider these questions when selecting an app:

1. Does the app allow teachers to send messages to the entire class as well as individual, private messages to each family?
2. Can teachers and families send text, photos, videos, or audio recordings?
3. Does the app translate information into multiple languages?

What are the school's priorities for a communication app?

Here is an [overview of popular communication apps](#) (Common Sense Education, n.d.; some are free, others require subscription).





Classroom Tip: Families engage with information in different ways. Using a mix of communication approaches—and inviting opportunities for conversation—can help ensure important messages are accessible, understood, and connected to relationships.



Engaging families in TK and kindergarten is essential for a child's education. It establishes a collaborative environment, extending learning from the classroom to the home. This involvement leads to better academic outcomes, improved social skills, and greater parent satisfaction. Prioritizing family engagement builds a foundation for lifelong learning and success.



Administrators:

See NAEYC's article [Discussions on School Policies Related to Homework for Young Students](#) (Charner-Laird, 2015).



**Learn More:
Family Engagement Strategies**

Explore [multiple resources for families](#) from the National Center for Pyramid Model Innovations. Share this link, [Twenty Ways You Can Help Your Child Succeed at School](#), with families.

"Correlation is not causation. Does homework cause achievement, or do high achievers do more homework?"
~Cathy Vatterott, Education Professor at the University of Missouri-St. Louis

Homework

There are mixed feelings regarding homework and reading logs for young children. Equity issues can affect homework completion, as some families face barriers related to time, resources, or access to support. Additionally, children with learning disabilities or language barriers may find homework challenging, leading to frustration. Consequently, homework expectations may inadvertently perpetuate educational disparities.

Using **reading logs** to motivate students is neither fair nor effective. Research has shown that reading logs can decrease children's motivation to read. Children typically have no control over the circumstances surrounding their reading time, and families may face multiple barriers to participating.

Key Lessons from Research on Homework

(Center for Public Education, n.d.)

Is Homework Good for Kids? (Reilly, 2016)

Rethinking Reading Logs for Beginning Readers (That Fun Reading Teacher, 2015)

A Non-Traditional Reading Log (Life Between Summers, n.d.)

When Reading Logs Backfire, What Can Teachers Do Instead? (endutopia, 2022)

Alternatives to home/school reading logs (McAllister, n.d.)

Intentional Family Engagement Reflection Questions

1. What current practices support the engagement of families in your classroom? How might you build on these strengths throughout the year?
2. How do you create opportunities for two-way communication with families? What supports or resources could help strengthen this communication over time?
3. How do your communication and engagement approaches reflect the diverse backgrounds, languages, schedules, and experiences of families in your learning community?
4. In what ways might you adapt or refine your existing approaches to encourage ongoing participation and collaboration with families across the school year?
5. How do you sustain outreach and connection with families whose circumstances may limit regular communication with the school? What approaches have been helpful, or could be explored, such as:
 - Partnering with trusted community liaisons
 - Connecting with families in community-based settings (e.g., libraries, food banks)
 - Supporting peer-to-peer outreach (e.g., "walking bus" parent leaders)
6. How do you reflect on your own perspectives and assumptions related to family partnerships?
 - Whose voices and experiences are most visible in your interactions?
 - How do you interpret family engagement when communication looks different from your expectations?
7. What resources, relationships, or supports within your LEA could help strengthen connections with families and support your family engagement goals?



Learn More: Family Engagement

- [Relationship-Based Competencies to Support Family Engagement from Head Start](#) (USDHHS, 2018).
- Check out these [resources](#) from NCPMI to share with families.



CHAPTER 7

Chapter Seven Key Learning Objectives

After completing this chapter, readers will be able to:

1. **Explain** the role of high-quality observation and documentation in assessing children's learning and development in TK and kindergarten classrooms.
2. **Recognize** how personal biases can influence observation and documentation and reflect on strategies to minimize their impact.
3. **Describe** strategies for integrating observation into daily routines, including non-instructional times such as snack and outdoor play.
4. **Identify** efficient methods for storing and organizing documentation to ensure easy access and systematic use of assessment data.
5. **Explain** how observation and assessment data can guide instruction, support student development, and inform adaptations for children with disabilities or challenging behaviors.

RCW Requirements: Administer the Washington Kindergarten Inventory of Developing Skills (WaKIDS; [RCW 28A.300.072](#), TK; [RCW 28A.655.080](#), Kindergarten).

TPEP Criteria: Using multiple student data elements to modify instruction and improve student learning.



Assessment plays a critical role in teaching and learning. Teachers use assessment data to inform instruction and to track children's learning and development. It provides specific information about what children know and can do which leads to identifying and addressing potential gaps in understanding. Assessment in TK and kindergarten classrooms is centered around observation and documentation of children's learning and development.

In this chapter, the following definitions will be used:

Observation: The process of watching children during learning, routines, and play opportunities to gain information about their learning and development.

Documentation: The method of recording evidence gathered to support instructional decisions and decisions about children's knowledge, skills, behavior, and abilities.

Washington Kindergarten Inventory of Developing Skills

One component of the statutory requirements of state-funded full-day kindergarten ([RCW 28A.150.315](#)) and the [Second Substitute HB 1550](#) (creation of TK) is the Washington Kindergarten Inventory of Developing Skills (WaKIDS). WaKIDS is a transition process that helps ensure a successful start to the TK–12 experience by connecting the key adults in a child's life. **It is critical that WAKIDS data is utilized by practitioners to determine classroom and individual children's needs and use that information to inform instruction.**



WaKIDS Connection:

The Whole-child Assessment is **not** a test, but a practice that allows teachers to observe and document children's demonstrated knowledge, skills, and abilities while they are engaged in everyday activities. Remember, it is NOT a pull-out assessment.



Watch and Learn

The [Welcome to WaKIDS Video](#) (4:04 minutes) provides an introduction to WaKIDS and features kindergarten teachers, parents, principals, and early learning teachers from Yakima, Sumner, and Tacoma school districts.

RCW Requirement:

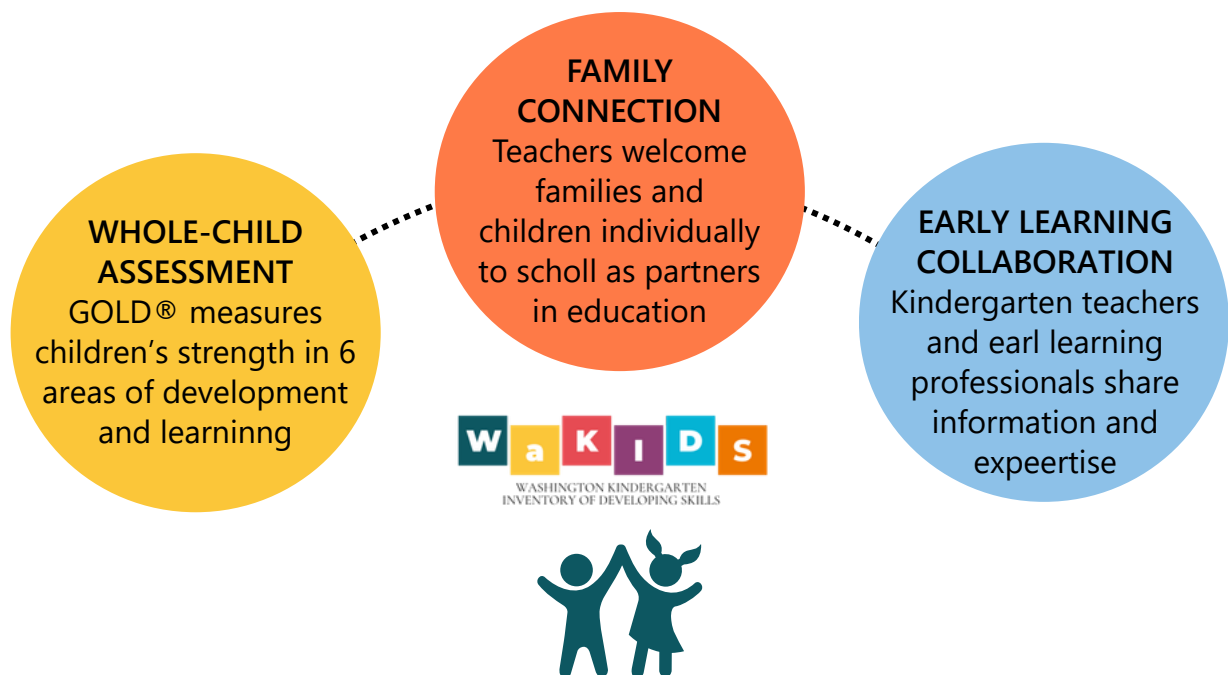
Administer the Washington Kindergarten Inventory of Developing Skills (WaKIDS).

TPEP Criteria:

Use multiple data elements to modify instruction and improve student learning.



WaKIDS has three separate, but equally important components:



This visual highlights that WaKIDS is a child-centered process. It also underscores the importance of connecting the key adults in a child's life to better support the child.

1. **Family Connection** welcomes families into the Washington TK–12 education system as partners in their child's learning. Through a one-on-one meeting, teachers and families begin building a relationship early in the school year, recognizing families as their child's first teachers and inviting them to share insights, ask questions, and support a smooth transition into TK or kindergarten.
2. **Early Learning Collaboration** brings together early learning professionals and TK and kindergarten teachers to support smooth transitions. By connecting children's birth-through-age-5 experiences with the TK–12 system, this component fosters shared understanding of kindergarten readiness and promotes continuity for children and families.
3. **The Whole-child Assessment** helps TK and kindergarten teachers learn about the skills, knowledge, and abilities of the children in their classrooms in order to support each child's learning and development. Whole-child Assessment data supports instructional planning and school, LEA, and state policies and practices.



Classroom Tip:

Class meetings, typically held in the morning, called "morning meetings," are the perfect environment to promote community by solving problems and making decisions together.



Why WaKIDS?

WaKIDS highlights the importance of early learning in Washington State. Agencies like OSPI, DCYF, and AESD, along with early learning partners, collaborate to make WaKIDS possible.

For teachers, WaKIDS will:

- Set the stage for intentional family engagement.
- Support authentic understanding of each child's knowledge, skills, and abilities across six areas of development.
- Inform individualized instruction that responds to children's strengths and needs.
- Strengthen teachers' observational skills.
- Provide opportunities to engage with students in intentional, developmentally appropriate ways.

For administrators, WaKIDS will:

- Support collaborative partnerships with childcare providers, ECEAP, and Head Start programs that connect to the elementary school community.
- Provide insights into data trends for entering TK and kindergarten students.
- Inform the design of TK and kindergarten programs that welcome and support all children and their families.
- Identify professional learning needs that help staff better serve children and families.

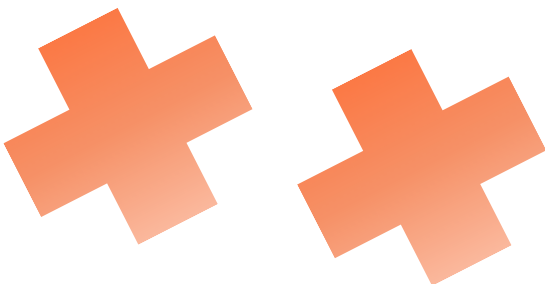
Find additional resources on [OSPI's WaKIDS webpage](#).



+ High-Quality Observation and Documentation

Individuals bring unique perspectives shaped by their life experiences, and observation therefore always includes a human element. High-quality observation, however, requires objectivity. This involves distinguishing observable facts from opinions or interpretations.

The observation and documentation process can be understood as similar to a home video. During everyday classroom activities, objective evidence of children's knowledge, skills, behaviors, and abilities is observed and documented. When documentation is objective, an outside observer could watch the home video and clearly understand what occurred. Maintaining this level of objectivity supports accurate understanding of children's learning and development.





Objective Observations

When documenting observations include the following:

- Descriptions of facial expressions: Bobby wrinkled his nose and lowered his eyebrows when his block tower fell.
- Quotations: In the art center, Makai selected watercolor paint. He said, "I am going to paint a masterpiece just like we saw in the book. I will be a painter."
- Descriptions of creations: Andie used pastels to draw a picture. She used green for the grass and blue for the water. Consider attaching photos of creations in addition to a description.
- Descriptions of gestures and actions: Shawnise stacked 5 rectangular blocks on top of each other. She stepped back from her creation. She raised her hands over her head and clapped her hands together. She said, "Look. It is balancing!"

Subjective Documentation

Avoid subjective documentation. When documenting observations avoid the following:

- Evaluations: Marcus did a good job painting in the art area.
- Evaluations: Georgia was a great listener during story time.
- Interpretations: Jax was sad during the whole group today.
- Interpretations: Keeley was tired and did not feel well when she came in this morning.



Context and Details

Documentation is most useful when it provides a complete picture of what was observed. Unlike the home-video analogy described earlier, those who review documentation rely solely on the written record to understand the event. Including details about the setting, materials, and the presence of others helps create a clearer and more complete illustration of what occurred. When this contextual information is combined with an objective description of children's behavior, the documentation provides strong evidence to support instructional decision-making.

Examples of helpful contextual information include:

- Were there other children or adults present? How many?
- Was this a teacher-initiated activity or a child-initiated activity?
- How long was the child engaged in this activity?
- Where and when did this activity take place?



The examples below illustrate how documentation can be analyzed and revised to strengthen clarity, objectivity, and usefulness for understanding children's learning.

Original Documentation:

Chloe loves reading with her best friend, Kynesha.

This example illustrates how subjective language can appear in documentation. Words such as "loves" and "best" reflect interpretation rather than observable facts and are not considered objective evidence. Documentation is most useful when it allows the reader to draw conclusions based on clearly described observations.

Revised documentation examples:

- Chloe spent 15 minutes in the library looking at books.
- Chloe read books with Kynesha.

When multiple observations document Chloe interacting with Kynesha over time, readers may interpret the nature of the relationship based on the evidence provided. Assigning labels such as "best friend" is unnecessary, as the documented interactions themselves offer sufficient information.

Original Documentation: Krystal and Evan played in blocks and built a road to the ocean.

This documentation does not contain subjective language but lacks sufficient detail and context to be as useful as it could be. **When, where, for how long?** Effective documentation answers questions such as when the interaction occurred, where it took place, and how long it lasted, as well as how conclusions were drawn.

What evidence explains how the destination was a road to the ocean?

Krystal lined up (and counted) five-unit blocks and told me that it was a road. Evan explained that they needed to build a "road to the ocean" so they could get on their boat and find sharks. They used small unit blocks to create a car and truck to drive on their road.

Original Documentation:

Ryland painted a pretty picture with a lot of colors at the easel.

This example includes an evaluative word ("pretty") and lacks sufficient detail to be informative.

Evaluative language reflects opinion rather than observation and does not provide useful evidence of children's learning.

Replacing evaluative language with specific, observable details strengthens documentation.

For example, "a pretty picture with a lot of colors" can be described as "painted using red, yellow, purple, and green tempera paint." However, color alone provides limited insight without additional context.

Revised documentation example:

During center time, Ryland painted at the easel for 10 minutes, creating a picture he named "the park." He explained that the red and yellow lines represented slides and that the purple and green oval-shaped area was a garden. When finished, Ryland placed the painting on the drying rack, hung up his smock, and washed his hands independently.

This level of detail provides meaningful evidence of fine-motor development, language use, symbolic thinking, and self-management skills, supporting a more complete understanding of Ryland's learning.

Observation, Documentation, and You

High-quality documentation involves more than distinguishing between subjective and objective observations. While observation strives to be clear and accurate, it is never completely separate from the observer.

Individual experiences and perspectives can influence how children's actions, skills, and development are interpreted.

Beliefs, expectations, and experiences shape how educators notice, interpret, and record children's knowledge, skills, behaviors, and abilities. These perspectives are often influenced by cultural backgrounds and previous experiences.

Observations may be influenced by factors such as:

- Beliefs about child-rearing and cultural practices
- Beliefs about appropriate ways to communicate
- Beliefs about children's independence and autonomy



Classroom Tip:

Bias can appear in both the documentation of observations and in how those observations are interpreted.

Regularly reflecting on our own assumptions can help ensure that children's learning and development are documented as accurately and fairly as possible. Learn more about implicit bias in Chapters 1 and 3.



Educators are also influenced by broader societal messages about gender and race. Research shows these influences can affect how children are perceived and supported in early learning settings. For example, a report from the U.S. Department of Education found that while Black children made up about 19% of preschool enrollment, they represented 48% of children suspended more than once (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2016).

Reflecting on these influences is not about assigning blame. Instead, it provides an opportunity to strengthen observation practices and ensure that children's learning is documented as accurately and equitably as possible.



Classroom Tip:

When assessing and teaching multilingual children, consider how language and culture influence learning. For example, when teaching the letter **A**, you may associate **A**, **/a/**, **apple**. A child who speaks Spanish at home may see **A**, **/a/** and think of **manzana** (apple in Spanish). Being aware of these differences can help you adapt instruction and avoid misunderstandings.

Observation Basics



When and Where

Successful observation is not limited to one time of the day, one place, or one documentation type. To maximize observations, they should become a regular and ongoing part of the day. By weaving observation into routines and instruction, opportunities are continually created for observation. Valuable data (especially social and language development skills) can be gained during non-instructional times, like snack and outdoor play.

Useful observation data can be collected while watching a child's behavior from the sidelines or while teachers are actively engaged with a child or small group of children. Simultaneously observing and interacting with children is a powerful way to authentically learn about children's knowledge, behavior, skills, and abilities.

Authentic Assessment

Authentic assessment focuses on evaluating young children's abilities, behaviors, skills, and knowledge in real-life contexts that are meaningful and relevant to their everyday experiences. Unlike traditional standardized tests, authentic assessment methods involve observing children as they engage in activities and interactions within their natural environments, such as the classroom or home.



Watch and Learn

Watch this 3-minute video from the Colorado Department of Education, [What is Authentic Assessment](#) (2021) to learn more about authentic assessment.

Identify ideal observation times in the classroom schedule, such as free choice centers. Incorporate a mix of spontaneous and planned observations into routines to ensure thorough documentation.

Intentional observations can be planned, focusing on specific children, groups, development areas, or objectives. For example, to assess gross motor skills, observe during outdoor play or indoor activities.

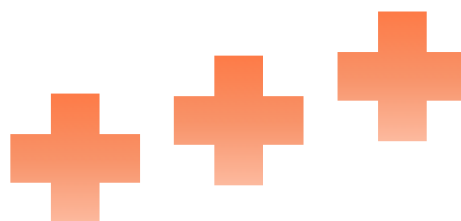
What

Targeted skills and learning targets might be the focus of an observation, or teachers may be observing for a more general demonstration of abilities or social-emotional competence. Either way, the data needs to be recorded in a way that indicates progression of development.

Kindergarten and TK teachers use skills and learning targets from different sources, including the [Washington State Early Learning and Development Guidelines](#), [Washington State Standards](#), [Washington TK Learning Expectations](#), and [GOLD®](#).

Teachers sometimes need to plan activities that enable them to observe specific skills. For example, to learn more about a child's rhyming skills, plan an activity, lesson, or small group that prompts a child or group of children to demonstrate these specific skills.

Keep in mind that teachers can observe several skills across multiple areas of development and learning during one interaction. Moreover, we can attach multiple children, dimensions, and objectives to that single piece of documentation.





Types of Documentation

Some methods of documentation include:

- Checklist
- Anecdotal notes
- Pictures and work samples
- Audio and video clips
- Running records
- Frequency counts

The following table outlines some popular strategies for capturing children's learning and development in the TK and kindergarten classroom.



WaKIDS Connection:

Use the GOLD® Documentation App to record audio and video observations as part of the Whole-child Assessment.

Documentation Strategies' Benefits and Drawbacks

Strategy	Benefits	Benefits
Checklist A list of skills that are checked or unchecked to record what the observer sees at one point in time	Quick Easy-to-use Predetermined list of skills Compare skills across children or timepoints	Limited context Potential bias
Anecdotal Notes A written, objective record of an event that demonstrates abilities and understanding. Families and caregivers are also a good source of information.	Rich contextual data	Potential bias
Work Samples Paper or other products produced by the child that document skills	Concrete evidence of progression of skills Lack of bias	Storage Requires written description of context to accompany item
Audio or Video Recordings Record of conversation, explanation, performance, interaction, or other event	Concrete evidence Lack of bias	Equipment expense
Running Records A written detailed account of everything a child does and says during a 5-10-minute period	Highest level of detail	Time-consuming Requires at least one other adult in the classroom
Frequency Counts Record of how often a particular behavior occurs	Easy to use	Limited context



Documentation Storage

Just like observing and documenting, there is no right way to store documentation. Assessment data is not helpful if it is not easily accessed. It is important to explore options and determine which approach works best. Utilizing different methods for different types of data may be most effective. The bottom line is that there must be a systematic approach.

- Storage methods can be divided into two major categories: hard copy and electronic. Any hard copy can be turned into an electronic copy by scanning it or entering notes into an electronic database/storage system, such as SmartTeach™.



WaKIDS Connection:

If you would like to store your pictures and work samples electronically, consider using the Teaching Strategies Teacher App. This will allow you to take a picture of a child or a work sample, checklist, running record, or other documentation and store it on SmartTeach™.

Portfolios

Regardless of how documentation is stored, portfolios should be created for each child with all of the assessments and work samples collected throughout the year. Portfolios are valuable tools in a TK or kindergarten classroom, as they provide a comprehensive and personalized way to document and highlight a child's growth and learning journey over time. These collections typically include various children's work, including artwork, writing samples, photos, and other evidence of their achievements. Portfolios offer educators and families a holistic view of a child's development, allowing for a more nuanced assessment of their progress and strengths.

Portfolios not only serve as a means of assessment but also as a powerful communication tool, enabling teachers and parents to collaborate effectively in supporting each child's individualized learning and development needs. Sharing a child's portfolio during teacher/family conferences is an effective way to highlight a child's learning and development;

it provides concrete evidence of their growth. Work samples can be housed electronically or can be organized in 3-ring binders or expanding folders.





Using Data to Inform Instruction

Using data effectively is crucial for planning meaningful activities and promoting students' development. Data from observations, assessments, and feedback can reveal students' strengths, needs, and interests. Teachers can then tailor instruction to meet these needs, provide targeted support, and track progress. Data also informs environmental or instructional adaptations, including social-emotional instruction, to support students with disabilities and those exhibiting challenging behaviors.

Teachers make decisions based on observations and evaluate the most appropriate responses. This process helps create a personalized and effective learning environment for all students. Having knowledge of child development research and understanding the indicators of normal development for a certain age helps the teacher intentionally plan learning opportunities for both the group and individual children, based on assessments (Nilsen, 2017).



Learn More: Observation and Documentation

- [NAEYC Portfolio and Documentation](#) webpage provides several resources on documentation.
- [The Power of Documentation](#), provides an overview on documentation (Seitz, 2008).
- Learn more about kindergarten assessment in [Assessment in Kindergarten: Meeting Children Where They Are](#) (Blessing, 2019).
- Explore [Learning Stories](#) (Escamilla, 2021), a narrative-based formative assessment.
- Learn creative ways to capture and display children's learning with [Reggio Documentation Panels](#) (Reggio Emilia, n.d.).
- A kindergarten teacher explains her method for documentation in her blog post, [Want to Be Amazing at Kindergarten Documentation?](#) (Creative Kindergarten, 2021).

Reggio



Observation and Documentation Reflection Questions

1. How do you currently capture and collect documentation about children's development and learning in your classroom?
2. In what ways do you embed observation within daily instruction and classroom routines? Will you consider using the resources available on the WaKIDS website?
3. How often do you collect documentation to develop a balanced and meaningful picture of each child's learning over time? Consider exploring the WaKIDS Whole-child Assessment pacing guide for supports.
4. How do you store and organize documentation to support reflection, instructional planning, and communication?
5. In what ways do you use documentation beyond assessment purposes (e.g., documentation panels, child portfolios, or sharing learning with families)?
6. How do you balance structured lesson planning with flexibility for noticing and documenting learning that occurs spontaneously?
7. How do the timing and locations of your observations support meaningful insights into children's engagement, interactions, and learning across different classroom contexts?



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